



But

Not

DFHall

For

Us

Somehow, Harry had stopped halfway
between both windows....

But Not For Us

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Hardboiled Babylon

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For the one left at the altar.

But Not For Us



A man changes. Or what's left of one. An older Harold Davenport, who then walked in fog-chilled night with his hands in his pockets, who had before that been 'Harry'—known as 'hairy'—Davenport of one armed force or the other, no longer noticed the wet, the dampness blurring a dingy reality as he stained the inhumane night with alcohol breath. His shoes skidded over damp paving stones as he stumbled into the gutter and out again and steadied himself against a night-damped light post. The feel of it remained against his shoulder, the coldness, the hardness, in the same way the hardness and coldness of a piece of cast-iron bench clung to his hand after he had stumbled a little ways more. Sitting and standing become one and the same in that condition, would have seemed that way as he lowered himself onto the bench. And the body's natural reaction to such a state splattered over the paving stones, partially carried away by the water that flowed through the gutter. And at times the muddiness of the world gives way to painful sharpness so that the stones nearest one's feet, the brick across the way, become as clear as if they were nearer neighbors; bench slats are solidity projecting through even a heavy jacket to define the segmentation of the body; fog-encased streetlamps glow with angelic fervor over caged rubbish bins; condensed water droplets drip down night-blackened windows and pool on the casements; sparkling rivulets trickle along the gutter to disappear between rusted sewer gratings and their same-rusted metal frames; droplets condense on the chilled bolts that anchor each streetlamp to chipped concrete; darkened doorways become oblong, blackened portals to nothingnesses and other worlds; poster corners curl from damp brickwork walls; unbroken pint bottles indicate no fortune amid their shattered compatriots in the gutter. He looked at

something imperceptible in the distance, something that should've been around the corner. But Harry gripped the bench and stumbled up. His cuff stank of vomit, and the smell came up toward him as he wiped his mouth. He turned and ambled down the street he had already traversed, encountering, again, his own alcoholic breaths that seemed unable to integrate with the atmosphere at large.

Light washed cobblestones. And Harry turned and winced into headlamps as a small car came along the road and slowed. He managed a few more staggering steps forward as he squinted at movement behind those lights. Harry turned and continued up the street.

“—Eah—”

Harry looked over his shoulder, the muscles in his neck taut and protesting. An arm waved amidst headlamp scatter.

“—Eah—”

Harry stopped and turned. Squinting, hands in his pockets, he slowly approached the small car. A large man, obviously bald-headed and muscular, stooped and rested his arm over the top of the car. “Vu older 'ome 'ound 'dvert'sm'nt?” he said.

But Harry could only just stand there and try to wrap his queasy stomach around the words.

“'ob?” the man said to Harry.

After a moment, Harry nodded. The bald-headed man motioned toward the back seat.

The bald-headed man opened the rear door. Harry looked at the shadowed interior a moment, where the front seat folded forward to allow access to the rear, then stooped and fell into the seat more than sat. Hands still in his pockets, he adjusted himself as best he could as the man climbed into the driver's seat and slammed the door. A smell pervaded the small European-manufactured car, not something bad, but something that in Harry's condition caused his stomach to turn, and he leaned forward and removed one of his hands from his pocket and rested it on the car door to steady himself as the suspension barely did its job as they rattled over cobblestones and shuddered through gutters and potholes and swung sideways when taking sharp turns on narrow streets. He tried to not look through the windows, tried to look at nothing at all that indicated movement, but passing streetlamps attracted his gaze. He tried to keep looking

straight ahead. Nothing on the instrument panel glowed. And only silence and darkness passed between the two men in front. Both stooped forward, the one because of his size, and his head extended over the wheel as he drove, nose almost pressed against the windshield, the other, though shorter, because of a darkened array of antlers that would tink against the unlined roof each time the car struck a hump or ditch.

When they stopped, Harry's body still rattled. The engine whispered as the front passenger climbed out, stretched, tilted back his head, and turned his neck one way then the other. And Harry turned away when the other man folded the passenger seat forward and stooped to lift something out of the seat opposite, and the other man's antlers came within an ace of catching on his jacket. The other man closed the door with his foot.

The whole car clunked as the driver changed gears, lurched forward; the suspension bobbed as they turned sharply into an alley. Old industrial buildings rose to obliterate the skyward on either side, and headlamps washed over dark, soot-marred brickwork. The fenders rubbed the corner as they turned. And one of a set of large, water-damaged-and-half-rotted double loading doors opened as the headlamps illuminated them. Inside, before the driver killed the engine, the headlamps briefly lit the brickwork and cast iron of the remains of dust-covered foundry equipment and an old truck that sat parked to one side. Harry looked through the droplet-marred windows. Light sparkled among the rivulets as someone mounted a set of steps with a flashlight and ascended. He continued looking through the window even after the light had disappeared through a doorway somewhere above, and as the driver climbed out and bent and reached in and folded the seat forward. Harry climbed out. "p'ere." The man motioned for him to follow. What moonlight made it through the thick layer of grey clouds that encased the sky filtered through the building's high windows to provide just enough illumination to discern the man ahead of him as they mounted a set of iron stairs. Climbing, a glow became apparent through the doorway above. And when they had mounted a platform and had gone through it into a hallway, he looked down the one way at where light streamed through the gaps around a distant door. "t's w'." The man motioned

down the opposite direction. Harry's eyes had adjusted enough, and the scant light leaking from around the door allowed the blue-black tattoos crammed over the back of the man's neck and bald head to seem to flow and writhe as Harry followed him, and Harry bent forward and put his hand over his stomach, finally placed the back of his other hand against his mouth as they stopped in the corridor. The man said, "'ead's 't th' 'nd 'f th' 'all 'nd d'n th' sta's." To which Harry didn't reply. Even in the dim light, it was possible to discern the man's tattoo-covered hands as he reached for the doorknob. "'leep. 'ob 'n 'he 'mo'nin'." He opened the door.

Harry looked at nothing a few moments, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He looked as if he might say something, or that something was threatening to rise again, but neither happened. And without a reply, he stepped inside. A step beyond the door, he stopped and looked back, but the door had already closed. Heavy footsteps moved away down the hall. After a while, a faint glow became perceptible beneath the door, then withdrew. Like too many old buildings, there were no windows. But the space felt small, stacked full. His leg ran against something. He ran his hand over a blanket, felt the cot. Guiding himself by touch in the dimness, he turned and sat. And for a long time, he looked at, or at least fixed his eyes on, the gentle glow that had returned to radiate beneath the door. Once in a while, the sounds of shoes grew from one end of the hallway, solidness momentarily dampering the glow beneath the door, then the sounds shrank into the distance one direction or the other, the glow retreating with them. Voices carried through thin walls, snatches of conversation that would have been unintelligible to anyone not in Harry's condition. But as it was, fragmentary syllables seemed to carry some gross weight, and he bent forward and nestled his thumb joint into the corner of his eye against the bridge of his nose. He sniffed the vomit embedded in his jacket sleeve and clutched his stomach, raised himself shabbily from the cot, and worked off his jacket while still hunched. And when he dropped again, he folded sideways, and his head collided with a blanket rolled into a pillow.



Sleep, if it had come, as perpetual darkness rendered it impossible to tell what kind of time had passed, broke with a contraction of his bladder. The light beneath the door had gone. He lay there on his side, half-awake, for who knows how long before another spasm made him sit up. He rolled off the cot and stumbled, unable to be sure if his eyes were open or closed, and groped for the door. The metal knob felt like ice, but more substantial and unforgiving. He braced himself against the door jamb as he looked up and down the hallway. He stumbled out, one hand against a wall to steady himself as he walked, his other hand stretched out in front of him. He touched a door, found a frozen wrought-iron knob that his bare skin clung to. Damp, chilled air, which already leaked so liberally around the doorjamb, cascaded over him as he opened it. He stepped out into the damp night. What vague light filtered through the clouds illuminated the brickwork of the building opposite and a railing. Harry looked around, left the door open as he ambled out toward a stairway. He stumbled forward, caught the railing, and stood there leaned against it, his head bent forward as he breathed hard. A spasm shot through his bladder. Untangling his pants...his ass in the cold night air...liquid splashing down steps...steaming in the darkness...still after all the work...managing to get his pants wet.

Harry stood there with his head still down, eyes half-closed, as he fitted himself back into his pants. He shivered as he turned back through the doorway. He groped along the hall, lucky enough to find the same place because it was the only door that remained open. Instinctively, he closed it softly, one hand against the door, one hand against the jamb, and touched his forehead to it. He turned and felt his way to the cot, folded down onto it the same as before, without pulling the blanket over himself, without removing his boots, or without lifting them from the floor.



A soft glow leaked round the door frame when he woke. Harry closed his eyes, opened them again. And groaning, he sat up. He put his arm over his stomach. He shivered. His jacket lay tangled on the floor, and he bent and pulled it up over his knees. He gathered it over his arm as he tried to stand. Dried vomit no longer smelled so bad. He opened the door. Grim daylight came through a door partway down the hall, illuminated enough of the hallway for him to make his way along the corridor. Grey-going-on-gray morning light came through the high windows and illuminated the dusty foundry floor. He looked down at it as he leaned against the platform's iron railing. The old truck still sat beside the small car. Voices carried up. Below, men in jackets congregated amid old furnaces and passed around a coffee pot. "rn'ng."

Harry turned. Luckily, this morning, the man's tattoos remained fixed.

"I't's," the man said, and it was the first opportunity Harry had to notice the field of silver or chrome knobs that carpeted the man's tongue, "g't 'mth'ng t' 'at." He put his hand on Harry's shoulder, then released it, and started down the iron stairs and toward the foundry floor. Harry looked down at the rusted, exposed metal of the furnaces as he descended. Smells of bacon and coffee rose to meet him, and his stomach turned and knotted.

"You look like shit, man."

Someone offered him a tin cup, and Harry held it with both hands as someone tipped the coffee pot into it.

"Army?" someone said.

Harry nodded.

"You look like it."

Still holding the cup in both hands, Harry let the steam rise into his face.

Someone pointed. "Better eat if you're gonna." Some eggs and bacon and a few slices of bread still remained on a set of plates atop a crate, and Harry moved toward them before the man had finished speaking. He set the coffee cup on the edge of another crate and stuffed a slice of bread into his mouth, then reach for the cup and washed the wad down his throat with another mouthful of coffee.

Someone extended a hand. "Captain Reginald Gracefield."

"Former captain," Silverman said.

Gracefield glanced at the man seated on the brickwork, then turned, motioned. "Jonathon Leary. Over there is Pete Taylor. David Ellison. Will Blue. And—"

"Rear Admiral Lucius Silverman," Silverman said, while still seated on the brickwork. "But when it comes right down to it," he said, "introductions are the same everywhere."

"Anyway," Gracefield said. He glanced over his shoulder. "It is not a bad position. Three meals. And such."

Harry drained the last of his coffee.

"Has anyone," Blue said, "seen Mister Cernan this morning?"

Ellison said, "You said he was upstairs."

"I mean after that," Blue said. He looked up. "But I didn't see Miss Rachel or Miss Millie this morning at all."

"Leave it be," Silverman said.

Ellison said, "You know something?"

"Leave it be."

"Yes," Gracefield said to Harry. "Well, they are a good bunch, so long as they keep themselves occupied."

"Careful," Silverman said, "about how you talk about your superiors. I outrank you now, remember."

"You just have to," Gracefield said, "keep your patience."

"You think," Blue said, "we should ask Mister Quegg about it?"

"Leave it be," Silverman said.

A horrible and sad noise echoed through the foundry, and the only thing to do was to turn and look at the truck. Mr Quegg, bent over with one hand planted on the hood, yanked round the starter rod again.

“Ready to fall out,” Gracefield said.

Silverman flicked what remained of his coffee through the open doorway of a furnace. “Tally ho.”

The truck pattered, and cups were placed on the crate on which the plates had been stacked. Harry pinched the last piece of egg and popped it in his mouth before he followed. Mr Quegg came around the front carrying the starter rod and tossed it into the cab. Such a large man, it seemed impossible to observe everything about him at once. Blue-black patterns in the whites of his eyes matched those over the rest of his body, and a recessed chin and shriveled mouth testified the fact of his toothlessness. He turned and climbed into the cab, and because it was such an old model, it was tall enough to allow him to sit without slumping forward.

Only Leary hadn’t climbed on, and instead moved round the truck and opened one of the double doors so it could putter through. He closed it, and Ellison reached out to help him up.

“Where do you think we’re headed today?” Blue called over rattles and squeaks and engine noise. A front tire dipped into a gutter. The truck turned onto tight streets lined with houses that overbore in the way of weeping willows. Leary turned up his collar against the heavy morning fog, and doing the only thing that could be done, stuffed his hands into his pockets.

Taylor huddled down into his jacket. “Who the hell knows?” He jerked his head toward the cab. “I bet even he doesn’t know.” Fog enshrouded the truck, thick enough at times no one could discern anything beyond the sides of the truck bed. “Maybe we’ll go down to the docks today. They say there’s work down there.”

“Won’t happen,” Silverman said.

Taylor said, “You don’t believe that stuff.”

Blue looked across at Harry, said, “Mister Quegg doesn’t like to be around water.”

“If that is the man’s preference,” Gracefield said, “that is his business.”

“Since when?” Silverman said. “Not like anyone wants to let a plain little old communist who isn’t hurting anyone mind his own business.”

"This is the way it goes," Ellison said to Harry, "most mornings." Silverman glanced at Harry. "And by the way," he said, "what's your opinion on the extension to the M1?"

Harry shook his head.

"He can be safely ignored," Gracefield said. "For the most part, he is harmless, you will find."

"Careful," Silverman said. "Remember I outrank you."

"Saying something," Gracefield said, "does not make it reality."

"My made-up rank," Silverman said, "is as authoritative outside the precious her majesty's Canadian flying boys as any rank you managed to scrape up inside."

"Though, sometimes," Ellison said to Harry, "they can really get at each other's throats."

"I," Gracefield said, "am not about to engage in such pointless debate in regards to such stupidity."

"It's like highschool football," Silverman said. "Some people never have anything else, so they have to try and hold onto it as long as they can."

"Have you," Blue said to Harry, "met Miss Rachel or Miss Millie yet?"

Harry shook his head.

"You'll like them when you do," Blue said. "They're Mister Quegg's and Mister Cernan's nieces. They're nice."

Silverman said, "Blue, here, is the resident baby. So they tend to particularly dote on him."

"Shut up," Blue said. He looked at Harry. "Screwed up my foot a few months after basic." He extended it as if to prove some point. "It got better, but the army cut me out, anyway."

"Would be," Silverman said, "we had all been so lucky."

Blue didn't reply.

"You remind me," Silverman said, "of the last teenager I saw in uniform. Only difference was he was in three pieces."

Blue glanced at Silverman, then looked at Harry. "Just figured I'd stay on this side for a while for the heck of it, you know? Mom always said we had Scottish ancestry, thought I might finish working my way up there sometime."

"You can go up on the M1," Silverman said, "when they finish it."

"I'm afraid," Gracefield said, "that you are slightly in error. That was finished quite a while ago. More than a decade, in fact."

"Such things," Silverman said, "are never finished." He turned toward Harry. "So what's your opinion of it?"

Harry shook his head.

"It is simply a motorway," Gracefield said. "One doesn't have to have an opinion on it."

"It's not *just* a motorway," Silverman said.

Gracefield sighed and shook his head and rooted inside his jacket for something.

Ellison leaned toward Harry, said, "We've been through this quite a few times by now."

Silverman continued, "The M1 is just the realization of a terminal concrete metaphor for the end of the world."

Gracefield produced a leather pouch from his pocket and folded it open to extract a pipe. "I hardly think," he said, as he clenched it between his teeth and rooted for a match, "that the construction of a motorway is going to have anything to say about the end of the world, one way or the other." He struck a match and shielded the flame behind his hand, but the dampness must have gotten to something, because it went out before the pipe could light, and he tossed the match and stuffed the pipe back into the pouch and stuffed the pouch back inside his jacket.

Rooflines and brickwork rose through the fog on either side. "Fog often gets soaked in pretty bad around here," Blue said. Water droplets condensed along the truck body.

"It's just the weather," Ellison said. "You learn not to worry about it."

The truck slowed and turned and came to a stop along a loading area. Mr Quegg cut the engine and climbed out. He went up the steps that led onto the loading area and knocked on a small door embedded in a larger one. A set of windows looked out on the loading area, and someone peered through them. And eventually a man with a clipboard emerged. After nodding and looking at his clipboard, he retreated inside, and Mr Quegg motioned for everyone to come up.

“Hope you like to work,” Taylor said to Harry as they climbed down.

“If he does,” Silverman said, “he should be locked up wherever it is they keep the mentally ill these days.”

Headlamps scattered through the fog as a truck rounded the corner and stopped and reversed into the loading area. Leary and Ellison rolled back the double doors.

The fog didn’t thin or burn off as the morning progressed. The only sign that time passed at all was each empty truck that backed in. And even then, it just made it seem as if it were looping around on itself. A small office area had been cordoned off inside the warehouse behind paneled glass, and the man inside looked up from his desk each time someone went in or out.

“Holding up?” Ellison said to Harry.

Harry nodded.

“It’s got to be almost time,” Ellison said. He looked around for Leary. “What do you think? Near lunch yet?”

Leary lifted a crate. He glanced over at Silverman, but he, too, had a crate in both hands, so he couldn’t look at his watch. “Got to be six hours past,” Leary said.

“That means it’s at least an hour to go,” Ellison said. He stretched his back before he took hold of another box.



After the last truck had departed, Mr Quegg stepped inside and ducked through the door into the small glass-delineated office. It was time to load up again.

The man with the clipboard peered through the dingy glass as Mr Quegg grabbed the rod from the cab and jerked the engine started. He watched through dirty glass as the truck turned and pulled around the corner.

“Not the easiest job in the world,” Ellison said. Even with it cold, breaking a sweat wasn’t uncommon, which led to shivers in that cold air.

“You get paid at the end of the day,” Blue said. “For whatever work’s gone on. That way you can leave whenever you want if you feel like it.”

“It’s all under the table,” Taylor said. “That sort of thing.”

Gracefield said, “But nothing illegal.”

“And,” Leary said, “lunch’s complementary, though.”

“Which is all it takes,” Silverman said, “to endear some people forever.”

Fog enveloped everything as the truck would its way along. “It’s easier to drive through than it looks” Blue said.

“We’ve only crashed once so far,” Silverman said. And he said to Harry, “You still never did say what your thoughts are on the M1.”



Mr Quegg parked the truck caddy-cornered down the way from a darkened pub. An old-style sign hung over the door, sooted beyond recognition or understanding. And a barmaid within looked as old as the picture of Shakespeare that hung on the wall among other such portraiture over the fireplace. She carried out a plate of sandwiches, Leary reaching for one as soon as she'd set the platter down.

"No moldy black bread today?" Taylor said.

The barmaid set her eye and jaw against him.

Taylor laughed. He reached for a sandwich. "Where're your sisters today?"

"Around," she said. She grinned with yellowed wooden teeth and turned to go around behind the bar and disappear into the back.

"You'll find," Silverman said to Harry, "this world is a freak-filled place."

Harry chewed his sandwich, but didn't otherwise reply.

A barmaid emerged from the back room, carried a set of pint glasses around on a tray after the publican had finished filling them.

"There's no use," Gracefield said, "to be unkind."

"It depends," Silverman said, "on if you find lying an unkindness." He raised his glass. "For example—"—and wiped the top of his lip—"—if there is such a thing as a lie by omission, then keeping quiet is a sin."

Unloading the tray, the barmaid turned and went behind the bar and into the back.

"In which case, you plan to be sinless."

Silverman raised his glass.

"So," Blue said to Harry, "what'd you do?"

Harry chewed a moment. "Mechanic."

"No worries," Silverman said, "about getting your ass blown skyward there."

Ellison said, "It's not as if you did, either."

"Depends," Silverman said, "on how you count. Got shelled by our own artillery once."

"Did they know you were there at the time?"

"Probably." Silverman set his beer on the table and looked across at Harry. "You ever see anyone get shot?"

Ellison said, "Why don't you give it a rest?"

"I'm just trying to find out about our new comrade." Silverman reached for a sandwich. "Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?" He took a bite, chewed. "Or any similar organization, such as the Ladies' Aid Afternoon Gardening Society or a Philomathean Literary Society or a subscriber to the Saturday Evening post?"

"Don't answer that," Ellison said.

"So," Leary said, as he reached for a sandwich, "the Post is a branch of the Communist Party?"

"Worse than that," Silverman said. He sipped his beer. "And do you always capitalize it when you shorten the title?"

"Never thought about it," Leary said. He added around the bite of a sandwich, "Why?"

"Just like to know who I'm dealing with," Silverman said. "You never know when you're going to wake up and someone close to you is going to be subscribing to magazines."

Ellison finished his sandwich. "You get used to it," he said to Harry. "After a while."

In the meantime, Gracefield had removed his pipe and cleaned it and sat there smoking, one hand cradling his elbow, the thumb and forefinger of his other hand lightly clasping the pipe bowl.

Blue said to Harry, "You staying long?"

Harry shook his head.

"Who wouldn't want to stay here?" Silverman said, and raised his glass. "At least it's a place civilized enough to let you have a beer at lunch." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Which is why America won't win the war."

"Of course," Ellison said.

“You can mark my words,” Silverman said. He drained his glass. “Either America will wholeheartedly throw off the shackles of piece-meal temperance—” —he set his glass on the table— “—or they are going to be naturally selected right out of existence.”

“As I recall,” Ellison said, “there was no shortage of alcohol in America.”

“That,” Silverman said, “depends on where you’re from.”

Leary leaned back and craned his neck to look down the bar at where Mr Quegg had been sitting. He stuffed the last quarter of a sandwich in his mouth. “ime’o’go.” The publican kicked open a back door while carrying something out, and the door bounced twice after him as two tails followed him through. Leary swallowed. “We—” He’d half-risen, still ahold of his glass, when the barmaid, who had set a platter on the end of the table to gather them up, grabbed his chin and forced his face around to meet hers, and she leaned even closer still.

“Hmmm.”

She stood there like that as the clock loudly ticked in the background. Then she simply released him. “Hm.” She took the empty glass from his hand and gathered it with the others on the tray. “Be careful of spotless spots today,” she said, then turned to carry them back into the kitchen.

Leary stood there a few moments. Silverman patted him on the shoulder. “Better do as she says.”

Mr Quegg had already gone out. Jackets were retrieved and slipped on in the intermix of cold and warm air that had been allowed by the opening of the door. Leary quickly stepped back to the table and snatched a sandwich from the platter before the barmaid could carry it away, and slipped it into his jacket pocket. Mr Quegg had already started the truck, and it sat there puttering, adding steam to the fog, as if it were all coming out of the back end of that old thing. Thing about it was it was the only vehicle outside of Mr Cernan’s car that would have fitted on those old streets. And even then, there were some tight corners, times when no one was quite sure it would squeeze through. Sparks once burst from the cab roof when it scraped against a low archway. The tires had been all patches. They seemed to mold themselves to the routed cobblestones.

"I don't see what there's left to do," Taylor said, as he hunkered in the truck bed. "We must've moved out every one of these warehouses by now."

"This whole thing's," Blue said to Harry, "gonna be torn down."

"You cannot hold back progress," Gracefield said.

Silverman said, "No more than you can hold back the end of the world."

Gracefield looked as if he might reply, but didn't. Ahead, trucks already sat parked at a loading area. And Mr Quegg stopped the truck where it wouldn't be in the way and climbed out with it still puttering and waved to a short man standing on the platform.

"It's a kick to get a load of some of these guys," Taylor said to Harry, and motioned with his head toward the loading area. "Half of em look ready to shit their pants."

Leary said, "Why's that?"

"H'."

The only thing to do was turn. Mr Quegg motioned to come up.

Drivers watched in rearview mirrors as the trucks were loaded, same as they always did. Most of the time they wouldn't even bother to inspect anything had been buttoned up and would just pull out as soon as someone banged on the side of the truck, nothing left but red brake lights in the fog before they turned an unseen corner. The fog thickened as evening approached. Leary and the rest sat on the loading area after all the trucks had pulled out, while Mr Quegg consulted with the man in charge.

"Gahhh...!" Leary almost jumped up when something tried to jam into his armpit. He jerked around. "G—" He shoved the hound's muzzle away as it tried to get into his pocket again. "Get out of there. Go on. Hey—" The hound dipped and dived, somehow opened the flap on Leary's jacket pocket with his nose, snatched out the sandwich, and bolted. "Hey—"

"You should have listened," Silverman said.

Leary scrambled to his feet. "HEY—"

"Leave it alone," Silverman said. "It's not like you're going to starve to death in the immediate."

But Leary was already racing across the loading area and dived into the street. A horn blared. Leary spun as a mirror clipped his arm. The

truck went on, disappeared into the fog, momentarily just two red brake lights.

"Jesus."

The only thing to do was get across the platform and scramble to get him up. Leary clutched his arm. The hound stood on the opposite side of the road, watching, the sandwich still in his mouth.

"Hold still," Silverman said. He touched Leary's arm.

"It's broken."

"It's not broken," Silverman said.

Leary groaned. "Are you goddamn sure of that?"

"Yes," Silverman said. He released Leary's jacket. "It'll be a hell of a bruise, but nothing else."

Leary groaned. "It's gotta be goddamn broke in at least three places."

"Only a bruise," Silverman said.

"Goddamn it." Leary clutched his arm and watched the dog eat the last of the sandwich. "I was saving that you goddamn damn—"

Mr Quegg went past, and the dog looked up as he approached, but didn't run. He tilted his head to one side as Mr Quegg bent and scratched him behind the ear.

"Oh, come on." Leary groaned. "That thing's a murderer."

Mr Quegg looked up at him.

"Well..." Leary squeezed his arm through his jacket. "An attempted murderer, anyway."

Mr Quegg scratched the hound behind the ear once more before he rose and started for the truck.

Silverman patted Leary on his good shoulder. "Let's go."

Leary said, "I was saving that."

"You're not going to starve to death between now and supper, anyway."

It was time to load up again. Harry reached down to help Leary up as Mr Quegg yanked round the starter rod. And Leary hunkered down against the side of the truck, massaged his arm through his jacket and tried to move it. "You sure it isn't broken?"

"Absolutely."

The truck shook and pattered. And the hound leapt onto the bumper and scrambled up into the bed. He sat there looking at

everyone, steam coming out of his mouth with every breath, tongue drooping out the side.

"Oh, come on."

"There is no need," Gracefield said, "to be so overdramatic."

"We are not," Leary said, "taking this murder machine home."

"Really." Gracefield shook his head as he removed his pipe pouch from inside his jacket.

"I don't know," Silverman said. He bent forward and looked at the hound, and the hound looked at him. "Never can tell."

"Knew this guy..." Taylor said. He dug in his pocket for a cigarette. "Used to talk about a village outside of..." He found one and so stuck it in his mouth, rooted in his pockets for a lighter. "Can't remember, but they had this tiny little old woman..." But he couldn't come up with the lighter and stuck the cigarette back in his pocket. "Don't remember what he called her—anyway, turned out to be some kind of sniper. Twenty...three...or something confirmed kills." He settled against the side of the truck with both hands in his pockets. "Supposed to have made excellent soup. They say to die for."

"In that case," Silverman said, "it seems we have two choices. Send him over there to have some soup with his sandwich. Or keep an eye on him here." He looked the hound in the eye. "Have you ever subscribed to the Saturday Evening Post?"

The hound cocked his head.

Silverman leaned back against the truck. "I can see," he said to Leary, "this is going to be a tough case. It may be a trick to get us to take him home so he can scout out our base, but I think we'll have to take the risk."

"It is important," Gracefield said around his pipe, "not to lose sight of what is a business arrangement." Smoke came out of his mouth and intermixed with the fog. "This is not a charity."

"Spoken like a true officer," Silverman said. Gracefield didn't reply.

"What..." Leary said, but didn't finish. He eyed the hound as it lay down.

"This is all just temporary," Gracefield said. "It is defeatist thinking not to remember that."

“We’re all just temporarily embarrassed,” Silverman said. “Just some more embarrassing than others.”

“I’m not sleeping in the same room with this thing,” Leary said. “It’ll kill us all in our sleep.”

“Not if you don’t have a sandwich in your pocket,” Ellison said.

“I get up early,” Leary said to Harry. He winced as he moved his shoulder around. “Sometimes I get hungry before breakfast.”

“Maybe you could get off with half,” Blue said. “Not biting the hand that feeds you and all that.”

“Don’t,” Gracefield said, “descend to their level.”

Blue glanced at him.

“By all means,” Silverman said. “Don’t descend to our level.”



But about the truck, as can be imagined, it wasn't in the best of shape, for various reasons, age not necessarily withstanding. And it did have the habit of loaning out the ghost on occasion and being in no hurry of collecting it again.

"Good to be moving on a chilly day," Gracefield said. "Keeps the circulation up."

"I could keep with a pinch of sun," Ellison said. He looked up at the grey morass that hung overhead.

"The national character," Silverman said.

"Now," Gracefield said, "that is a tad shoddy." He pulled his pipe out as he walked, clamped the stem between his teeth, and he searched for a light. He said around the pipe stem, "Those skies..." But he paused to strike a match and cup his hands around the pipe bowl. "Those skies..." He looked up, thumb and forefinger against the pipe bowl. "Well, anyway, one cannot deny their historical definition."

"Never much paid attention to them," Leary said. He looked up.

"What if," Blue said, "Mister Cernan's gone out with the car?"

"Then," Silverman said, "someone gets to walk back."

"It's ridiculous," Taylor said, "to have to walk this much this day and age."

"One of these days," Silverman said, "even our pets will have their own automobiles."

"I don't think it would be such a good idea for Spot to drive," Blue said.

Taylor said, "Why'd you pick that stupid name?"

"He didn't," Silverman said. "I did. Besides, it's a good name for a dog. Very traditional."

"As if," Leary said, "a murder machine needs one."

"Oh," Blue said, "stop calling him that."

"It's accurate," Leary said.

"It's silly," Ellison said.

"And completely unproven," Silverman said. "As of yet."

Leary said, "But—"

"All purely circumstantial," Silverman said.

Ellison looked at what fraction of the sky the foundry's roofline didn't block. "I really don't like this time of year," he said. "Darker earlier every day."

"If people," Silverman said, "would look where they're going instead of trying to see if God is looking down at them they wouldn't—"

Plastic bounced and clattered across cobblestones. One piece landed near Harry's feet. He looked down at it, then up. A few windows had been opened but were otherwise empty. Harry bent and lifted a broke half in each hand. He looked at the one, turned the other over, fitted the fractured, white-plastic elbow back together.

"It's an arm," Leary said. He looked at it a few moments more.

Blue squatted and gathered the shattered fingers. He cradled the small pile of them in his hand and looked up. "You think it came from up there?"

"It probably isn't raining them," Ellison said.

"Come on," Silverman said. "No use to stand around gawking. And if it does start raining them, better to be under cover."

"Should we," Harry said, "take them?"

"It might be Miss Rachel's," Blue said. He looked up at the open windows. "They sew. Maybe it's some kind of sewing dummy."

Leary said, "Maybe they didn't want it anymore."

"Well," Gracefield said, "in any regard, it is of little practical value now."

"Might be able to glue it back together," Leary said.

"Toss it," Taylor said. "It's just garbage."

"Fine," Silverman called from ahead. "Stand around and get maimed and injured from dummies falling out of the sky. Maybe you're all used to that sort of thing."

Harry started toward the foundry doors, white plastic arm still in hand. Blue picked up his pace to settle in beside him. "You ever managed to meet Miss Rachel or Miss Millie yet?"

Harry shook his head.

"They may say they're nieces," Taylor said. "But if you ask me..."

Blue said, "What do you mean by that?"

"I'm just saying that from what *I've* seen of them, there's not much in the way of a family resemblance, if you know what I mean." He said to Harry, "Not that either are particular lookers, mind you. But the twin thing..." He canted his hand. "So you fit them together, I figure that kinda doubles the points."

"There is," Gracefield said, "more to be regarded in a woman than her looks."

"From my experience," Taylor said, "it's only the ones who don't have any looks to begin with who need to focus on that."

Silverman had left open one of the doors. "Looks like we're in luck," Taylor said. The car still sat where it had that morning. Silverman's footsteps on the iron stairs rang through the open, dusty interior as he climbed. He paused and looked back.

"Get the tools and let's get going," he called to Harry.

"What about these?" Blue raised his hands.

Silverman shook his head. "Hurry up with it."

"Here," Blue said. He offered the fingers to Harry. And Harry shifted half of the plastic arm under his own and cradled them in his palm.

"Come on," Silverman called. "Don't take all day."

Harry started up the stairs. Silverman had already disappeared into the wood-panel hall beyond by the time Harry had made it onto the observation platform. And when he entered the dim-lit passage, he paused a moment, looked both ways. A knock echoed. Harry looked left, then right. A sliver of light fell across Silverman's face as a door opened. Harry moved toward him.

"It's an emergency," Silverman said through the cracked door. He glanced toward Harry as he approached. "We can't move without it." The door closed. "Give it a minute," Silverman said to Harry. When the door opened again, Mr Cernan ducked through the doorway and stepped into the hallway, closed the door behind himself. Keys jingled in his hand as he moved. He paused and looked at the white-plastic fingers cradled in Harry's hand. Silverman followed his gaze. "It fell out a window."

Mr Cernan slipped his keys into his coat pocket. He took the pieces from Harry's hand, accepted the fragments of arm, but struggled to open the door carrying all of them, and Silverman had to lean round and turn the knob so Mr Cernan could duck through. Harry watched through the doorway as Mr Cernan laid them on the coffee table. On the couch, a woman looked up, momentarily laid her knitting on an afghan that had been wadded up around her and hung off the front of a cushion and draped over the floor. She leaned to look around Mr Cernan as he straightened. She faintly smiled. "Thank you," she said. "But there was no need to go through the trouble."

Harry removed his cap. He nodded.

Mr Cernan turned and moved toward the door.

The woman said, "You won't be late, will you?"

Mr Cernan turned, shook his head. "It shouldn't take long," he said. He glanced at Harry. "Right?"

Harry, cap still in hand, said, "It's just a broken belt."

"You must be the mechanic," she said.

Harry nodded.

"That's good," she said. "We need a mechanic around here." She looked at Mr Cernan. "You know you don't like it when it has to be rewarmed."

Mr Cernan nodded and ducked through the doorway. He closed the door.

The car was too small to have a trunk, so Silverman tossed the tool bag onto the back seat. "You'll go faster if no one else is weighing it down." He glanced at Harry, then opened the front passenger door and stepped aside. The small car made small-car noises as Mr Cernan hunched over the steering wheel and peered through the windshield. Silverman slammed the passenger side door so it would properly latch. And Leary and Ellison opened one of the double doors. Idly, Blue watched it turn the corner.

The car also made its usual sounds as Mr Cernan steered it along the narrow streets. The former contents of a chamber pot emptied above splashed across one of the windows. The suspension squeaked as he avoided a pothole. But otherwise, the machine ran rather smoothly. No obvious squeaks or rattles that didn't belong. Mr Cernan released one hand from the wheel to rub his neck. Sometimes his antlers

pecked the windshield when they went over a bump, and he adjusted his head. The tools in the bag on the back seat sometimes shifted when they rounded a corner. Certain runs of cobblestones had a rhythm to them, as if designed to play a tune, but such patches were often broken by potholes that spoiled the effect, and the music faded too quickly to be identified. Otherwise, the motor just half-buzzed, half-hummed, as was normal for such a small car. Mr Cernan shifted his foot from the gas pedal to the brake then back as they came into and out of a curve or corner. His antlers pecked the windshield. Birds scattered from the curb. And water that had collected in a route sprayed a wall as they rolled through. The birds settled again on the damp curb after they had passed. Grey, cloudy skies reflected in the wind shield, mottled morass that almost seemed static. The suspension made its usual, faint noises as they went into a tight curve. His antlers pecked the windshield. "Do you feel comfortable here?"

Harry didn't turn; he just looked through the windshield. He might have been about to say something, but Mr Cernan steered into the next curve, and he had to brace himself against the door. Ahead, the truck sat canted to one side, the left front tire off and in the air, jacked and on block. That the starter rod functioned as a fair lug wrench was the only reason things had gotten that far. And Harry had neglected to mention that one of the patches had blown. Spot still sat in the passenger seat, and Mr Quegg stood there scratching him behind the ear while the car approached and stopped. He approached them as Harry climbed out, bent, and laid his arm over the top of the car as Mr Cernan rolled down the window. Their low voices couldn't compete with the noise of everything jostling about in the tool bag or Harry slamming the back door or the idling of the motor or even the distant noises of trackhoes and bulldozers. Harry stood there a moment or two looking into the distance, toward those sounds. It wasn't unusual to hear them, not when far enough out toward the edge and a cold breeze carried them in. When he turned toward the car again, Mr Quegg was looking in that direction, too. He removed his forearm from the top of the car and straightened. Mr Cernan said through the rolled-down window to Harry, "It was good to have a chance to talk." Then he u-turned in the narrow lane, jumped the curb, reversed, turned, and started back down the way they had come.

Harry turned and walked toward the truck and dropped the tool bag on the ground in front of it. The old belt lay coiled atop the engine, too dead to strike, as Silverman had said. Harry grabbed a wrench from the bag and bent over the engine, stuck both arms in as far as they would go, and started working at removing those parts that he would have to in order to even start to get to work. Mr Quegg stood a moment or two, scratching Spot behind the ear, seemingly listening to the sounds of the great behemoths submerged out there in the fog and in the coming dark and the distance.

Spot shook his head at him when he stopped, but didn't deign to climb down and follow him around to the front of the truck. Mr Quegg looked down into the engine compartment. "'ood 'ng 'u c'm uh'l'ng," he said.

"Since we don't have a belt..." Harry said. "I'll try something. How long it will hold, I don't know."

"I 'ud t'l 'u I c'nt 'ay yu'."

"It doesn't matter," Harry said.

Mr Quegg turned back to the cab and pulled out the lantern that hung behind and between the seats. He fished matches from the glovebox and struck one. Spot snorted, shook his head from the sulfur. And Mr Quegg lowered the glass and carried the lantern around and held it up over the engine so there was enough light to work by as everything burgeoned on night. Spot just sat on the seat the whole time, tongue hanging out of the side of his mouth.



A cold rain started sometime in the night. Lying in bed in the dark, the only light the faint glow of Silverman's radium-dial watch, droplets pounded a million tiny ways against the roof. And after a while, a smaller version invaded the room.

"God..." A blanket rustled. Bare feet—"Shit!" Match flare preceded sulfur stench, and smoke curled towards the ceiling as Blue extinguished it with a quick flick of his wrist and replaced the lamp's glass globe.

Ellison rubbed his toes. He scowled and hobbled toward the corner and shoved the bucket across the floor toward where water drummed against the floorboards. He looked at the ceiling.

"What time is it?"

Silverman reached for his watch. "Oh four hundred."

Pink. Pink. Pink. Water hammered into the then not technically empty bucket. Taylor rolled over and drew his pillow over his head. Spot poked his nose from under a bunk; his drooped ears twitched with each droplet.

Ellison sat on the edge of his bunk and rubbed his toes. "I can't sleep like this."

Nearby, Leary snored. Spot craned his neck to look that way. Silverman lay back, watch in hand, and closed his eyes.

Pink. Pink. Pink.

Blue lay there on his side. "You awake, sir?"

Gracefield breathed deep through his nose; his mustache twitched. "How could I not be?" But his eyes remained closed.

To the room: "Should I put out the light?"

Pink. Pink. Pink.

"Why bother?" Silverman rose and swung his legs from under the

blanket and sat up. He rubbed his eyes. When he opened them again, he glanced toward Leary's bunk. "Somebody wake him up and ask him if he's asleep."

"Happy to." Ellison released his foot and leaned over, grabbed Leary's shoulder, shook. But Leary only snored. "Wake up." He shook him again. He tried again, shook his head, and shifted upright in his own bunk again. "I'd swear he was dead if it wasn't for the noise."

Pink. Pink. Pink.

Harry sat up and rubbed his face.

"Hey—" Ellison said. "Wake up—"

Leary just snored.

"Let him sleep," Gracefield said. "At least someone can."

Pink. Pink. Pink.

"To hell with that. If everybody else is suffering, he can suffer too. Most of us are still technically Americans here." Silverman whistled; Spot's ears arched. He crawled from under a bunk. Silverman snapped his fingers and pointed. And spot turned, looked at Leary's prostrate form a moment, his head cocked, then bit into the blanket and pulled it back. But Leary still just lay there staring at the ceiling with his eyes closed. Spot bit his cuff, tugged his nightclothes, tugged his arm, and when he released it, Leary's knuckles struck the floorboards.

Pink. Pink. Pink.

Spot barked.

"Leave him," Ellison said. "He won't be up until breakfast time, anyway."

"What's going on?" Leary sat up, yawned. He yawned and looked down at Spot. "What have I told you—" He looked round himself for something, grabbed his pillow. "Stay away from me." He swung the pillow. Spot backed away, cocked his head. "I told you not to let it sleep near me. Now it's trying to freeze me to death."

"You asleep?" Silverman said.

Leary looked at him, pillow on his knees. "I don't think so. Why?"

"Just making sure."

"Okay." Leary dropped his pillow back into place. He pointed. "Just keep that thing away from me. I want to stay alive just a little

longer.” Spot sat there looking at him. “Why does he have to sit there looking at me?” Spot opened his mouth, and his tongue dropped out.

“Give him your sandwich and maybe he’ll go away.”

Leary leaned toward the end of the bunk and stretch toward his jacket. “I’m not...” He rooted in a pocket, drug his jacket across his lap and rooted into the other. “What the...” He patted it down. “Where’d it...” He looked up. “You...” Spot just looked at him, tongue dangling out the side of his mouth. “Thief!” Spot cocked his head.

“Oh, really.” Graceland sat up.

“Plain burglary.”

“You probably ate it in the middle of the night, yourself.”

“I...”

“See. You can’t even remember.”

“I still say burglary.”

“No convictions without evidence,” Silverman said. “An utopian dream, but delusion can be pleasurable in its own right.”

Leary just sat there with his jacket draped over his lap. “At least there’s breakfast.”

“Not for a while,” Silverman said. Leary looked at him. Silverman shrugged. “Don’t look at me. A Jew only ever made the sun stop, never come up faster.” He put his watch down on the bunk and touched his face. The staticy sound of his fingers through his two-day beard overlaid each drop in the bucket. That morning, Gracefield made no arguments about personal grooming and letting oneself go, as he slipped on his shoes and rose and crossed the room to go out into the hall.

Pink. Pink. Pink.

“Sounds like a color,” Leary said.

“That’s great,” Silverman said. And he bent and drew his pack from under his bunk and produced a book and scooted back to brace himself against the wall.

Blue still lay on his side, and Spot wandered over, and Blue scratched him behind the ear. “You going to grow a full beard?”

“Remains to be seen,” Silverman said, without taking his eyes from the page. “It depends on if it comes in like my father’s or my mother’s.”

Taylor's voice carried muffled from beneath his pillow. "Which one's was better?"

"It depends."

Muffled: "On what?"

"My father had the length." Silverman turned the page. "My mother had the volume."

Muffled laughter, and Taylor pulled his pillow from over his head. "And what're you aiming for?"

"I'm just waiting to see what comes of it."

"So how long *is* it until breakfast?"

"You don't want to ask."

Leary groaned and lay back on his bunk.

Enough water had collected in the bucket to change the sound and color.

"Look at it this way, it's just more proof for your case."

"What case?"

"You claim this animal here—"—Silverman motioned absently, but didn't remove his eyes from the page—"—is out to kill you."

"Yeah?"

"Well, obviously he's just trying to get you into a weakened state so that when he decides to make his move—"—he snapped his fingers, and Spot's ears arched and he looked around—"you won't have the strength to fight back."

Leary raised himself onto his elbows. And Spot twisted his neck round, and his tongue hung out as he panted, and they each eyed the other. "I told you," Leary said.

The door opened, and the only thing to do was look over. Gracefield, fresh shaven, patted the corners of his trimmed mustache one last time. He unbuttoned the top buttons of his nightclothes as he moved toward his bunk. And Taylor groaned and rolled out and disappeared into the hallway, scratching himself through his nightclothes. Gracefield pulled his own over his head. He half-turned to reach for his britches, must have seen Blue looking, because he said, "Ridiculously antiquated things." Blue turned away, and as if to have *something* to look at, looked down at his own nightclothes.

"No one," Silverman said, "said you had to wear them." He turned the page. "Besides, some of us might happen to idolize Ebenezer

Scrooge. And if Christians can run around flailing themselves to feel what Christ felt, then the rest of us can get along with our own things and feelings in our own way.”

“Do we really,” Gracefield said, “have to begin this ridiculousness first thing in the morning?”

“I kind of like them,” Blue said. He brushed his hand over his own and studied the patterning. “Miss Rachel and Miss Millie do pretty work,” he said. “And they are warm.”

“I am not saying they don’t do good work,” Gracefield said, as he donned his shirt. “Just that if they applied themselves and modernized—”

Ellison, in the meantime, had found a cigarette and lit it to cut the morning from his mouth. Droplets plopped into the bucket. He looked at the ceiling, but not at where it leaked. “We’ll have to put the tarp on.”

Taylor returned, rubbed his fingers into the folds of his ear as he walked. “What was that?”

“If it keeps up like this, we’ll have to stretch the tarp.”

“Maybe you need a cold shower,” Taylor said, as he still fingered his ear. “Blue there looks as if he could use one.”

Blue looked up. “What?”

“What’re you doing?” Taylor said. “Fingering that thing and thinking about one of the sisters? Or both?” Taylor pulled his night-clothes over his head. Blue didn’t reply, and instead pulled himself up and gathered his clothes from the end of his bunk and passed Spot to go out into the hall.

Ellison’s pants and suspenders hung over the end of his bunk, and he pulled them into his lap. “Why Scrooge?”

“Well, I figure if Jews had patron saints he would be the top one.”

“Scrooge wasn’t Jewish.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Rich but penny pinching? Works in finance? Doesn’t observe Christmas? Always depicted with sharp features and a hooked nose?”

“The rest of his family’s definitely not portrayed as anything close to Jewish.”

“He could have been adopted.”

"There is no use..." Gracefield sat on the edge of his bunk, lit his pipe. "There is no use," he said, "in arguing with the man." He dropped the burnt-out match on the table beside the lamp.

"There," Silverman said, "is where we will have to agree to agree."

Gracefield didn't reply, and instead concerned himself with his pipe.

Leary, who had lain back on his bunk again, looked at the ceiling.

"Scrooge," Ellison said, "celebrated Christmas at the end."

"Well, it is a conversion story, after all. That's what makes it a happy ending. Consume and be happy, after all."

"Are you talking about religion or economics?"

"Yes."

"You can't conflate the two."

"Well—" Silverman turned the page—"—you should have told me that before."

"Y—"

"My Granddad," Taylor said, "always used to say how Jesus was a communist."

"That's ridiculous," Ellison said.

"He's right," Silverman said. He still didn't look up. "Communism can only be understood in a post-capitalistic sense. And seeing as how this Jesus person obviously predates the rise of mercantile capitalism in the Middle Ages, it's incorrect to use that term."

"So," Ellison said, "you believe Jesus existed?"

"Why not?"

"And what was your grandfather?" Gracefield said to Taylor. "Some sort of communist?"

"Don't know," Taylor said. "Never asked."

Gracefield returned his pipe stem to his mouth and silently watched him.

The rain continued overhead, and a tiny portion of it still dripped into the bucket.

"If he converted," Ellison said, "that wouldn't make him a very good saint."

"A good point," Silverman said. "So maybe I'm wrong. But maybe we should all be like Scrooge, anyway. Maybe if we would buy a little more we'd be happier." And he said to Harry, "What about you?"

Don't you think we'd be happier?" But Harry shook his head and, when Blue entered already dressed, he finished buttoning his pants and slipped his suspenders over his undershirt and passed him on his way into the hall.

Leary, still lying on his bunk and looking at the ceiling, said "Is it closer to breakfast yet?"

"Hopefully," Silverman said, but didn't reach for his watch. "Unless someone *is* out there doing something to the sun."

"What," Blue said, "would they do to the sun?"

"Somebody might stop it from coming up. Haven't you been keeping up?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Ellison said.

"Don't you believe what's written?"

"Of course. But—"

"Well, then you have to admit it could happen again. After all, He didn't promise not to do that again."

Leary interlaced his fingers over his chest as he lay back. "Do you always use a capital *H* when referring to God?"

"It's customary. However, what's a custom but a fashion that has hung around too long after its expiration date. Maybe it's too bad Al Capone wasn't born earlier and hadn't gone a little farther afield."

"How's that?" Blue said.

Gracefield removed his pipe from his mouth. "Don't engage him. He—"

"Is perhaps the most concentrated specimen of Americanism ever produced," Silverman said. "We both drank stale milk as children, you know. We have that in common. So I could have been a gangster."

"I'm sure your parents would have been happy about that," Ellison said.

Silverman shrugged. "But what was was."

"You should have been a rabbi," Blue said.

"Few things being considered," Silverman said, "being a coreman was good enough. It's the only thing less useful. Except for maybe being a surgeon. My mother wanted me to become a doctor."

"Was that," Taylor said, "so you could do something about the beard?"

“Actually, so I could do something about my father’s baldness.”

Spot had taken up a position in the middle of the floor and, mouth still open, tongue dangling out the side, he turned his head from speaker to speaker.

The rain continued.



And continued.

Damp through, no different than anyone else, Harry had climbed out through the rivulet veil that had streamed off the tarp and then closed the doors once the truck had passed through. A pool collected round it on the floor and eked away into the cracks. Hard, fogged breath issued from each man, but even with the cold, it was a relief to strip wet clothes down to bare skin; even shivering could be pleasant. Mr Quegg, who had long before removed his soaked shirt to further reveal the faint-blue tattoo work that covered his body, climbed from the cab. No man spoke about the cold or wet, that was how much of it there had been. Blue, who had discarded his shirt on the remains of a nearby kiln, sat in his undershirt, on the edge of the brickwork and rolled up his damp pants leg to untie his shoes and roll down his socks, which clung damply to the iron he slapped them against. Gracefield picked his damp pipe from his pocket and set it aside. Silverman snapped some of the kindling scraps piled nearby and tossed them into a kiln, over top old charcoal. He groped through his pockets to come up with a wet matchbook. Gracefield dug in his pockets for his own, but they came out just a soggy.

“’pst’rs.” Mr Quegg pointed as he opened the passenger side door. And spot jumped down and shook, splattering wet dog over the side of the truck. Mr Quegg motioned to Harry, who remained the most dressed, still in a damp shirt and pants. “M’tch’s’n th’ k’ch’n.” Harry nodded and turned to thread his way between kilns and mount the iron stairs. Spot jerked to follow, faintly yelped as Mr Quegg grabbed him by the wet scruff of the neck.

Harry’s boots, as waterlogged as the rest of him, faintly mushed and squeaked as he passed down the hall. He knocked.

“Come in. It’s open.”

He turned the knob. He had left his waterlogged cap downstairs and thus didn’t have it to hold in hand as he stepped inside. Rachel, pins in her mouth, looked up from her chair, a dress draped in front of her over the cushion. “Y...” She removed the pins. “You look awful. What in the world have the lot of you been up to?”

Harry looked down at himself, probably wished he had his cap to occupy his hands. “We need some matches.” He added, “To start a fire.”

“You look soaked through,” she said. “You’ll catch cold that way.” She pointed into the kitchen. “In the tin above the stove.” He nodded and crossed the front room. His boots squished on the rug. “The one with the pink chrysanthemums on it,” she called. She still sat there when he returned, tin in hand. “You probably all look like a bunch of drowned rats,” she said. She shook her head. “I’m afraid you will all have to hold until Millie gets back. Then we will fix something hot.”

Harry nodded. Rachel sat there with the dress still draped in front of her lap. And he just stood there tin in hand. “I should...get downstairs.”

“Yes,” she said. “You should.”

He nodded and squished across the hardwood and rug.

“Close the door, please,” she called.

He did and continued down the hall.

“About time,” Silverman called to him when he was almost at the bottom of the stairs. “What took you so long?”

“Took the long way round,” Taylor said. He rubbed his hands up and down his bare arms. “See anything nice?”

“Most men,” Gracefield said, “find their minds cleared by a cold shower.” Stripped to his undershirt, he sat on brickwork and produced his pocket knife and lifted his pipe in his other hand.

“Oh, my mind’s clear alright,” Taylor said. “Maybe it’s you’ve got the dirty mind.”

In the time Harry had been gone, Spot and Mr Quegg had disappeared. Gracefield added, “One of these days your comments might fall on the wrong ears.”

“Yeah, and I have the feeling they’ll come secondhand.”

Kindling crackled, and a minimal flame faintly illuminated the inside of the kiln. Blue set his shoes on the nearby brickwork to be not too close to the heat when it arrived. Harry pulled his shirt over his head and laid it on the kiln; his damp hair plastered against his forehead, and he brushed it back. Taylor tossed his pants across nearby brickwork. Slowly, as the fire gathered, breathing began to fade into the invisible realm again. Harry sat on the brickwork and pulled his leg over his knee to unlace his boots. Kindling hissed and popped as Silverman added wood, the sound intermeshing with the hammering patter far overhead, the distant and unpunctuated leakings distributed through the vast interior. And the high windows that looked out on the dimly lit brickwork sides of other buildings streamed with water.

“Beastly day.”

As if the obvious needed to be stated.

“Just the national character,” Silverman said. “And, so I’m told, one can’t argue with that.”

Silent except for the rain and crackling fire, the only thing to do was watch the flames as Silverman added more wood. He slipped his boots on again and sans socks leaned old boards against the brickwork and stomped them to halves and splinters to fit them inside. Taylor still rubbed his arms as firelight played over them and his face and exposed chest. Leary held his palms toward the fire, rubbing them together at intervals.

And thus preoccupied, no one had bothered to notice that Mr Cernan’s car had been absent. And actually, no one noticed anything other than the fire—except for maybe Gracefield, who single mindedly busied himself with scraping his pipe bowl, seemingly content to allow his pants and undershirt to dry on him—and Blue, who preoccupied himself with keeping his attention on the fire. And no one noticed a thing until a cold draft blew against every backside, and the fire wavered, and the deluge’s constant static drone rushed in unimpeded. And the only thing to do was look round. Headlamps blared blindingly as someone kicked open the other door. Rain cascaded from her hat, down over her poncho, down over the bag whose straps she clenched in her teeth. She stepped aside to allow the car by, the single wiper still casting droplets aside even after it sat parked out of the downpour. Mr Cernan straightened after he climbed out, bent back

his neck, which audibly popped, and he turned to close the doors. But he only got the one before Millie had kicked shut the other. She shook her head, and water scattered down over her and the bag. "What're you boys looking at?" She managed to talk and faintly grin, even with the straps in her mouth. And she continued to grin around the straps as she passed between them. "Don't be embarrassed on my account."

Gracefield cleared his throat. "Perhaps..."

She glanced at him from beneath her dripping hat brim as she passed. Bare footsteps on the iron stairs had also gone unnoticed, and she turned sideways to squeeze by Mr Quegg and ascend. Spot stopped and sniffed her, but water drizzled from her poncho and peppered his snout, and he shook his head and turned to follow Mr Quegg. "Nice to see you boys," she called from the stairs, before she turned to ascend, her voice only faintly muffled by the bag.

Mr Quegg deposited a stack of towels on the brickwork. Then he went to help Mr Cernan with the rest of the bags. Spot followed them up.

With no lack of physical satisfaction, Taylor toweled behind his ears. "Which one was that? Do you know?"

Silverman said, "It's just a good thing for you that you were still in your skivvies."

"Yeah? And how's that?"

"Better to have the mystery than the unfortunate truth."

Taylor paused, snorted.

Leary rubbed his hands together. "You ever had hot rum punch?"

"I'd take hot water right now."

Taylor draped his towel around his neck. "You want to know what I like about twins?"

"No," Gracefield said. He blew into his pipe bowl. "I doubt that we would." He glanced up, and Blue turned toward the fire again. Gracefield didn't seem to think anything of it and looked down at his pipe again as he reamed the bowl and withdrew his knife to puff into it.

"None of you want to admit it," Taylor said, "but you're thinking about just the same things. You're just like me. So it's not like the rest of you all are doing any better."

"Perhaps," Silverman said. He held up a wet sock. "But with you around, we have to do something to differentiate ourselves."

"Everybody's the same," Taylor said.

Leary unbuckled his pants. "Even women?"

"Why," Taylor said, "is it I always get barracked up with a bunch of dummies?"

No one replied.

Clothes draped over the kiln had begun to steam. Harry wrung out his hat and laid it on the nearby brickwork.

"Wouldn't mind some soup, either," Leary said.

Harry looked into the fire. He glanced down at his damp pants but didn't unbuckle them. He looked up. "It's going to be a bit, I think."

Leary sighed.

"Maybe we could cobble together an ark and float down to the pub," Silverman said. He stomped another board and, in only skivvies and boots, fed the pieces and splinters into the kiln.

Ellison watched him without comment. The hiss and crackle from the fire had no chance of overpowering what was happening overhead. Ellison looked into the darkness above. "This will slow things down," he said. And to clarify, added, "The work out there, I mean." A faint light momentarily filtered through the doorway overhead, from down the hall, as someone opened and closed a door.

"Maybe," Silverman said.

Bare feet descended the iron stairs, a sound that couldn't be discerned over anything else. A sharp whistle went up, and the only thing to do was turn toward it. Mr Quegg carried a pot, bowls stacked atop it, and set it on the brickwork next to the lit kiln. Taylor managed to beat Leary to be first in line. And after he finally got to the ladle, Leary forewent a spoon altogether and just cradled a bowl in both hands and sipped as he watched the fire. Blue had taken to the same idea. And after a while, sitting there on the brickwork, he looked up, paused. "Sounds like it might be slowing down." The only thing to do was look up. Mr Quegg had long before ascended the iron stairs. Spot, too, had long disappeared, prompting a comment from Taylor on the nature of the soup which no one had cared for and isn't worth repeating.

"It is getting late," Gracefield said. He collected his shirt, dried crisp, and slipped his arms into it. "I think I'll turn in."

"A cold one tonight," Taylor said. "I wouldn't mind something

to keep warm with.” He pulled his own clothes from the sides of the kiln and stepped into them. “Or two,” he said, as he tied his shoes.

Gracefield, pipe in hand, threaded between kilns and mounted the iron stairs. Taylor laughed to himself and followed. He stopped beside one of the kilns, turned. “You think it’s true about one of them being left at the altar?”

“What’s it matter?”

Taylor shrugged. “I just wouldn’t want her to feel bad. Anything I could do to offer comfort and all that. Wouldn’t happen to have any idea which one it was?”

No one replied.

And Taylor just shrugged and turned and mounted the stairs.

“He’s too obvious,” Silverman said into the lit kiln.

Leary said, “About what?” He removed the pot lid. “Anybody want the rest of this?” Glancing around at shaking heads, he removed the ladle and upended the pot to extract what remained, in the unceremonious but only way it could be done. He licked his lips and sighed. Then he set the pot on the brickwork and replaced the lid. He had long before slipped back into his dried clothes. “Well,” he said. He stood with his hands in his pockets. “Night.” And he moved toward the stairs, paused there at the base of them.

After a moment or two, Silverman called, “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.” Leary gripped the railing and mounted the first step, carefully testing each as he climbed. He called down, “Just want to make sure it isn’t up here in the dark waiting to trip me.”

Overhead, everything rested in silence. Leary’s shoes resounded against the iron steps. The fire crackled.



Empty boxes and crates sat in the front pews. Angular parishioners, Silverman called them. A few of them lay open, brown wrapping paper spewing out. He had a name for these, too. But he had no time for that as he helped Ellison and Blue with the block and tackle. “Easy with it,” Ellison said.

“Just,” Leary said, “watch what you’re doing.” He stood atop the second-to-last rung of a ladder and stretched out his arm and prodded the back of the cross as it partially detached from the wall.

“If Jesus chooses to smite thee,” Silverman said, “there’s nothing us mere mortals can do about it.” He wrapped the rope around one hand for a better grip.

The cross and the figure permanently attached to it tipped forward, so the figure, who had been looking forlornly down at those below, contemplated his own feet.

“Don’t—” Ellison said, “—Watch it!” And the entire thing swung forward when the last anchor broke. “Hold onto it!” Leary pressed himself against the wall.

“Hold it,” Silverman said to Blue. “Wait till it settles down.”

The cross and figure pivoted back and forth in ever-decreasing arcs, as if it were a pendulum powering heaven, until it settled into vaguely turning side to side. “Make sure it doesn’t twist the ropes.” By then, Leary had climbed down and could get close enough to steady it.

“Alright,” Ellison said. “Now, let’s take it down very carefully.” He said to Leary, “Watch your feet.” The base of the cross touched the floor. “Alright, that’s it. Make sure it’s tilting back. Watch it. Make sure it’s tilting back.”

Leary said, “I heard you the first time.” He stepped clear.

"Alright," Ellison said. "Let it down slowly." He added, "Slowly."

When the back of the cross had settled on the floor, Silverman released the rope, huffed. "I wonder if it was this hard the first time around." He stepped toward the cross and looked down. "I think he may have put on weight since then."

Ellison motioned to Leary. "Everyone get into position."

Blue and Silverman and Ellison and Leary bent and took hold of a section of the cross, and Harry prepared to support the center.

"Okay," Ellison said. "One. Two. Lift."

They got it up onto their shoulders.

"I don't see why he can't carry his own cross this time, too," Silverman said. They started down the center aisle. "Definitely put on weight, too." Silverman grunted. "Definitely could not have ascended into heaven like this." He shifted his shoulder to try and manage how the beam rested on it. "I don't see why God makes us Jews to carry these things around so often."

"Watch the sides of the doors," Ellison said. They passed out into the narthex, where the only thing to do was to wait and push open the doors so they could carry it on out. "Watch the steps," Ellison said.

"A man," Silverman said, "can't keep his eyes on the ground and heaven at the same time."

They eased it head first into the back of the truck. And Blue climbed up over the wheel wells to grab hold of it again. "Come on with it."

"It's not going to fit flat," Silverman said. He grunted as they shoved it forward.

"It will," Ellison said.

"It's too wide," Blue said. They left it balanced on the sides of the truck, the ends of the cross wider than the cab. "It'll never make it through a tight turn."

Ellison said, "We can shift it onto its side."

"Then," Silverman said, "it will just be too tall."

"Well, what do you suggest?"

Silverman stepped back, slipped his hands into his pockets, and stood there some moments looking at it.

"What if..." Blue looked down at it from where he was in the

truck bed. "What if we put this corner down here. And lean the other side up over there?"

"Might," Leary said, "push the feet toward the side down here, rather than straight out."

Ellison stood there looking at the truck and the figure, as if turning it round in his mind.

"Good as anything," Silverman said. "Lift it up there then. And get ahold of it back here."

"Be careful," Ellison said.

"Swing it around. A little farther."

"Be careful."

"Now..." Silverman released the foot end. "Alright..." He motioned to Leary. "Get that crate. Jam it in behind it there." And Leary tossed the crate in and climbed up over the wheel well.

"Make sure to wrap those ropes tight," Ellison said.

Mr Quegg poked his head through the rolled-down window and looked back as Blue and Leary hopped down. Silverman banged on the side of the truck. "And off we go," he said, as it pattered away.

"What," Silverman said, "a sad sight."

Leary said, "How so?"

Silverman shook his head. "It's unnatural for something to be turned that many angles at once." He shook his head and turned up the steps. He paused at the top, turned. Ellison still remained below, looking in the direction of where the truck had disappeared into the fog. "You coming?"

Ellison turned. He looked over his shoulder. Then he started up the steps.

"You all should be grateful," Silverman said, as they entered the church.

Taylor said, "How's that?"

"Vikings came all this way to strip places like this for free," Silverman said. "You're getting paid." He glanced back at Ellison, but Ellison turned and walked off to work on something on the other side of the room. Leary mounted the ladder again, filled one arm full of the smaller things hung along the wall, and carefully made his way back down to hand them off to Blue and Taylor to pack. Hammer blows echoed through the space as Gracefield nailed-shut a

filled crate. "So much bric-à-brac," Silverman said. Lantern light flickered over gold accents.

"Some of this stuff..." Taylor said. He breathed foggy breath on a piece and wiped it against his jacket and looked at it. "Might be worth a penny or two."

"You can't," Ellison said, and took it from him, "put a price on it."

Taylor shrugged. "You can put a price on anything."

Silverman said, "What's your price?"

"Eh?"

"How much do you want for yourself?"

Taylor laughed. "As much as I can get."

Silverman rooted in his pocket. "I'll start the bidding at...fifty cents. Anybody else?" He held up a coin. "Anybody?" He looked from man to man.

"Bad taste," Gracefield said.

"All I want to know," Silverman said, "is anyone going to bid more than fifty cents? Anyone? Going once. Going twice. That's it. Sold." He tossed the coin to Taylor, who caught it, out of instinct. "Just don't start calling me master. Your Lordship will do just fine."

Taylor looked down at the coin in his open palm. He shook his head and laughed and tossed it back. "Very funny," he said.

"A sale is a sale," Silverman said, and flipped it back at him. "No refunds. All sales final."

Taylor threw it. It went past Silverman's shoulder and struck the wall and rebounded somewhere against stone and disappeared into the shadows. "It's not funny anymore."

"Never was supposed to be."

"Everybody," Ellison said, "take it easy."

"A man," Silverman said, "sells himself a little every day to survive. Should be at least able to admit it."

"And what about you?" Taylor said.

"Oh," Silverman said, "I admit it."

Ellison said, "That's enough. Remember where we're at."

"I might flatter myself," Gracefield said, "but I believe I comprehend the man's point." He stood there propped against a stack of nailed crates, had taken out his pipe and lit it. "I would believe that

our compatriot is attempting to argue that economics is tantamount to slavery.”

“And of course,” Silverman said, “you disagree.”

Gracefield puffed his pipe. “Obviously, a system whereby men are free to choose for whom and when they will work cannot be comparable.”

“Yet,” Silverman said, “man is placed in a system whereby he has to do so. And what is the difference between having to choose a new master each day or one for a lifetime?”

“A sufficiently enterprising man,” Gracefield said, “would find he could employ himself.”

Leary backed down the ladder slowly, pausing to move his free hand from rung to rung. He said, “What about a woman?”

After that, it’s hard to know if his howl or Spot’s yelp came first. But in any regard, Leary tumbled backwards, and Spot scrambled out of the way, tail between his legs, and bric-à-brac sailed through the air and hit the floor and rolled towards the pews and across the front of the altar. Lying on his back, arms splayed, legs bent and partially in the air, staring at the ceiling, Leary breathed out. “Ow.”

Ellison helped him up. “You hurt?”

Leary groaned. He put his hand against his back. Spot stood at a distance, looking that way, ears down, tail still between his legs.

“Ow.” Leary bent forward, hand still on his back. “I think he paralyzed me,” he said.

Silverman said, “Where at?”

“All over.” Leary groaned. “Ow.”

“Better make sure,” Silverman said. “Just let me kick you in the leg and we’ll—”

“Ow—leave off.”

“He must have hit his head,” Silverman said. “Now he’s picking up Britishisms.”

Leary straightened, hand still on his back. “Ow.” He looked at Spot, who hadn’t moved the whole time. “I told you he’s out to get me. Ow. You all saw that.” He looked at Blue. “Didn’t you?” Blue shook his head. “Don’t say that,” Leary said. “You saw it.” He turned to Ellison. “You saw what he tried to do.”

“Why don’t you just sit down,” Ellison said.

"Ow. Ow." He turned. "Don't any of you tell me you didn't see that."

"There is no need," Gracefield said, "to be so melodramatic."

"Ow." Leary tilted back his head and sighed. "Ow."

Gracefield shook his head, and pipe clamped between his teeth, he lifted one of the crates and carried it down the aisle to the vestibule.

"Come on," Ellison said, and took Leary's arm and guided him to a pew.

Leary eased down onto it. "Ow." Spot tentatively moved toward him, tail still down. Leary said, "Keep him away from me."

Ellison motioned to Blue. "Take some of the rope and put him up front or something. Get him out from underfoot."

Blue patted his thigh. "Come on, boy." He patted his thigh. "Come on." Spot looked at Leary, who groaned. Blue patted Spot's side. "Come on." Tail still low, Spot followed him down the aisle.

"It's a murder machine," Leary said, once they had gone.

"Well, then it's a very bad one then," Ellison said. "Now, are you good enough to go or not?"

Leary arched forward, put his hand on his lower back. "Ow."

"I'll take that as a no."

"Here," Silverman said, and lifted one of the items that had scattered across the floor when Leary had fallen, "look at this."

Leary raised his head. "It's a gold woman," he said.

"And," Silverman said, "does it make you feel anything in particular?"

"No."

Ellison said, "What's the point of this?"

"Well," Silverman said, "I was holding out for a miracle. But..." He looked down at the figure. "Maybe this one's broken."

Ellison grabbed it from him.

"Well?" Silverman said.

Ellison didn't reply. Instead, he turned and placed the figure in one of the crates, wrapped packing material around it.

Silverman turned to Leary. He said, "You sure you don't want me to kick your leg?"

Leary shook his head.

"Alright," Silverman said. "Take it easy." He turned. "Anyway,

you messed up right from the start,” he said. “If you want to get out of work, you should get out of it at the beginning and not at the end. Didn’t they ever teach you anything in the army?”

“Don’t know,” Leary said. He straightened and eased back against the pew, tilted back his head. “Never stopped to think about it.”

Silverman said, “You must have been in intelligence.”

Leary sighed. “You know it was the infantry.”

“That’s just what you’d expect an intelligence man to say.”

“Ow. It is?”

Silverman nodded. “For all you know, you might be one and not know it.”

“You think?”

“A definite maybe,” Silverman said.

Taylor said, “Are you talking or working?”

Silverman said, “I’ve told you to address me as Your Lordship.”

Taylor extended his middle finger.

“Enough,” Ellison said.

Blue passed up the aisle. “Truck’s back.”

Ellison nodded. “Make sure these are packed snug,” he said to Taylor. Then he lifted one and carried it past Blue.

Blue turned to watch him go. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Silverman said. “Yet.”



“A gift from the sisters,” Silverman said, and extended a hot-water bottle. Leary, lying face up on his bunk, reached for it and laid it across his stomach and covered it with both hands. “They work better if you apply them directly to the problem area.”

“It’s moved to his stomach,” Taylor said. “As usual.”

Ellison said, “How’s the back?”

“Fine,” Leary said. He turned his head and looked around the room. “Where’s the murder machine?”

“Down the hall,” Silverman said. “Maybe someone should go keep an eye on him to make sure he doesn’t slip anything into your food.”

Taylor said, “What’s taking everything so long today?”

“Don’t the both of you get started,” Gracefield said. He sat at the table, running his knife around the inside of his pipe bowl.

Blue entered about then. “The cesspool overflowed when it flooded,” he said.

“Fucking great,” Taylor said. “You’d think we were living in a third-world country.”

“There’s no need,” Silverman said, “to bring politics into it.”

“What the hell,” Taylor said, “are you talking about?”

Silverman reclined on his bunk, stretched. “First World countries,” he said, “are aligned with the States. Britain is aligned with the States. Therefore, Britain is a first world country.”

“And?”

“There is no utility,” Gracefield said, “in rehashing these sorts of subject matter.”

“Second World countries,” Silverman said, “are those allied with the U.S.S.R.—”

"Do you put a period at the end of the sentence," Leary said, "with an acronym like that?"

"Third World countries," Silverman said, "are those not explicitly aligned with neither."

"And," Taylor said, "I do not care."

"But notice how," Silverman said, "it's always the people that are in neither category that are treated the worst." He interlaced his fingers behind his head and closed his eyes. "Or people who are in both at the same time."

Taylor said, "What're you mumbling about?"

"Don't," Gracefield said, "encourage him."

"What a very discouraging thing to say," Silverman said. "After all, I'm only the solution to a naturally arisen problem."

Ellison said, "What's that?"

"Someone," Silverman said, "must take up the role of the antagonist. Someone must be the devil that challenges God's complacency. Otherwise He would end up trusting people too much. And who knows where the world would end up then? Not that I am egotistical enough to claim to operate on that sort of scale, however."

"Deliver us," Ellison said, "from temptation."

"And when," Silverman said, "did the devil ever tempt anyone without God's permission?"

"I'm going to go out," Ellison said. He said to Blue, "Did you check the spigot?" Blue shook his head. Ellison went out and closed the door after himself.

"You really go in for this stuff, don't you?" Taylor said.

"No," Silverman said, "I am completely superficial. Scratch the surface and all you will find is a hollow void underneath. A vacuity. A mask pulled over nothingness."

"That seems," Blue said, "a rather dismal view."

"Perhaps," Silverman said. "But it leaves me free of having to cultivate a true inner me, or whatever it is you want to call it, that must be protected from the outside world." He yawned. "And I am saved from having to agonize over finding that one person whom I can safely reveal that true inner me to. Which sounds as unpleasant to be on the receiving end of as the giving." He slipped his opposite shin over his other knee.

"Men always," Gracefield said, as he stuffed his pipe, "try to run away from themselves and hide behind a mask." He put the pipe stem between his teeth.

"If it is mine and I can't get rid of it," Silverman said, "then you shouldn't have to foist it on me. And if you have to continually foist it upon me, well."

"Men," Gracefield said, and stopped to puff, "are always willing to define the uncomfortable aspects of life as imaginary, something that can be escaped from."

"If God can make anything," Silverman said, "He can make the imaginary. And neglect to tell us which is which. And if He can do anything, He can even make himself forget which is which."

"Some men's idea of God," Gracefield said, "tends to mirror too much of themselves." He touched his pipe bowl with his thumb and forefinger.

Silverman, eyes still closed, said, "All men do."

Leary said, "What about women?"

"Well, of course," Silverman said. "What gods do women observe?"

"Plural?" Ellison said.

"But what else?"

"I'm," Blue said, "getting lost here." He ran his fingers through his hair and looked across at Harry. "Do you understand this?"

Harry shook his head.

Taylor stood. "I'm sick of lectures. I never asked for a damn education."

Silverman didn't reply. In fact, all he did was lower his boot to the floor again. He leaned forward, forearms on his knees.

After a while Leary said, "why is supper so late today?"

Blue shook his head. "I don't know. I just know that it is."

Leary laid the hot-water bottle off his stomach and beside him on the mattress. After a while, he said, "A couple days after coming in on the plane, getting back, there was this guy, we hadn't been discharged yet, but we'd gone off base on a pass into the city, and there was this guy, marine, I guess, and he'd climbed up on this broadcast tower, television, I guess, maybe, he'd been staying at this halfway house, or something or the other, and he was gonna jump,

and the fire department was there and the police and a crowd and everything like that, and, well, he was gonna jump, and then there was this shot, and when everybody looks up, he's falling, and he hits the ground, and a news van showed up just after, and they have these couple of huge cameras, but they don't bring them out, because it was the bullet that killed him instead of the fall, so everything was okay."

"No man," Gracefield said, "has the right to take his own life."

Silverman said, "Then no man owns himself."

Leary said, "What about women?"

"Forgive my ignorance," Blue said.

"That, of course, would suppose," Silverman said, "that ignorance is a sin."

"But isn't the temple or whatever you call it and the rabbis all men?"

"So they say," Silverman said.

"And they," Blue said, "sit around talking about things like this?"

"Most likely."

"It's just..." Blue shook his head. "I don't know..."

"About what?" Leary said.

About then a sharp whistle carried from the distance.

"That's Miss Millie," Blue said. He rose from his bunk. "Everything must be ready."

Leary sat up. He left the hot-water bottle lying on his bunk. "You stay where you're at," Silverman said. "We'll never pry you out of the kitchen if you get in there." He motioned to Harry. "Give him a hand." Harry nodded and rose to follow Blue into the hall. Oven scents assaulted them as soon as they opened the door into the front room, and the curtain over the kitchen door had been pulled aside, and Blue motioned for Harry to follow him in there. The one sister held a wooden spoon in her teeth, bent forward to stir a pot with it, and withdrew it and knocked it against the rim before she dropped it on a towel on the counter. "The ladle's in the drawer," she said, and she looked at Harry and motioned her head. He turned, searching. "That one." She shook her head in frustration. "Honestly." She stepped past him and balanced and pulled one of her feet free of a slipper and grasp the knob with her toes. "There." She shook her

head and jammed her foot into her slipper and exited the kitchen behind Blue as he carried the pot out.

"Don't mind her," her sister said. She sat at the table and turned a loaf of bread out of a pan onto a platter. "There is a bread knife in there, too. Would you mind handing that to me?"

"Yes, mam." But it took him a moment to find a bread knife among everything piled in the drawer, so when he handed it across the table she was already saying, "You can just call me Millie or something. Whatever. That'll be fine."

He paused there looking at her while she sawed part of the loaf. When she looked up again she said, "Is there something wrong?"

"I..." Harry looked as if he missed having his hat to fondle. "I'm just... wondering why you want me to call you by your sister's name?"

She looked at him a moment, puzzled.

Blue poked his head through the kitchen door. "Something wrong?"

"What...?" Rachel looked at him. "No." She shook her head. "No," she said, "here." And she pushed the plate toward Harry. "You lot had better eat. You've had a hard day." Still, she watched Harry as he lifted the plate, and that disconcerted him.

"Is there anything else I can do?" Blue said.

Rachel shook her head. "No. No. Go on. Get something to eat."

He nodded and turned to go open the door for Harry. About then, Millie emerged from the bedroom. "Did you get the plates?" she said.

"God no," Blue said. He shook his head and turned back toward the kitchen. "I don't know sometimes." He emerged again with a stack of tin plates and plain cutlery.

"Of course," she said, "I'm sure you men down there probably don't have a problem with using your fingers, do you?" She laughed at Harry's reaction. "Be careful," she said, "a person might get the idea you take everything as a dirty thought when you get a face like that."

"Blue," Rachel called from the kitchen, "would you please go down to the other end of the hall and tell them supper's ready?"

"Yes, mam."

Blue followed Harry into the hall. And he set the stack of plates on the table and immediately turned. Gracefield said, "Where are you off too in such a hurry?"

Blue motioned over his shoulder. "Miss Rachel asked me to let Mister Quegg and Mister Cernan know everything was ready."

Leary had reached and grabbed a chunk of bread off the plate before Harry had even set it down. Taylor stirred the ladle through the pot. He took a plate from the stack. "At least the one can cook," he said. "Have to give her that." He pulled back a chair and sat down. About then, Ellison had returned. "The way I figure it," Taylor said, before his first spoonful, then continued after, "the way these things run, I figure one of them's good at the stove, and the other's good in the sack. The problem is figuring out which one."

"Don't know about that," Silverman said. He took a bite of his own and eyed Ellison as he dug into the pot and ladled some onto his own plate. "I do know how you find out if someone is a baptist preacher, however."

"And how," Ellison said, as he sat down, "is that?"

"You serve a chicken potluck, just like this," Silverman said. "And the one that stands there digging around in the pot till he finds the piece of chicken, is the one you are after."

"And what," Ellison said, as he brought a spoonful to his mouth, "would you do if you caught one?"

"What do you think?" Silverman said to Leary.

Leary said, "Never thought about it."

"Neither have I," Silverman said. "You ever see a monkey trap?"

Blue entered. "What's going on?"

"We were just discussing baptist preachers and monkeys," Silverman said.

Blue sat at the table and reached for a plate. "OK."

"Have you ever seen a monkey trap?"

"I think I saw a picture of one in a National Geographic."

"Then you know exactly what I'm talking about."

"What're you yapping on?" Taylor said.

"It's pretty simple," Silverman said. "It's just a box with a hole in it and a banana inside. When the monkey reaches in and grabs the banana he can't get his hand back out while holding it."

"And it just stays there." Blue said. "Right? I think that's what I read."

"You can walk right up to it," Silverman said, "and hit it on the

head. It won't let go of the banana." He swallowed another spoonful. "Now," he said, "what I figure is you can use a chicken potluck in roughly the same way. Only you don't put the chicken in it. So he just stands there stirring and stirring and stirring and looking for the chicken."

"But," Leary said, "it isn't in there."

"Exactly," Silverman said.

Ellison set his elbow on the table and lowered his head until his forehead rested in his palm. Faintly, he laughed.

"The Catholics and the Jews," Silverman said, "if nothing else, united against the Protestants." He said to Blue, "No offense intended."

"None taken, I guess."

Silverman reached for a chunk of bread. He said to Harry, "What is the matter with you?"

Harry shook his head.



Gracefield said, "It is the moisture in the air, that's what makes it feel colder than it actually is." Though, it wasn't cold enough to turn to ice the water that trickled through the gutters or for breath to be rendered visible, but the only thing to do was shiver, regardless. "Just let it get down a little more, past freezing, say a good minus five, and you will be able to walk out in your shirt sleeves."

Leary, who walked with his hands in his pockets same as everyone else, said, "What's that in numbers?"

Silverman said, "-5."

"I don't see," Taylor said, he turned up his collar, "why he couldn't bother to drop us at the pub before he took off wherever the hell."

"Exercise is good for the body," Gracefield said. "And good for the mind."

"Some of us," Silverman said, "have neither. And find it preferable to keep it that way."

"A man," Gracefield said, "should maintain a certain healthy amount of self-respect."

"Ah, but I'm an ape first."

"As I said, a man has to maintain a certain healthy amount of self-respect."

Silverman nodded. He glanced at Leary. "How about you? Do you have self-respect?"

Leary shrugged. "Never thought about it."

"Well, I'm convinced," Taylor said, "no self-respecting man has a job that keeps him out in weather like this."

"And a self-respecting man," Silverman said, "would offer to buy a round for everyone else. Which is why I am glad to be full of self-loathing. Or at least I would be if I existed."

Gracefield said, "Come now."

"And guilt. I'm all full to the brim with it. You name it. But there's only so much I can do. I can only apologize for the last few world wars so many times. I mean, I know I wasn't born yet, but I take full responsibility. Absolutely. That's the way you have to do it, step right up and take it on the big nose. After all, everyone already knows we're responsible for everything that goes wrong. The safest thing to do is to admit it, because then they're convinced you're lying and trying to trick them, and in that moment of puzzlement, you can run away really fast. That would have saved my father's life once in Germany if he had been there."

Gracefield said, "Poor taste."

"Oh, I admit it. Absolutely guilty as charged." He said to Ellison, "You do have to admit that, in terms of guilt, we do have the church outclassed. Not that I'm not saying it wouldn't come in a strong second. We've just had so much longer to practice at it. So in that way it's like a medium weight going in the heavy finals."

"Long odds," Leary said.

"Moderation," Gracefield said, "can often be a useful quality."

"Agreed," Silverman said. "And I prefer to keep my use of moderation very moderate."

Taylor opened the door, and Silverman caught it, held it open, and motioned to go through. Jackets, as usual, were hung there by the door. "And not that I wanted to say anything," Silverman said, as he moved toward a table, "but since you brought it up. You've been guilty of some bad taste, yourself." He stepped over the bench and sat opposite Gracefield. "Not that I'm trying to cast aspersions, mind you."

"And what," Gracefield said, "pray tell, are you referring to?"

"Well, as I said, I didn't want to say anything, but since you ask, don't you think it might have been a bit inconsiderate to talk about it getting colder as if it were a good thing? What about all those cold-blooded people in this world? What do you have against the capitalist class? Are you by chance secretly a subscriber to the Saturday Evening Post?"

Gracefield removed his pipe and pouch and clenched his pipe stem between his teeth as he opened the pouch, said around it, "I have always found it rather obvious why any given man was released from

the service. I find it tends to be very forward in their character. That is to speak generally, of course."

"Well," Silverman said, "I admit we did have a few fundamental disagreements, but that is just the way it always is, isn't it? But at one point, it seemed to me, since I had died, that should have, effectively, been the end of my service."

Ellison said, "Are you claiming to have returned from the dead?"

"Oh, nothing like that. After all, we have seen what a mess it created the last time a Jew did that." Silverman shook his head. "No. No, I would rather avoid that."

"I didn't know you died," Leary said. He watched the bar as the publican filled the pints. "Was it over there?"

"Don't encourage him," Gracefield said, then paused to light his pipe.

A barmaid came round and set the platter on the end of the table and dispersed the glasses.

Leary said, "How long until the sandwiches?"

"You won't starve to death today," the barmaid said, as she carried the tray back.

"So you die and end up here," Blue said. "How does that happen?"

Gracefield shook his head.

"Well," Silverman said. "It was a bit of a mix-up, actually." He circled his finger around his glass, orbiting the rim. "You have to understand I'm not the man they first drafted. He was a rather...mild figure. You might more accurately say milquetoast. It's a sad story, really." He sipped his beer. "You see, I was the one who was supposed to die. I actually only came about because that poor guy couldn't handle it. So you see, it was my job to take over for a while. We were polar opposites, really. Eventually, he would have completely cracked, just gone right out of it. So I was supposed to step in and take the brunt of it and shrug the horrors of war off with my wit and panache and extra-curricular antics. Everyone would love me. Then, at the end, I would nobly sacrifice myself so that Corporal Stephen Donaldson from Battle Creek, North Carolina could live his rather dull, but not unpleasant, life." He sipped his beer. "But things didn't exactly go as to plan."

"What happened?"

"He died."

Leary said, "What of?"

Silverman shook his head. "Complete mystery. One day I looked in on him and he was fine. Then the next...nothing."

Leary craned his neck to see down the bar. "Happens sometimes. Nothing you can do about it."

"Nope." Silverman sipped his beer, wiped foam from his upper lip with his thumb. "And the real problem is, of course, that there's nothing to send home in a box after just fading away like that."

Blue said, "And his family?"

Gracefield shook his head. "Don't encourage this."

Blue rubbed the back of his neck and sipped his beer.

"I wrote them a letter," Silverman said. "I didn't know what else I could do. I'm the one who knew him best, I think. So I guess it was my responsibility to say something to his wife and daughter."

Gracefield removed his pipe from his mouth and stepped over the bench and moved toward the bar. He ordered a fresh pint, as if the old one had been tainted by proximity.

Blue glanced at him. "What happened to them?"

"Don't know."

"You..."

"There's only so much I can do." Silverman lifted his glass.

"Right," Taylor said. "It's like I had this one down in... And one up in... Hah—funny, isn't it, how it just goes away? Besides, it doesn't matter in the long run, does it, anyway?" He lifted his own glass. "Better to have a little fun while you can."

"Just say it," Silverman said to Ellison.

And Ellison looked up from his beer, silent.

"If you don't want to dance, you don't have to take my card."

"Dance?"

Silverman nodded.

"I suppose you'll have a suitable witty or sarcastic reply for whatever I say."

"That," Silverman said, "we already know. But we have to go through the process."

Ellison lifted his glass. "I reject the process."

"And you feel there was something different that could have been done?"

“Changing doesn’t absolve a person of their responsibilities.”

Silverman set down his beer, nodded. “Interesting.”

Leary said, “What do you think is taking them so long with the sandwiches?”

“So,” Silverman said, “what you’re saying is that the body is more important than the soul.”

“I didn’t say anything of the kind.”

“But if one soul vacates a body and another occupies it—” —Silverman sipped his beer— “—and the new soul inherits the debts of the old soul accrued through use of that former body...” He set his glass on the table. “What else can you be arguing?”

“Bodies don’t trade out souls.”

“But they can be devoid of them. As they are after death, and before the body is a body. And the soul must enter that devoid body, as it does when the body becomes a body, or after it has become a body. So is it really so far-fetched to think that one might vacate to provide space for another?”

“That’s not how it works. You’re born with a soul, and it doesn’t vacate the body till death.”

“Oh.” Silverman raised his glass, sipped. “We don’t believe the soul enters the body till three or so days after birth.” He tipped up the glass and drained it. “It enters through the mouth, incidentally. Or is it the nose? Although, I don’t know if that detail is important.”

“I guess,” Taylor said, “there could be worse places for it to go in.” He laughed. “That would be a good line.” He laughed. “*I want to give you a piece of my soul.*” He shook his head and laughed and lifted his glass.

Leary watched a barmaid come around with the plate of sandwiches.

“That’s the problem with around here,” Taylor said. “Such a poor selection.” He looked up at the barmaid, shook his head. “Now, of course...the other two... What’re they’re names?”

“Rachel and Millie,” Blue said.

“Actually I was talking ’bout them.” He glanced up at the barmaid, laughed. “Ah, whatever. Does it really matter?” He laughed. “Either of a set matches, right? I mean, they do look the same after all, don’t they?”

Harry, who had nursed his beer in silence, looked up, puzzled.

"Still would like to know which one got jilted." He looked up at the barmaid. "How 'bout you? Which one was it got left at the altar?"

The barmaid tossed the plate onto the table. "I don't spread gossip." When she'd turned and started away, Taylor said, "that's the problem, asking a woman about another woman, you know."

The barmaid paused, turned. "I will be glad when you ride away on a dump truck," she said, then turned and walked down the length of the bar and stepped behind it and went into the back.

Taylor laughed. "Now what the hell was that?" He took up a sandwich in one hand and his glass in the other. "I think it's something to do with after they get past a certain age," he said, as he chewed.

"Taylor," Silverman said.

Taylor said through a mouthful, "Yeah?"

"If I were a surgeon," Silverman said, "I would threaten to sew your big toe to your forehead."

Taylor laughed.

A barmaid came around to collect empty glasses.

"What about you?" Silverman said to Harry. "Quiet as always." He shook his head. "Nobody likes quiet people. They're terrifying, didn't anyone ever tell you that?" He looked up at the barmaid. "Maybe you should give him a little news. Have anything to shake him up a little?"

The barmaid looked down at Harry, touched his chin, and turned his face upwards. "You should get a spare shoe," she said, then lifted the tray and carried it back to the bar.

"Better," Leary said, as he chewed, swallowed, "keep a tight hold on your boots."

"Doesn't have to mean anything will happen to it," Silverman said.

"What else would it mean?"

"Oh, different things." He said to the barmaid as she returned with a tray of filled glasses, "He could give one away, couldn't he?"

Blue said, "Why would he do that?"

Silverman shook his head and lifted a fresh glass.

"Better," Leary said, "watch them around the dog, anyway." He reached for another sandwich.

“I would wager,” Silverman said, “that, all totaled, you’ve spent at least seven-eighths of your life just in sandwich-related activity, of one sort or the other.”

Leary chewed and swallowed. “What’s that in numbers?”

“7/18.”

Leary shrugged, washed down what he’d just swallowed, then took another bite.

“It would be interesting,” Taylor said, “to know exactly how much of your life’s been spent doing certain things.”

“That’s what happens when you die,” Silverman said. He wiped his upper lip. “You get to heaven and they hand you a time sheet.”



Usually, it was an evening job for someone to carry a couple of armfuls of wood up to the kitchen, but in waiting for the truck to return with another load, Blue and Harry had decided to go ahead and saw and split out enough for the next few days, and each carried an armful. Blue knocked on the door, careful not to loose any of the former floorboards haphazardly stacked in his other arm. "Hello." No reply came. He knocked again. "Miss Rachel?" He knocked again. "Miss Millie?" He looked back at Harry. "Maybe they went out?" He tried the knob and found the door unlocked. "Hello?" He opened it enough to peek inside the darkened room. "We'll just leave it," he said. And he opened the door and crossed through the front room and went into the kitchen and unloaded his arm piece by piece into the metal carrier beside the cook stove, barely able to see in the dim light that filtered in from the ill-illuminated corridor. He turned and squeezed through the kitchen doorway, passed Harry. "See you downstairs," he said.

Harry nodded. He filled the carrier until he had to stack extra planks carefully above its sides. When he had finished, his eyes having adjusted to the gloom, he turned and looked at the empty kitchen. Then, as if somewhat embarrassed, he ducked his head and turned and walked back through the front room and into the hall. He closed the door. He stood there a few moments in the silence; Blue must have been sitting below, waiting; there wouldn't have been anything else to do. Which meant there was nothing wrong with Harry pausing a moment, either. He looked down at the floor. But then he shook himself and looked up. Day glow lit the passage from around the corner at the far end, and for whatever reason, he walked toward it. The layout of the upper floor existed more than it made

sense. And around the corner a span of soot-coated windows allowed dim light but no view of the rooftops beyond. He looked at them a moment, then, shaking himself as if his mind had been allowed to settle into something he didn't care to consider, he slipped his hands in his pockets and walked down the length of hallway and past all those soot-coated windows and around the next corner. Another turn-and-a-half and he would find himself back where he had started. And—

“Good morning, Harry.”

Harry paused, hands still in his pockets, and turned. The outer wall along this corridor was just bricks and mortar, the backsides of the outer shell of the building itself. But two framed windows had been slotted a certain distance apart in the inside wall and looked into the room that they partitioned.

Harry nodded. “Good morning.”

The windows were like those in houses that push up to open, and the lower halves of these had already been pushed up and propped in the corners with sticks, and one of the sisters looked through the bottom half at him and smiled. She said, “Are you waiting too?”

He nodded.

Mr Cernan had departed early that morning in the car, about the same time the truck had pulled out.

“Is the fog as thick today?” she said. “It feels a little wetter in the air, don't you think? Or maybe that's just me, I don't know.”

“I guess,” Harry said, “that it's about the same.”

“It's hard to tell the difference sometimes,” she said, “isn't it?”

“I suppose.”

“Good morning.”

Somehow, Harry had stopped halfway between both windows, and looked from the one to the other to find the other sister looking out of the second on the opposite side. She didn't smile, and just in general just looked more matter-of-fact.

“Good...” Harry nodded. “Morning.”

“How was breakfast?” the one on the left said. “Was everything alright?”

He looked left. He nodded.

The one on the right said, “The car hasn't come back yet, has it?”

Harry looked right and shook his head.

"I hope they haven't been working you too hard," the one on the left said.

Harry looked left and shook his head.

The one on the right said, "You don't say much, do you?"

Harry looked right and shook his head. "I guess not, mam."

"Don't call me mam."

"Don't mind her," the one on the left said. "Has everything been all right while you have been with us?"

The one on the right said, "Don't mind her nosiness."

Harry, as if he just then recalled still wearing it, removed his cap and held it in front of him with both hands.

"Where are you from?" the one on the left said.

"Oklahoma."

"Is that a nice place?" the one on the left said.

"No," Harry said. "Not really."

"You're not in any hurry to go back?"

He shook his head.

"No one you miss there?"

He shook his head.

The one on the right said, "Anyone you don't miss there?"

Harry looked right. He shook his head.

"So you don't have plans to go anywhere else?" the one on the left said.

Harry looked left. He shook his head.

The one on the right said, "Do you have a habit of disappearing in the middle of the night?"

Harry looked right. He shook his head.

"Don't mind her. She can sometimes be rude," the one on the left said.

Harry looked left.

"So Harry, do you have any plans for the future?" the one on the left said.

Harry shook his head.

The one on the right said, "Do you have something against plans?"

Harry looked right. He shook his head.

"Don't tease him," the one on the left said.

Harry looked left.

"But do you have a problem with things being planned out?" the one on the left said.

Harry shook his head.

The one on the right said, "But get afraid if everything isn't planned out?"

Harry looked right. He shook his head.

"Have you ever been in love?" the one on the left said.

Harry looked left.

The one on the right said, "was it a him or a her?"

Harry looked right.

"Don't ask him that," the one on the left said.

Harry looked left.

The one on the right said, "I can ask him what I want."

Harry looked right.

"Don't mind her," the one on the left said.

Harry looked left.

The one on the right said, "Well, say something."

Harry looked right. "Yes..." He gripped his cap.

"I'm sorry. We seem to have you all confused," the one on the left said.

Harry looked left.

"It happens to a lot of people," the one on the left said.

The one on the right said, "Pretty much everyone."

Harry looked right, then left again.

"Would you mind playing a bit of a game with us?" the one on the left said.

Harry paused.

"Only if you want to, of course," the one on the left said.

Harry still held his hat in front of him. "OK."

The one on the right said, "Would you mind telling me my name?"

Harry looked right and paused.

The one on the right said, "It's just a game."

"Miss—"

"Oh, you can drop all that. After all, we might as well just use plain first names, hadn't we, Harry?" the one on the left said.

Harry looked left and paused.

"But I mean if you don't want to play, don't let us keep you or anything," the one on the left said.

Harry fondled his cap. "Rachel..."

"Are you sure?" the one on the left said.

Harry paused. "Yes..."

The one on the right said, "And me?"

Harry turned right. "Millie..."

"And you're sure about that," the one on the left said.

Harry turned left. He nodded.

"Would you hold on for just a minute," the one on the left said.

Harry nodded.

The one on the left ducked her head back through the window. And when Harry looked right, the other had done the same. A flurry of commotion carried through the thin wall. And one poked her head through the window on the right again.

"Now..." the one on the left said.

Harry turned left.

"What's my name?" the one on the left said.

Harry, cap still in hand said, "Rachel."

"And you're sure about that?" the one on the left said.

He nodded.

"Really sure?"

He nodded.

"Hold on just a minute," the one on the left said. And she ducked her head back through the window. And when Harry looked right, the other had done the same.

"Alright..." the one on the right said when she poked her head through the window again.

"One last time," the one on the left said.

Harry looked left.

The one on the right said, "What's my name?"

Harry looked right. "Rachel."

"And you're really sure about that?" the one on his left said.

Harry looked left. He nodded.

The one on the right said, "Really sure?"

Harry looked right. He nodded.

The one on the right said, "Well..." She paused, listened. "It sounds like the truck's back. You'd better go down. It was good talking to you, Harry." She ducked her head back through the window. And When Harry looked left, the other had done the same.

He stood there a moment, cap in hand. The doors opened, and the truck pattered somewhere beneath his feet. Finally, he started his way down the rest of the hall, around the corner, along a hall with no windows, inside or out, around another corner, and finally found himself back approximately where he had started. He still had his cap in hand as he went down the iron stairs. Below, planks and boards pulled from the truck bed clattered onto piles.

"What took you so long?" Blue said.

Harry paused a moment, then shook his head. As if he just then remembered it, he put on his cap.

Taylor drug out a plank and tossed it onto the pile. He glanced at Harry. "What happened to you?"

Harry looked at him blankly.

Taylor said, "You get caught?"

Mr Quegg climbed out of the truck cab.

"Keep your eyes on your work," Silverman said. He turned with a long plank balanced over his forearm, which sliced over Taylor's head.

"Watch it," Taylor said.

Silverman said, "That's what I told you to do."

A horn sounded outside. Blue tossed a plank and went to open the door so Mr Cernan could drive the car in. He stretched as he climbed out, bent back his head, and his neck popped.

"'y d'n't 'u g'v 'm ' h'd," Mr Quegg said, and motioned to Harry as Mr Cernan pushed the seat forward. Harry nodded, crossed toward the car, looked through the window, and opened the passenger door and pushed the seat forward to get at the bags and boxes behind. And together they carried them upstairs. When they entered the kitchen, Rachel was already seated at the table.

She smiled. "Just set it down," she said. "I'll sort it. Thank you, Harry."

Harry nodded.

"She found some more yeast this time," Mr Cernan said, as he

unwrapped a muffler from around his neck and stepped into the front room to hang it, leaving Harry standing there by himself. "So I went ahead and picked up the extra packs."

"Good," Rachel said. She smiled at Harry.

"But they didn't have any..." Mr Cernan glanced at the two of them and went quiet as he entered the kitchen, but kept his pace toward the stove and grabbed a rag and wrapped it around the coffee pot handle. He lifted a ceramic mug from the counter and filled it. He turned. Steam curled out of it and struck his face as he sipped. "Hadn't you," he said, "better be getting back?"

Harry nodded.

"Thank you for the help," Rachel said.

He nodded to her before he turned to go out.

When the front door closed, she turned in her seat, toward Mr Cernan, who stood there with his hands wrapped around the mug, trying to warm his fingers. "You don't always have to try and be so mean," she said.

He pulled his nose up out of the mug. Faintly, he smiled.

Rachel just shook her head.



There is nothing that cannot be discussed over a pint and a plate of sandwiches.

“The bomb will do away with Christmas.” Silverman heaved his glass as if toasting.

“Come now.”

“Please, clarify.”

Gracefield, who’d taken out his pipe and laid his tobacco pouch on the table, looked up. “What?”

“Well, taking British spelling into account, that phrase could be interpreted any of several ways,” Silverman said. “And I wouldn’t want my reply to be out of context.”

Gracefield shook his head and stuck his pipe between his teeth and struck a match. “Ridiculousness.”

“No more than anything else.” Silverman took up his glass again. “And after all, it wouldn’t be the first time, anyway. Christmas is such a modern invention.” He talked as Gracefield touched his pipe and looked past him at the wall. “Or am I touching a tender spot?”

“Or,” Ellison said, as he reached for a sandwich, “mistaking boredom for anything else.” He took a bite and chewed. “We are quite familiar, at this point, with Charles Dickens’ financials.” He pointed at Leary. “Don’t.”

Leary said through a mouthful, “What?”

“Ask what the bomb has to do with Christmas.”

Leary chewed. “What does it have to do with Christmas?”

“I am glad you asked that.” Silverman set his glass on the table. “Of course you know about all this nuclear testing.”

Leary shrugged as he chewed.

"They're supposed to just do that underground now," Blue said. "That's what I read."

"And what's the difference?" Silverman rapped on the table. "It warms the air up. It warms the Earth up. Same thing. It all equals out. It all bleeds into everything else. And what do you think's going to happen?"

"Never thought about it," Leary said. He reached for another sandwich, started to put one half in his pocket, but caught Spot scooching closer to sniff, and set it down on the table in front of himself instead.

"Of course everything's going to get hotter. You can't put heat into the system without expecting that to happen. And what is *that* going to do to the weather?"

The door opened, blew cold wind over everything and threatened to extinguish the lamps. The publican carried splintered and sawed planks to the fireplace and dropped them beside it and lifted the poker and stirred the embers.

"Right now," Blue said, "I might be in favor of a warmer world."

Taylor said, "They used to test those things out on some tropical islands, didn't they?"

"Bikini," Blue said.

"Yeah, whatever. It's already so warm there those native girls wear those grass skirts and stuff, don't they? And if it got a little warmer, they might be convinced to wear nothing at all."

Gracefield: "Hmpf."

"And if it gets a bit warmer, say, around here, a man might make a fortune if he could be the first in the door importing some of those grass skirts. And you wouldn't even have to worry about covering anything up top." Taylor reached for the sandwiches. "Say you're right. I mean, I'm not saying there wouldn't be some resistance at first, but if a man had the money to get in on the ground floor of a change like that..." He bit into his sandwich, waved the remainder of it.

"You underestimate," Gracefield said, "the instinct toward modesty."

"One man's modesty," Silverman said, "is another's scandal. However, one shouldn't underestimate the bra and blouse lobby. Or the undergarment cartels."

"I think you will find," Gracefield said, "there are reasonably equitable, cross-cultural values in this area in any civilized domain."

"No, I don't find that."

The publican stirred and shifted the fresh-added planks as they smoked and smoldered and crackled.

"But I think you will have to agree," Gracefield said, "as any decent man would, that women do not prefer themselves to be on display in some vulgar fashion."

"Well, I would say that very greatly depends on the woman."

Gracefield clenched his pipe in his teeth.

Leary reached for another sandwich, held one half in one hand, elbow on the edge of the table. He glanced to see that Spot was looking at it, as he carefully slipped the other half into his other pocket.

"Now," Silverman said to Leary, "you were asking about how this applies to Christmas."

Leary looked at him blankly as he chewed. "I guess."

"Of course, ancient Christmas tradition—or I should say the pagan roots of the holiday—"—he cut his eyes toward Ellison—"—all comes out of some deep-seated human psychological need to feel that they deserve a celebration in the deepest darkest middle of the winter. This then begs the question—"

"That," Gracefield said, "is not how that phrase is used."

"As I was saying, it begs the question if the whole world warms up, are we still going to have that deep-driven need to celebrate something near the winter solstice? Or is the whole thing going to fade away?"

"Ridiculousness."

"Cultural institutions," Ellison said, "do not change based on the weather."

"I'm not saying it would go away right off. I'm sure it would hang around for quite a while as a vestigial cultural practice, something that no one can quite remember why it started in the first place or why they do it other than that it was done before. And like I say, it wouldn't be the first time culture or society or whatever you want to call it lets this particular celebration lapse."

"Don't," Ellison said, "bring up Dickens again."

“You’re very touchy on that subject. Is there something I should know?”

Ellison sighed and shook his head.

“How about you?” Silverman said to Harry. “You’ve managed to not comment at all. What’s your opinion?”

But Harry just shook his head and stood and stepped over the bench and headed for the back. “Be careful it doesn’t freeze off,” Taylor called. Mr Quegg, sitting at the bar, glanced up as Harry passed and stepped out the back door.

The fire crackled. Ellison, who sat there with his hands wrapped around his empty glass, said, “It’s too cold for beer.” He looked toward the bar. “Is there any coffee hot?” And the publican pointed to the fireplace. He reached under the counter and set the cups on the bar. Ellison stood and moved toward the bar, reached for the stacked cups, had the back of his hand slapped. A barmaid eyed him, then lifted the cups and walked over to the table and dropped them there. She drug off the rag draped over her shoulder and wrapped the pot handle with it to lift it off the ledge built into the fireplace. She set it on the table. And before she walked away, she looked down at Spot, then at Leary. “Don’t think you can hide things from him,” she said, then she retreated into the back. Leary looked down at Spot. Spot looked up with his mouth open, tongue hanging out.

“There is,” Silverman said, “another option. That is full-on thermonuclear warfare.”

“No one,” Ellison said, as he poured a cup of coffee, “would be that stupid.”

“Maybe.”

“All doomsday scenarios,” Gracefield said. “Alarmism from people who don’t understand anything in the first place.”

“I...” Blue said. “I don’t know.”

“All ridiculousness,” Gracefield said. He clutched his pipe. “Ridiculousness spouted by a bunch of pinko sympathizers who want to weaken western nations and their allies’ ability to defend their sovereign rights.”

“God,” Silverman said, “does seem willing to help those who help themselves to a nuclear arsenal. If he does have some sort of plan, after all, and that’s how Christmas is supposed to end up saved.”

"I think," Ellison said, "I'm probably going to regret this, but I'm going to have to ask how you come to that?"

"Simple enough. If winter celebrations do come out of some deep-seated human psychological need related to the harshness of the depths of winter, what more fitting place for it to re-emerge than in the heart of a nuclear winter?"

"Rubbish."

Ellison put both hands around his coffee cup. "No one will let it go that far."

"Maybe," Silverman said. "Then again, if all that testing does heat up the Earth and changes only God knows what, well, governments, people... might become desperate."

"As we have always found, we will find that man's strength of character shines through in the toughest times."

"What about women?" Leary said.

Gracefield touched his pipe and shook his head.

"Of course," Silverman said, "under such circumstances, what men will have to fear most is not just fear itself but themselves. After all, even in just the midst of ordinary night too many men find themselves confronting thoughts they cannot understand and that they would rather not understand." He took a sip of his beer. "And there is something still worse."

"What's that?" Taylor said.

"If gone long enough, they find themselves saying them aloud." He looked down at his beer. "And if such terrible contemplation is precipitated by mere ordinary night, what such thoughts will come unbeckoned in the last, cold, long, dark night of the end of the world?"

Gracefield knocked his pipe against the ashtray. "First you claim all of this is going to heat the Earth. Then you claim it is going to freeze it. A sane individual might wonder what it takes for you to be wrong. One should take care."

A cold wind blew in when the back door opened. The publican flipped a rag over his shoulder and moved out from behind the bar to tend the fireplace. Ellison shivered, and coffee cup still in hand, glanced up to see Harry talking with Mr Quegg at the bar.

"Yes," Silverman said. "One should take care, shouldn't one."

Gracefield slipped his pipe and tobacco pouch into his pocket.

Taylor said, "What about all them mutant babies and such that're supposed to happen? Born without legs and arms. And two heads and all that."

"What about it?" Blue said.

"Well, it would change the dynamic, wouldn't it? I mean, I've never seen it in the movies or the comics or anything, but suppose a guy, instead of two heads—"

"Came out," Silverman said, "with another pair of heads."

"It would," Taylor said, "uniquely increase the possibilities."

"This is all," Gracefield said, "becoming quite unbecoming and disgusting."

"It's merely," Silverman said, "the discussion of a set of particular medical phenomena. And any inquiring mind with a penchant for a liberal education should be—"

"The human mind need not spend its time in the gutter."

"That's too trite an answer even for you." Silverman looked at Blue. "And what about you?"

"I..." He shook his head.

"Welcome back," Silverman said to Harry as he approached. "We were just discussing various—what might be categorized as unseemly—medical phenomena. Do you feel you would care to contribute?"

Harry paused.

"Well," Gracefield said, and rose, "I, for one, am not going to participate in such. There is a level of common decency that one should be able to agree on in civilized company."

"Yes," Silverman said. "One should."

Gracefield moved toward the bar. Blue glanced after him, looked at the table a moment, and finally rose and stepped over the bench and followed him.

"One should," Silverman said, "of course."

"You don't," Ellison said, "have any sense of embarrassment, do you?"

"Oh..." Silverman leaned forward and poured himself some coffee. "I quite do." He sipped it and winced. "It's just that I find I tend to become more embarrassed about what I don't say, rather than

what I do say.” He glanced toward the bar. “And it’s not as if the blowhard doesn’t deserve everything that’s coming to him.”

Leary poured himself a cup, offered to pass the pot down, but Harry shook his head. Leary glanced to his side as he lifted the cup, watched Spot watch him, and he placed his hand over his other pocket.

“What about you?” Silverman said to Leary. “What’s your thoughts on nuclear proliferation and the potential end of the world?”

“Never really thought about it.”

He looked down the table at Harry. “And you?”

“Don’t think there’s much I can do about it.”

“True,” Silverman said. “But there isn’t much that most of us can do about anything. Yet we waste a lot of breath on it.”

“Some,” Ellison said, “more than others.”

“True.” Silverman sipped his coffee. “I have often wondered if we need a new therapy, a sort of inverse, you might call it, of the talking cure. Except, rather than have the patient talk, the physician continually talks at them and cocoons them in a stream of nonsense.”

“An anti-Freudian, then?” Ellison said. “You might want to have yourself checked out by a physician.”

Silverman sipped his coffee. “Why is that?”

“We actually might agree on something.”

“Had to happen sooner or later.” Silverman sipped his coffee.

Ellison didn’t reply.

Mr Quegg rose and started for the front of the pub, pulled his coat and toboggan from the hooks. The last of the various coffees and beers were downed.



Dust sifted from on high, up where roof beams looked ready to splinter and allow the roof to implode. It danced through what light filtered through high windows.

"What do you think this place made? Originally."

Taylor lifted a chunk of cast-iron formerly part of a piece of equipment. "Spikes?"

"Steel nibs," Silverman said. "For pens."

"You know, I've always wondered how they make those little balls that go in the end of a pen. Who comes up with that?"

"So much for nothing new under the sun," Silverman said.

"Never thought about it," Leary said.

"It would be nice..." Ellison said, as he shifted a crate, "It would be nice for once to get through a day without something that has the color of blasphemy."

"And you're in Britain," Silverman said to Leary, "you should use the appropriate term, they're called *biros* here."

"Didn't know that."

"Little-known fact," Silverman said. Blue sneezed. "Good health. But little-known fact, Moses actually went up on the mount and wrote the second Ten Commandments with a *biro*."

"Didn't know that," Leary said. Nobody bothered to respond to either of them. "Hey, what should we do with these?" He raised one of the boxes to examine it, shook it. "It looks like a bunch of them have already been packaged." He opened one. "Oh. Already rusted, though."

"Dump them all together," Silverman said. "It's all metal." He turned. "Where'd Harry get to?"

"He went for the sledges."

"Good," Silverman said. He mumbled to himself as he looked around. "Not much personality, that fellow. Don't even know when he's missing." He eyed the old equipment, circled it, as if it were a combatant and the match were on the eve of starting.

Blue helped Ellison shift another crate. "Can I ask you a question?" he said to Silverman.

"No."

"O—okay."

"He used a biro because he got fed up with how much work he had to put into the first set and then end up smashing the whole project just like that, so he decided to just go knock one off and use his spare time for something constructive."

"What?"

"You were going to ask why Moses used a biro, weren't you?"

"No."

"Oh. Go ahead then. What did you want to know?" He looked around the factory floor. "Can we get some shit out of here so we can get some work done?"

"Makes you..." Ellison said, then grunted and threw something aside. "Makes you wish you'd gone with them to unload, doesn't it?"

Blue didn't reply. And he looked vaguely puzzled when Silverman turned to him and said, "What did you want to know?"

"I...don't remember." He lifted and tossed aside a broken stool.

"Hmm." Silverman shook his head. He turned back toward the equipment. "I figured you were going to ask what the Ten Commandments mean to me. On a personal basis. Was that it?"

"No...?"

"Guess I must be off today."

"True to form," Ellison said.

"Perhaps," Silverman said. "So what do they mean to *you*? The Ten Commandments, that is. On a personal basis."

"The same thing they mean to everyone else."

"You mean those people who recite thou shalt not kill on Sundays and join the army?"

Blue said, "I was always told Jesus told Peter to buy a sword."

"Interesting." Silverman nodded, his back to them, as he surveyed the equipment.

"Well," Blue said after a few minutes.

"Hm?"

"Never mind."

"Oh." Silverman nodded. "If you want to know how I resolve the problem—I don't. It isn't really one. Well, unless you're Christian, that is, which is a mess I will very conveniently avoid stepping in, thank you."

Blue turned to shift something.

Silverman said, "the second commandment only says don't murder. You can only murder a fellow Jew, give or take. Everybody else doesn't count. Whole problem solved, you see? Besides, God hasn't been exactly shy about ordering us to slaughter whole nations right down to cutting children from the womb, anyway."

"Not," Blue said, "something that inspires...confidence..."

"Can we," Ellison said, "just have more work and less religion for a while?"

"So you don't take work as a religion, then. How very appropriately anti-Protestant of you," Silverman said. "Now—will someone please get me a hammer so I can start hitting something?" He turned toward oncoming footsteps. "Finally," he said to Harry. "Took long enough." And he grabbed the other sledge hammer. "I've been waiting to hit something all morning." He raised the hammer, paused.

"What's the matter?"

Silverman lowered the hammer and looked at the piece of equipment a moment. "It's missing something," he said.

"What?"

Silverman, seriousness and determination set into his face, pulled a pencil nub from his pocket and stepped close to the machine, crooned over it as he marked a piece of housing, each stroke a dull scream of graphite on metal. He stepped back. "There." The only thing to do was to look at the roundish, lumpish outline as he lifted the hammer again.

"Your skills as an artist," Ellison said, "leave something to be desired."

Without the pipe jutting off-center from its thin-lined mouth, it would have been impossible to distinguish it as a face, rather than a sketch of a potato.

Silverman hauled back, struck. If it had been a picture of a potato, it would have then been a picture of a mashed potato. Silverman hammered into the mechanism. Bits creaked and broke away. He huffed, brushed sweat away from his forehead with his jacket sleeve. He set the hammer down and motioned with his head for Harry to step up. Silverman unbuttoned his jacket. After a while, they traded again, each stripping until they were down to shirtsleeves, sweating in the chilled air. And after a while, Blue and Ellison traded off with them. Then Leary. Chunks of cast-iron littered the ground, treacherous to walk on and that each man kicked out of the way as he took a turn. Ellison breathed hard, handed off his hammer and leaned against a crate.

Ellison said, "Hit something enough?"

Silverman looked up, grinned. He looked at the chunks of metal that littered the dusty factory floor. "This is the nature of man," he said, "neither the ability to create nor to destroy, but merely to rearrange things."

"And," Blue said, "can we even do that very well?"

Silverman passed the hammer. "Here we have a true Protestant."

"You know everybody's religion better than they do," Ellison said, "don't you?"

The old factory echoed with the dull sound of dense metal striking dense metal.

Blue leaned back against a crate, accepted some water. "It is all supposed to be foreseen." He downed the water. "Or planned or whatever you want to say about it."

"And," Ellison said, "what of free will?"

Blue shrugged. "The outcome of the decision may be preordained, but we still have to make the choice to find out what the choice we make is, and to discover whether there will be salvation at the end or not. At least, that's what my mother always said."

Breaths fogged in the chilled air, even as sweat continued to flow and undershirts dampened.

Ellison leaned back his head, set the hammer head against the ground and balanced on the handle. "What a great mess."

Silverman struck a chunk of metal, and it toppled across the floor. "And you would prefer God to come down and settle the whole thing once and for all?"

"It would be helpful."

Silverman swung the hammer. "Unless you're talking about the floor, that is. If so, I wouldn't mind him coming down and hauling some of this stuff out."

Ellison didn't reply.

"As the phrase goes—"Silverman swung—"—be careful what—"—swung again—"—you wish—"—and swung—"—for." He stopped, breathed hard. "You just might get it." He swung again—"And did you—"—and swung—"—hear about—"—and swung—"—someone whom God—"—and swung—"—talked to—"—and swung—"—that something—"—and swung—"—bad didn't—"—and swung—"—happen to?" He paused, passed off the hammer, and wiped his forehead as he stepped out of the way.

Ellison slammed the hammer into old pig iron. "Mary."

Silverman accepted some water, drank. "I guess it depends on how you feel about setting it up so a mother watches her son get crucified."

Ellison swung.

"Or God telling a twelve year old girl he's just gotten her pregnant."

"She—"Ellison swung—"—was not—"—and swung—"—twelve—"—and swung.

"She was twelve. Joseph would have been in his mid twenties to mid thirties. Since they were merely espoused, she would have been twelve and three quarters when Jesus was born. Give or take. And they would've been married three or so months later, when she turned thirteen."

Ellison swung. "No." A lump of pig iron hit the ground. He panted.

"Now you are an expert in everyone else's religion?" Silverman said.

Ellison looked back at him. He turned and struck a couple more times, panted, turned. "You're just trying to piss me off." He tossed Silverman the hammer.

"I'm just waiting for you to punch in your weight class." Silverman shifted the hammer to one hand. "What about it, Chaplain?"

Ellison still panted. "Explain something to me," he said. "How does a Jew go around without a cap for when he takes off his hat, works on Saturdays, and eats ham sandwiches?"

"I never said I was good at it."

Ellison said, "Well, God help you then."

Silverman handed him the water.

Ellison took a gulp, then wiped his mouth. The hair along his arms stood on end, sweat turned cold by the lateness of the hour. He handed back the water and went for his shirt.

Blue and Harry had stopped hammering, but for several moments the ringing could only continue. Blue slipped back on his shirt and jacket. "That sounds like them," he said. And he went to see.

Sweat, cooling too well, caused clothes to stick to skin, and the only thing to do was to shiver. But at the same time, it didn't seem to help cool any when loading the truck. But then again, if it isn't one extreme it's the other.



The sky drifted towards a darker grey, and the only thing to do was wait for the truck to return from the last load. A dampness, or at least a damp feeling, still pervaded underclothes. And hands in pockets, ambling back and forth in front of the old factory proved the second best way to keep warm.

Fog settled with the evening, obscuring all but the immediate. Blue turned up his collar as he walked, hands in his jacket pockets.

"I," Ellison said, "don't concede your point." He walked in-stride with Silverman. "But it only makes sense that Joseph would have been an older man." He added, "With children of his own already. A widower."

"And that," Silverman said, "solves it." He stopped, hands in his pockets. "I can't say that I envy her."

"*That's obscene.*"

"Oh?"

"*You—*"

Leary said, "What's that?"

Silverman shook his head. "You can do better than that."

The two just stood there looking at each other, their hands in their jacket pockets.

"Or," Silverman said, "does an immaculate conception free one from burning with desire? Just how far do you think original sin

sinks into—” Silverman recovered himself, rubbed the side of his jaw. “When I said you should punch your weight class...” He shook his head. “I didn’t quite mean that literally.” He faintly smiled. “Are we then just pawns and recapitulations of our respective faiths’ illustrious histories?”

Ellison unballled his fist. “I am through taking it easy with you.”

“Good,” Silverman said. “I still don’t envy her.”

“There are more things in heaven.”

“But not those things.”

“The mechanisms of life are not the mechanisms of eternity.”

“An interesting position, coming from those who follow a man who was so well acquainted with a prostitute.”

“Whom he told to go and sin no more.”

“So you concede that Jesus himself admits it is possible for a man to avoid sin.”

“Maybe. After he has been initially forgiven. But that is not the point. All men are born sinners.”

“All men are condemned for a crime they did not commit, before they are even born.”

“That is the nature of man who is descended from Adam. But it’s not guilt.”

“So men aren’t guilty, but they get to be condemned, anyway?”

“But,” Leary said, “what about women?”

Both men turned and looked at him. Leary stood there with his hands in his pockets, chewing the last of something.

Headlamps dimly cut through the fog. Motor noise carried dully through heavy, wet air. “The truck’s back,” Blue said.



Cold and heat collided in the entryway and swirled round as jackets were removed and hung. Silverman drew off his scarf. "Your toes had best better be glad of that," he said. And he turned and moved toward the usual table. The publican dried his fingers and fitted a glass under the tap.

"I knew this guy," Taylor said, as he sat down. "Got pissing drunk, the middle of the night, walked out into a minefield."

"What happened?"

"Somebody seen him laying out there the next morning. Figured he was dead. And they get all this hooprah going to get out there and collect the body and ship it home. And they're about halfway there. And he sits up. Stands. Takes a piss. And then walks out."

"God," Ellison said, "does seem to watch over some with extra care."

A barmaid set down the tray and started offloading glasses.

"He," Taylor said, "can watch whatever he wants, I reckon. Not as if anyone can do anything about it, right?" He laughed. "Not that you probably wouldn't want to turn a blind eye to some of these people getting up to it." He glanced at the barmaid. "Don't you think?" She looked straight down into his face, but it seemed to no effect. She took the tray and turned to go back behind the bar. Taylor sipped his beer.

"There is no need," Gracefield said, as he removed his pipe, "to become vulgar about it."

"On the one hand," Silverman said, as he lifted his beer, "I will grant him the point of what I think is a rather unintended observation, no matter how correct, that so many want to ignore. Namely, that a God that sees everything, also watches you take a dump."

Gracefield put his pipe in his mouth and struck a match.

"And," Ellison said, "you think there's a need to point out what would be the obvious conclusion of realizing that?"

Silverman set his glass on the table. "If it's so obvious, why is everyone so uncomfortable with it?"

A barmaid brought out a plate of sandwiches. And Leary reached for one as he said, "Even when they're in bed?"

"We've already established that God sees or knows everything," Ellison said. "There is no need to go into the details of it."

"If you have nothing to hide," Silverman said, "why are you so uncomfortable with the idea?"

"I just think it's pointless."

"Agreed," Gracefield said.

Taylor reached for a sandwich. "Enough time in the army and you learn to shit with half a platoon around. Why should you bother if one more's watching?" He bit into it. "And watching..." he said, as he chewed, then paused to swallow. "Up in... Shit, can't remember where it was. But there was this place up there you could pay to watch this nigger fuck this little chink they called Thumbelina and—"

Silverman said, "You a virgin?"

Taylor paused. "Fuck no."

"You've been to a donkey show then?"

"No," Taylor said, and took another bite of his sandwich, said, as he chewed, "What the hell's that?"

"I thought you said you weren't a virgin."

Taylor washed down his sandwich and slammed the glass on the table. "What the fuck're you talking about?"

"A donkey show," Silverman said. "Where a woman has sexual intercourse with a jackass."

Taylor sat there a moment, beer in one hand, sandwich in the other, with his head slightly canted. Then he laughed. And started to choke. And coughed. And took a swig of beer. And laughed.

Silverman put his elbow on the table and rested his temple on his fist. "The Bible talks about that too, you know."

Still sipping his beer, Ellison shook his head, paused to wipe his mouth, and set his glass on the table. "It only says she lusted after men who were *like* horses. Not actual horses. It's a metaphor."

"Is this," Gracefield said, "really a necessary subject of conversation?"

"Well, somebody had to be doing it if there had to be a law about it. Unless it was all just coming from the guy writing the stuff down, that is."

Ellison reached for a sandwich. "No doubt."

"What're you..." Leary swallowed, "... talking about?"

Those on the opposite side of the table looked up when Mr Quegg entered and hung his coat and toboggan and found his usual place at the bar.

Silverman pulled his elbow from the table. "Nothing important." He lifted his beer. He said to Blue, "Have you ever been happy?"

"What?" Blue looked over the top of his glass.

"Okay," Silverman said. "Have you ever been elated?"

Leary said, "You didn't give him a chance to answer the first question."

"I thought the answer was plain enough."

"What," Gracefield said, "sort of game have you gotten onto?"

Silverman shrugged. "Just curious." He set down his glass. "And you?"

"Happy—you mean?" Gracefield said. "Of course I have been happy."

"When?"

"Many times. I fail to see—"

"Anything specific."

"Well," Gracefield said, "not right off the top of my head, of course."

"I have a theory," Silverman said, as he raised his glass, then paused for a sip and to wipe his thumb across his lip. "I don't think happiness actually exists."

"Ridiculousness."

Silverman shrugged. "What about you?" he said to Leary. "Ever been happy?"

"Never thought about it."

Silverman looked at Ellison, said, "And you?"

"I believe happiness can come from God."

"Does he promise that?" Silverman said. He lifted his beer and

sipped. "In writing, that is." He wiped his lip with his thumb. "Safety. Perhaps. Prosperity. Perhaps. Wisdom. Perhaps. Sometimes, anyway. But I don't recall happiness."

"Then," Ellison said, "where does it come from?"

"If it doesn't exist," Silverman reached for a sandwich, "then it doesn't have to come from anywhere."

"Then if happiness doesn't exist, what is there supposed to be instead?"

Silverman took a bite from his sandwich, chewed, swallowed. "Obsession? Love?" He lifted his beer and sipped. "Intense experience that leaves no room for worrying about anything else. Or doesn't leave room for anything, really."

"I don't," Ellison said, and raised his glass, "care to live in a world without happiness."

"And what," Silverman said, "is happiness supposed to be?"

Ellison said, "The opposite of pain."

"But that," Silverman said, "is just the absence of pain. Desirable, yes. But is that it?"

"What is it," Gracefield said, "about this time of day that breeds such ridiculous conversation?"

"That," Silverman said, as he set his glass on the table, "I do not know."

"My mother," Blue said, "said happiness was to be found in always doing the noble thing."

"Then," Silverman said, "if nobility is required for happiness, it might be no wonder it is such a scarce resource." He touched his glass and looked down the table at Taylor. "And have you ever been happy?"

"I won a hundred-fifty bucks once in a poker game so... yeah, I'd say so."

"It looks like," Silverman said, "I have been proven wrong. Apparently happiness does exist." He lifted his glass. "And it's not all that expensive."

"And what," Gracefield said, "do you hope to get out of these rhetorical games?"

Silverman ran his fingers around the rim of his glass. "Maybe a moment in time that is...an intensity of experience?" He raised his glass.

Gracefield said, "There are those men who start to talk themselves out of their head when everything becomes difficult. It requires a certain strength of character to maintain oneself. I'm speaking in general, of course, you understand."

"Of course," Silverman said. "Some men do just go all to pieces." He lifted his glass. "One way or the other."

"Knew a guy like that," Taylor said. "Mortar hit right near him. Shrapnel took off a leg. They took him to the hospital and he ended up with this thing that attached to his side and his shit came out in a tube or something."

Harry rose and stepped over the bench. The conversation still continued behind him as he passed the bar and moved toward the back door. Cold dampness had collected on the cobblestones and brickwork outside. And his breath became visible as soon as he closed the door. He moved down the alley, through trickling water. Garbage blocked one end. And he stopped there and slipped his suspenders off his shoulders and unbuttoned his pants and worked them down his thighs almost to his knees. Squatting there made it possible to differentiate each cobblestone as a kind of island surrounded by trickling water.

Leary rounded the corner. "What the hell, man?"

Harry finished and stood, pulled up his pants and buttoned them, tucked his shirttail in. "Mine," he said. He pulled his suspenders over his shoulders. "I'd...appreciate it if you didn't say anything."

"About what?" Leary turned toward the wall and unbuttoned his pants. He sighed as Harry passed. "Make sure they save a sandwich, will you?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah."

Warmth enveloped him as he stepped inside. Mr Quegg glanced at him, nodded, then turned back to the publican, who had slung his towel over his shoulder and bent and lifted the pail in which he had collected the castoff from the taps. Two tails crowded round and followed him to the corner where he set it down. He wiped his hands as he turned toward the bar.

Harry moved toward the table.

"...this guy coming back," Taylor said. "Gone from the waist

down. All of it completely gone.” He lifted his beer. “Not worth living if you ask me.”

“The human spirit,” Gracefield said, “has a deep well of endurance.”

Taylor set down his glass. “Well, whatever.” He reached for a sandwich. “But I can see why a bunch of those guys bought it, if you know what I mean.” He chewed. “Better to taste a little gun oil than go on living that way.”

Harry straddled the bench and sat down. His beer glass sat empty, foam collected in the bottom corners.

Ellison said, “It’s just as bad to encourage a mortal sin as it is to commit one.”

“Who’s encouraging?” Taylor washed down a bite of sandwich. “I’m just saying.” He took another bite of his sandwich.

“There was this guy in our company. At least, I heard about it later, you know,” Blue said. “One day, he just...ran straight into a machine gun nest. Everybody was just...pinned down. And he just went straight at it.”

Gracefield removed his pipe and motioned with the stem. “Brave fellow.”

“Where’s the line,” Silverman said, “between bravery and suicide?” He glanced toward the sandwich plate. “Anybody gonna eat that?”

Harry glanced toward it, as well. He reached for it.

“Now that that’s settled.” Silverman tilted back his head and drained his glass.

Harry laid the sandwich on the table, beside his glass.

“What about you?” Blue said to Silverman. “You must’ve seen something.”

“Plenty.” Silverman set his empty glass on the table. “There’s always that one guy, isn’t there?” He shook his head. “You think they’re standard issue? Or do you think it’s just the same guy doing it over and over and over again? What if there’s just this one guy who can’t get killed no matter what or can’t stay dead so he just runs around trying over and over again without any luck?”

“So you had one, too?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Silverman scratched his shallow beard. “We

called him Marie Antoinette. Jumped into a chopper rotor. I can go into details if you want.”

Gracefield said, “I think we would rather not.”

“Bet that,” Taylor said, “was a real mess.” He washed down the last of his sandwich with the last of his beer. “Still say it’s better than getting it from the other end. You—GOD DAMN IT—WHAT THE FUCK—” He scooted down the bench and grabbed his shin. “What the hell?”

“Sorry about that,” Silverman said.

“Sorry?” Taylor rubbed his leg. “That hurt.”

“An accident,” Silverman said. “On the bright side, at least we know you don’t have a wooden leg.”

“A wooden leg?”

“You never know, people are always hiding things these days. Never can tell.”

Taylor stumbled over the bench and tried to stand, grabbed for Silverman’s shirt. But all heads jerked up or around when someone slapped the bar. The publican pulled the rag from his shoulder. “No fights.”

Mr Quegg slipped off his stool. “T’m’u’ ’o,” he said.

About then, Leary emerged through the back door.

Taylor looked from Mr Quegg to Silverman, released his shirt. “Sorry about that,” Silverman said. Without saying anything, Taylor turned and walked with an unsteady gate toward the coat hooks. Silverman rubbed his beard. He turned toward the table, shrugged. “Some people just can’t accept that things that happen happen.”

Ellison shook his head and finished his beer and stood. “Fewer workplace accidents would be a blessing.”

“Maybe,” Silverman said. He turned to Leary. “What took you so long?”

Leary shrugged. He looked at the empty sandwich plate as others passed to head for the coat hooks, and a barmaid came round with a tray to gather empty glasses. Harry stood, lifted the sandwich from the table. He offered it to Leary.

“Say, thanks,” Leary said, and slipped it into his pocket. He looked around. “Something happen while I was gone?”

Silverman called from the doorway, “You two coming?”



Silverman and Harry had ridden in the cab, Spot in Harry's lap, though only the one looked comfortable with that fact. Sometimes planks rattled loose from how they had been stacked into the bed against makeshift sideboards and clattered to the ground, and Silverman turned to try and look back through the window, but the fog was too thick, and they were already long past. Droplets streamed down the windshield where it had started to drizzle. And their combined breaths steamed the backside of the glass, requiring Mr Quegg to periodically clear a swath with a swipe of his broad hand. He leaned forward and looked through a newly wiped streak at the dark-grey clouds that appeared between rooflines. "B't'r br'g 'v'n 'n," he said.

Silverman wiped the window with his jacket sleeve and tried to peer upwards. He said to Harry, "We will unload this and stretch the tarp."

Harry nodded, Spot sat there in his lap, contributing to the fogged windows with his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth.

The foundry lay ensconced in a fog bank, and the doors only became visible the moment before it would have been too late to brake. Mr Quegg reversed the truck, and Silverman climbed out to open the doors. Inside, after the truck had parked, Silverman opened the cab to get to his gloves in the floorboards, and Spot hopped off Harry's lap and down and past him and scurried between the piled lumber and foundry works and mounted the stairs, and his nails clattered against the iron steps as he ascended. A damper chill than usual had settled outside and proved also to have invaded the foundry floor, and Harry and Silverman shifted their jackets around themselves, against it. It somehow made slipping hands into cold leather gloves more noticeable. Only after they had shifted half of what had been stacked in the truck bed had they been warmed enough not to care so much.

But the longer they worked, the more substantial their own breaths became, so that by the time they had finished, the white fog hanging in the air that came out of their mouths seemed at times to be more solid than the bodies that did the breathing.

Mr Quegg jerked started the truck and climbed into the cab as Harry and Silverman opened the doors. They pulled up their collars against what by then was light rain, but it still struck the backs of their necks, anyway. They closed the doors against it, watching taillights disappear into the fog and darkness that had come with the darkening skies.

"The dog has the right idea," Silverman said. "Let's go get something." He stuffed his gloves in his jacket pockets as they climbed the stairs. But at top, rather than turn toward the bunk room, Silverman motioned for them to go down the opposite way. He knocked on the door.

"It's open."

Silverman unbuttoned his jacket as he opened the door and stepped inside. "Starting to rain," he said. Already, the multitudinous sound of it carried down from the roof.

Millie, who had been sitting on the floor in front of the couch, pieces of paper spread across the floor and a pencil between her big and second toe, looked at the ceiling.

Silverman said, "Any coffee?"

"On the stove," she said, as she looked back down at her drawings. "It's leftover from this morning."

Silverman passed through to the kitchen. Harry, hands still in his pockets, stepped toward the kitchen doorway, but remained on the front room side of it as he watched Silverman look for a rag to drape over the pot handle. "You look cold," she said to him, and when he looked at her, she looked down at the sheets of paper arrayed around her.

"Here," Silverman said. Harry turned and took the offered cup.

"Put another piece of wood in the stove," Millie said. To which Silverman's reply was to set his cup on the table and take his glove from his pocket and jiggle open the cook stove latch and feed in a couple of sawed planks from the wood box. He closed the stove door and pressed the warm spot that had formed in the leather into the

palm of one hand and took up his cup again with his other. Millie dropped onto the floor the pencil she had been holding and picked through a scattered set of different colors until she had found a red one. Without looking up, she said, "You're all probably going to be loafing the rest of the day."

Silverman sipped his coffee. "The weather prediction isn't good."

"When is it ever?" she said, still without looking up. Pencil scratched against paper as she shaded a figure.

"Something new?" Silverman said.

"Maybe." Millie turned one of the pages face down. "Did I hear the truck go out again?"

"He went to pick up everyone else."

"Well," she said, as she dropped the red pencil and picked out a yellow one, "supper is still going to be at the usual time." And then she traded that for a green one. "Make a fresh pot of coffee if you're not going to do anything else." And then she traded that one for the red again. "Say something, Harry."

"He's cultivating the image of the mysterious silent type," Silverman said.

Millie dropped the pencil and lifted one of the sheets. She said to Harry, "What do you think of this one?" He bent to look at it. "You can take it," she said. He shifted his cup to his other hand and grasped the piece of paper. "I'm going to call it the shadow of the moon over an unknown jungle."

"It's pretty," Harry said of the interconnected geometrics.

"You can keep that one if you want," she said. And she reached for a plain pencil. "I'll just end up throwing it out anyway."

"Thank you," Harry said.

"Don't pretend you like it."

Harry nodded.

Silverman sipped his coffee. "So where is your sister?"

"She's around," Millie said. She had looked up to see Harry's reply, but then looked down at her work. "Working." She paused. "Since you know about mechanics," she said, and looked up at Harry, "do you think you're useful enough to fix a sewing machine?"

Harry paused. "I never have."

"But would you be willing to try?"

"I can take a look at it."

"Fine," Millie said. "Go take a look at it then. Around the corner. You should know where it is. Rachel's around there somewhere. She can show you the problem."

Silverman said, "At least let him finish his coffee first."

Millie glanced at him, then looked at Harry. "Whenever you have a moment."

Harry nodded. He had already mostly finished his cup, anyway, and drained the last of it. "I'll take that," Silverman said. And held out his palm to receive the empty cup.

"Maybe you'll be of some use," Millie said, as Harry moved toward the door. He stopped as he opened it, looked back at her, and Silverman standing there with two cups in hand. "Don't let the heat out," she said. And he shook himself and stepped into the hall and closed the door behind himself.

Below, it sounded as if the truck had come back in.

Around the corner, blown rain had streaked the windows, revealing the watery outlines of what rooftops weren't submerged into fog. Eventually, if it continued that way, it might even clean them completely. He continued around the corner. The door was shut. A tick-tick sound emanated from the other side. He knocked.

"Who is it?"

"Harry," he said.

"Oh." A pause followed. "You can come in."

He opened the door enough to see in. Even with darkened clouds and the rain, a skylight provided almost enough light to work by. Rachel sat by a small desk, her fingers still on the handle of a small, portable, hand-crank sewing machine.

"Millie," Harry said, "ask me to look at a sewing machine."

"Oh." Rachel smiled and nodded. "Well, come in then."

The door only barely opened. He glanced behind it, but in the dim light, he could only vaguely discern the bolts of fabric piled back there.

"Sorry," Rachel said. "It's a mess." In fact, only a narrow pathway led through piles of stacked fabric. Boxes overflowed with scraps and small squares and cut-off pieces and triangles and thread spools. "It's raining," she said, and looked up at the soot-marred skylight. Water

ran down in waves along the glass. He followed her eyes up. "I hope the rest of you aren't going to be out in it all day."

Harry shook his head.

"That's good," Rachel said. She smiled.

After a moment or two of silence, he took off his cap.

"Well I guess," Rachel said, "you don't want to stand around here all day." She pushed against the desk and the chair swiveled. "It's right back here." She moved aside a bolt of fabric that draped the machine. "Sorry about the mess." He stepped closer and rested his fingertips on the oak surface as he looked at the machine folded up out of the body. "Do you know much about sewing machines?"

Harry shook his head.

"It's kind of special, you see." She pointed down between the curlicue molded cast-iron legs. "It's a tandem sewing machine," she said. "So someone can sit on the opposite side and peddle. It's supposed to have come all the way from America."

He nodded as he looked at it.

"There's a wooden piece broken there," she said. "See it? But we haven't been able to find one to replace it."

He bent over to try and get a better look but, down so low, there wasn't enough light, so she said, "It's too dark down there." And swiveled the chair around again. "Let me get the light." But there wasn't enough space for the two of them to pass each other. There wasn't even enough space for her to slip out of the chair. And Harry, momentarily absorbed in the sewing machine's pedal works, didn't notice. But when he did, he stepped back as if to make up for something, and clutching his cap in one hand said, "Sorry." She faintly smiled at him, a smile which changed to perplexion, then faded as he stumbled into something. "Careful..." She raised one hand, gripped the back of her chair with the other. But while she was worried about him falling into something or something coming down on top of him, instead, something nearer her started to cascade, and an avalanche of fabric and boxes slid toward them. Rachel screamed. Harry didn't even have time for that.

Shoes and boots rushed along the hallway outside. Fabric and ribbon and thread spools flowed out through the open doorway, and Mr Quegg carefully stepped over it all. Mr Cernan ducked his antlers

through the doorway, stood there holding a lantern. In the darkened interval before they had arrived, sobs carried muffled from within the fabric. Now, in the lantern light, it remained plain to see that she would have kicked the toppled, nearby bolts of fabric, could she have. But she didn't speak as Mr Quegg shifted the bolts and helped her up. And he would have carried her out, but she made him put her down, and Mr Cernan stepped back as she propelled herself through the doorway and down the hall.

Mr Quegg offered a hand to help Harry up. “’r’d?” Harry shook his head once he was on his feet. Carefully, the two of them stepped over the fallen fabric and out into the hall. But he paused and turned and looked back through the open doorway, at the fabric that had spilled out, at the spools that had rolled across the floor, at the ribbons that had unraveled into pigtail curlings.

“It was an accident,” he said.

Mr Quegg patted him on the shoulder.



Breath crystallized and twisted ghost-white through the lamp and torchlight that illuminated the basement.

"Are these bells?" Leary raised his torch to try and better see. The bulb burned dim, dimmer by the day. He shook it. "I thought I just changed the battery in this thing yesterday." He pointed it at his face and squinted into it.

Mr Quegg carried a kerosene lamp somewhere ahead.

"Dumb bells," Silverman said. He rubbed dust from one of the green-grimed covered specimens, ran his fingers over one of the already extant cracks.

"Church bells?"

"What makes you say that?"

Leary shrugged. "Just a thought."

"What else would they be?" Silverman said. He wiped his hand on his jacket. "Dumb bells now." He looked round at the three large bells that had been packed in there. "These we'll have to break down to get out of here."

"How'd they get them in here then?"

"Who knows?"

And just then, Harry descended the rickety stairs with sledge hammers in each hand.

"You're getting to be convenient," Silverman said, and took one from him. "We need a piece to wedge in the crack."

"Keep your mouth open," Leary said. Harry looked over his shoulder at him, but Leary was still too busy trying to illuminate things with his torch. "It helps."

The first strike rang through the basement. Harry almost dropped his hammer.

"You get used to it," Silverman said. He struck again. "What did you need to hear, anyway?" Dust filtered down between floorboards with each strike. Each traded off from one hammer to the other until the bell finally cracked and collapsed into itself, halves each propping the other up. "Get the blanket." Four men could carry a half of a medium bell between them. The pieces piled onto the back of the truck looked like green and grey-grimed eggshells.

"You shouldn't rub inside your ears that way," Blue said. He let another eggshell fragment clank into place.

"I can still hear it," Leary said.

"Jam cotton in your ears." Blue offered some from his jacket pocket.

Leary stuck a puffy cotton mass in each of his ears. "Doesn't work. I can still hear it."

"You have to put them in before they start."

"What?"

"You—"

"I can't hear you."

Ellison shouted from the doorway, "What's taking so long?" The small side door looked an oddly comical portal into such a good-sized church, nothing like the sculpted stone work and steps out front. Ellison drug one of the smaller pieces. "Come on, lend a hand." But it took two to get it onto the truck. "Careful." He huffed and looked up at low-cloud-enshrouded sky, where church towers lay hidden. "God, what it must have been like to haul them all the way up there."

"What'd you say?"

"What?"

Leary looked over the side of the truck. He extracted one of the cotton balls. "You say something?"

"What're you doing?"

"Trying to keep the ringing in."

"What?"

"It's not so bad once the volume settles down a bit. Rather... rhythmic."

"Uh huh."

"Hey—" Silverman appeared in the small, darkened church doorway. "The rest of you working or not?"

Ellison removed his leather gloves and stuck his hands in his pockets. "I think your ancestors learned the wrong lesson down in Egypt."

"What ancestors?" Silverman tossed a fragment into the truck bed. "I was there personally."

"How was the weather?" Leary said.

"Balmy." Silverman started back toward the church.

Ellison followed him, hands still in his pockets. Bell pieces clanked against the truck bed as Blue and Leary arrange them to be as space efficient as possible. "I'm beginning to wish I was back in the army," Ellison said.

"They keep telling me that people have to work for their living out here in the real world."

"I always hear Marxists talk about being alienated from labor. I could do with a bit of alienation."

"Know what the gate at Auschwitz had written on it?"

"No clue."

"Work shall set you free."

"Then I think I might prefer to be in bondage."

Gracefield, carrying two buckets, passed them on his way out, without saying a word.

They entered the church.

"Where is a monk when you need one?" Silverman said. "He could step out of the shadows and say how it is sin that is true bondage." He glanced at Ellison, "Ever consider it? Or do you not like the color brown?" Silverman stopped in the corridor, and Ellison stopped to keep from running into him. Silverman pointed. "Up this way. There's something we need to look at." They turned the opposite way down the corridor and ducked through a low door, then ascended. Above, cold light filtered through slits in the walls, illuminated the brass chimes and their constituent mechanisms that hung acenter the chamber. And above those, the bells.

Ellison looked at everything arrayed above. "Not these, too."

"Only the chimes for now," Silverman said. "The brass will get the best price."

"They can't have just left these," Ellison said. "This is..."

"Not worth taking, apparently," Silverman said. "They traded it for packing up everything downstairs. So unless you don't want to

get paid..." His eyes flitted over mounted brass. "We will need some hammers and the cutters and a metal saw," he said. After a moment or two of silence, he looked over his shoulder. "All right?"

"I," Ellison said, "just don't know, sometimes."

Silverman turned, again, toward the chimes. "Knowing isn't requisite to living."

Ellison said, "You really enjoy this, don't you?"

Silverman didn't look back. "What?"

"Tearing down things like this. Smashing it up."

"I'm not the one that decides what gets done."

"Only following orders."

"If you want to say."

"Well," Ellison said, "I just..."

"The brass will bring a good price."

"You would know."

"If it bothers you that much—"

"Let's just—"

"Imagine if someone interrupted us right now," Silverman said. He still spoke without turning. "Pushed right between the both of us, just a complete stranger, so we both had to ask *what the hell was that about?*, wouldn't that be useful." He still didn't turn. "Send Blue back up. You can work on the truck."

"I said I'm fine." Ellison jerked his hands out of his pockets and reached for his gloves.

"I doubt you will have to worry about them not being here for New Years," Silverman said.

Ellison paused. "Why is that?"

"Let's just get to work," Silverman said. "We can talk eschatology later."

Ellison stood there a few more moments, watching Silverman examine the chimes, then jerked off his gloves and stuffed them in his pocket as he turned and ducked through the low doorway and started down. He shifted his shoulders against the cold as he stepped outside. He called, "Where're the tools?" Blue, alone, wrangling a large bell fragment into place, huffed and pointed. Ellison pulled the large leather bag over his shoulder and started inside. Hammering had ceased below, and Leary, Taylor, and Harry appeared at the head

of the stairs, blanket stretched between them to carry the smaller fragments, looking as if they were hauling pieces of someone off a battlefield in a stretcher. Ellison said nothing as he turned and ducked through the low doorway that led to the stairs that ascended the bell tower. Carefully, he made his way up the damp steps, almost slipped more than once, almost toppled over with the weight of the bag. Pausing to right himself, Ellison started up again. Up top, he ducked through the low door and dropped the bag and stuffed his hands in his pockets. He looked up at the polished brass cylinders and their associated mechanisms as Silverman opened the bag and removed tools in the way a doctor might before an operation and laid them on the floor. "What's eschatology?" Ellison said.

Silverman didn't pause or look up. He set a hammer beside a saw and file. "Stories of the end of the world."

"The apocalypse?" Ellison said, "Revelations, you mean?"

"Revelations is a Christian eschatology," Silverman said. He dug into the bag for something he couldn't seem to find. "And if the Earth were to fall into the sun, that would be a scientific eschatology. Ragnarok a Norse one." He dug deeper. "What's the matter? Forgotten your seminary classes already?" He withdrew a crowbar and offered it to Ellison. "You want to start?"

Ellison grasped the cold metal with his bare hand. "Why not?"

Piece by piece, they piled brass and iron fittings onto the floor to be carried down in buckets and blankets. A void slowly opened in the mechanism, and eventually, mounting holes in the wood and stone would be the only indicators anything had ever been there. And Silverman stood looking at that void as Ellison dutifully gathered the four corners of a blanket and tossed it over his shoulder and started down, passing Leary on the stairs going the opposite direction. Outside, he silently dumped the contents into the truck bed and started back in, passing Leary, who was already coming out. "That's the last of it," Leary said. But Ellison passed him and started up the stairs, anyway. Ducking through the doorway at the top, he paused and looked at the newly created void as Silverman lashed the tool bag closed. Hands in his pockets, Ellison looked at the bells that remained overhead. "Saved," he said, "only because they were too much trouble."

Silverman glanced upwards. "Sometimes the nail that sticks up bends when it gets hammered down." He rose and lifted the tool bag, ducked through the low door. The sound of his steps receded down the stairs. After another moment or two, Ellison turned and followed. And when he reached the bottom, Blue and Silverman stood talking in the hallway, their hands in their pockets. Blue looked over Silverman's shoulder. "They've taken off the last load," he said. "They'll be back in not too long." To which Ellison nodded absently. He stood there a moment, near them, hands in his pockets, looking at one of the walls. "You alright?" Blue said.

"Hm?" Ellison looked at him blankly, nodded. Then he passed them both and moved along the corridor and into the main body of the church. Enough light from the overcast day made it through the narrow, high windows and between the boards nailed over where stained glass had been removed, to allow him to see once his eyes had adjusted. Holes overhead testified to the iron chandeliers that had once been. He looked around at the barren interior, seemingly massive without anything to occupy it.

"Did you know," Silverman said from behind him, and prompted Ellison to turn, "that the phrase nature abhors a vacuum was created to deride the idea that a vacuum could exist?" Silverman added, "Although what that guy Plato had against housewives I cannot say."

Ellison turned, again, to look over the interior.

Blue had taken a seat in one of the nearby pews. "But science has proved there can be. Or so I've read. Space is a vacuum."

"Yes," Silverman said. "Science stole the problem from philosophy and seemed to make some headway." He looked up at the vaulted ceiling. "But then, is even space a true vacuum? That is to say, is it devoid of everything, even down to the smallest... what is the scale?"

"Quantum," Blue said. "I think."

"Yes," Silverman said. "The Quanta. The fundamental unit? The question is then can a vacuum exist without even this minimal unit, this quanta?" He still looked at the ceiling. "It appears," he said, "in its theft, science has only found the same beginning it had thought it had passed." Still looking at the heights above, he said, "Perhaps the East is proved to be correct, then, in its use of cyclical time, rather than our own linear construction. And then again, if God is both

the beginning *and* the end, perhaps..." He shook his head, lowered it. "I am afraid this space is not quite large enough to think in."

"I read somewhere, once," Blue said, "that the height and grandeur of a building did affect the kinds of thoughts we think."

"Of course," Silverman said. "Space itself controls the mind. That is why there is so much fear of this modern art business."

"If man," Ellison said, "has free will, that cannot be."

"Perhaps," Silverman said, "man's free will rests in choosing what rooms he will enter?"



Taylor used a splintered piece of timber to jig open the door of the small barrel stove that sat against the outside wall. "I'd prefer a paying job," he said. The round metal pipe elbowed at about head height and turned and went through the wall, Leary, as Silverman had said, having figured out a way to cut a round hole with a not-so saw.

"You get paid," Blue said.

Taylor tossed a chunk of former support beam onto the coals and closed the door. "Only when we haul off scrap," he said. "Which we haven't done for days." He sat on the edge of his bunk, hands still in his pockets. "All we do is pile this place full of old shit."

"It should make you feel good," Silverman said. He lay in his own bunk with his jacket on and his hands in his pockets and his eyes closed.

Taylor turned. "Feel good?" He stepped around where Leary's leg extended into the floor. Leary sat there leaned back as he whittled a long stick, drilling a hole into a flattened end with his knife.

Sitting on his own bunk, as well, Gracefield had taken out his pipe and was already lighting it.

"It's intimate," Silverman said, his eyes still closed. "It's working directly for your own survival, without exchange or intermediary. You're warm...or at least warming up, as a direct product of your own labor. No exchange. No alienation. Only what you do that changes your own circumstances."

"Money," Taylor said, "is just as good for changing one's circumstances."

"There is also," Gracefield said, "the matter of scale. While perhaps rudimentarily satisfactory in certain respects, human civilization could not function without the necessity of abstraction."

"Exactly," Silverman said. His eyes remained closed.

The chunk of former support beam popped and sizzled inside the barrel stove.

Gracefield sat there puffing on his pipe, possibly about to say something, when someone kicked the door. Blue rose and moved toward it, and in the interval, it got kicked swiftly twice more. Millie looked around him when he opened it. "Where's..." She motioned with her head. "Harry, you're coming with us." He had been sitting on his bunk and had turned toward the door, but now sat there looking at her, puzzled. "Well," she said, "come on."

It had become warm enough for him to have unbuttoned his jacket shortly before, and instinctively he moved his hand to re-button it.

"Hurry up," Millie said. "And get your cap."

He stepped and turned and lifted his hat from his bunk.

"Well, hurry up," Millie said. And she turned and went back down the hall. Blue stepped aside to allow him through, then leaned out to look into the hallway after him.

"Don't be nosy," Silverman said. But when Blue looked over his shoulder, Silverman still lay there with his eyes closed. "And close the door. You're letting your labor out into the hall."

Millie left the door open for Harry, who paused a moment on the threshold, before stepping in. "Well," Millie said, "close the door." Harry turned and did that. "It'll just be a minute," she said. Then she disappeared into the next room. Harry stood there waiting, cap in hand.

"There is some coffee on the stove," Mr Cernan said. It was just possible, if leaning to one side, to see round the curtain pulled aside in the kitchen doorway and to discern him seated at the end of the table. Hat in both hands, Harry stepped into the kitchen doorway. "If," Mr Cernan said, "you want something warm before you go out." He didn't look over his shoulder, but instead concentrated on the pieces stacked semi-pyramidal in front of him. But Harry shook his head, anyway. He glanced over his shoulder as the door to the other room slammed. Shouts carried from the far side. "Best to ignore it," Mr Cernan said. He moved a tile from one stack to another. He added, "But it might be a minute or two." More shouts carried through the thin walls. "Better," Mr Cernan said, "get warm while you can."

Hat still in both hands, Harry stepped into the kitchen and closer to the stove. Mr Cernan shifted a tile, paused, placed the tile back where it had been. "It's a game," he said without looking up, "that sometimes leaves you in an unwinnable position." He sat back in his chair, looking at the pieces. "Or at least, that's what happens when you play the solitary version." He shook his head and stood and lifted his empty mug from the table and turned toward the stove. And Harry stepped aside to allow him to access the coffee pot. He stood there looking down at the table when Mr Cernan turned around. "I'm afraid the situation is hopeless." He sipped his coffee. Harry remained silent. "Sometimes all you can do is start over."

Harry pointed. "You have a move... Then there."

Mr Cernan sipped his coffee as he stepped closer to the table and looked down. "Hm." He set his mug on the table. He removed one tile, then paused to examine the field. "That might break the deadlock," he said. He lifted his mug. "But of course," and he sipped his coffee, "it remains to be seen that one won't emerge again." They both looked up, noticing that the shouts had stopped for some time. Mr Cernan looked down at the tiles. "Are you versed against other players, as well?" He sipped his coffee. "Or just in the solitary form?"

"I've played," Harry said.

"Hm." Mr Cernan nodded to himself.

They both looked up and turned when the door into the other room opened and footsteps crossed the front room. She stepped into the kitchen. "Let's go," she said, right before she leaned to bite the brim of her hat that hung on a hook on the wall and jerked back her head so that it flipped up and she could lean forward and press the top of the hat against the wall to seat it.

Mr Cernan still looked down at the table. "Where are you off to?"

"We're going to run a few errands," Millie said. "Pick up a few things."

"Was there something else?" Mr Cernan said. "I could take you out in the car if—"

"The car," Millie said, "is broken."

"But I just—"

"The car," Millie said, "is broken."

Mr Cernan removed a tile. "Oh." He lifted his mug with his other hand. "I guess I had forgotten about that."

Harry said, "If it's—"

"Nothing," Mr Cernan said. "There's no need to worry about it." He set the mug on the table as he observed the field. "I'm sure it will resolve itself eventually." He hovered a finger over a tile. "Sometimes all things need is a little time."

Before Harry could say anything else, Millie said, "Come on." And he looked at her, and she motioned with her head, toward the front door. And cap in hand, he followed her.

"Take care," Mr Cernan said behind them.

In the front room, Rachel had already donned her coat and tightened it at the bottom where waterproofing encompassed her waist, and wrapped a scarf over her shoulders and pulled on a knitted cap that came down over her ears. She glanced at Harry once when she reached for a pair of leather gloves lying near the door, but turned and propelled herself past Millie and through the front door as soon as Harry had opened it. "Well," Millie said, "come on."

Rachel had managed to get far ahead of them, all the way to the bottom of the stairs by the time they had come out on the platform. Fog had creeped in, obscuring much of everything below. Harry opened one of the doors and closed it behind them.



They traveled in silence. Harry, having forgotten his gloves, walked with his hands in his pockets. And it wasn't just the cold that was the problem—that was normal enough. Or even the darkened, fog-enshrouded bleakness of the streets—which was also quite normative, something that had been accepted long ago. No, it was more the silence of the thing—or that is to say, the near silence of it. No truck pattering around. No one muttering or shouting obscenities. No arguments. No crashing. Or tools. Or even the sounds of distant bulldozers and dump trucks. What remained were the sounds of their own movements as they passed down the street, side by side, Millie to the side of Harry, Rachel to the side of Millie.

"Say something, Harry," Millie said. He glanced sideways at her. And she looked at him. He seemed lost for a reply. She shook her

head. "You could at least," she said, "ask where we're going. Gaah." She threw back her head and looked at the darkened sky. "You're such a pushover."

Harry didn't reply.

"I mean," Millie said, "what is it about you? You just seem to float around. Are you there or not? What are you Harry? What do you want to *be*? Who are you? Why do you get up in the morning?"

Harry didn't reply.

"You might as well," Millie said, "be a car or a sewing machine or a kitchen appliance. You just sit there until somebody needs something. Then after you're done you go right back on the shelf. Or your box or your closet, or whatever it is."

"She's just worried," Rachel said.

"I am not worried."

"She really likes you," Rachel said to Harry. "But she can't figure out why. And that scares her."

"It doesn't scare me," Millie said. But her voice had taken on an edge. "I'm just not like you—I don't accept things as true just because I feel them." She paused. She said to Harry, "Don't get the wrong idea."

"You're a hypocrite," Rachel said.

"Yeah?" Millie said. "Well, what about you? Huh? Not doing anything unless you're putting the right foot forward."

"Oh, shut up!" Rachel stopped. Millie and Harry did as well. Rachel said, "You never behave like a grown-up."

"I'm older than you."

"That doesn't count!"

"Oh, it doesn't count. Just because it's inconvenient for you."

"And everything's inconvenient for you!" Rachel said. "You're just trying to scare him so he'll go away and you won't have to worry about it anymore because then nothing'll be possible."

"Don't tell me what I am and am not." Millie looked as if she might glance over her shoulder at Harry, but didn't. "And what about being grown-up—blurting things out like you just read someone's diary. Screaming private things IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STREET."

"That's what you want," Rachel said. "To scare him away—because you're scared."

“Why—you’re already doing a good enough job of it yourself.”

Rachel looked up at her sister. She cleared her throat and removed her gloves and wiped her eyes. Millie didn’t do anything like that, but she didn’t look much better, either. She jerked around toward Harry. “Well,” she said, “aren’t you going to say anything?” But what could he have said? So he just stood there with his hands in his jacket pockets. “Gah.” Millie threw back her head, closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she looked down at her sister. “What’s wrong with your hands?”

“Nothing,” Rachel said.

Millie said, “Why didn’t you wear the oiled gloves, the ones that’re water-proof?”

“I haven’t been able to find them,” Rachel said. By then, she had stuffed her hands in her coat pockets.

Millie went down on one knee beside her. “Let me feel,” she said.

Rachel shook her head. “Leave me alone,” Rachel said. “Just go on and find whatever you’re looking for. I’m going to go home.”

“Let me feel,” Millie said.

Rachel shook her head.

“Come on,” Millie said. “Are we going to get this mad over a stupid man?”

Rachel said, “You just want to be mean and angry the rest of our lives.”

“Funny,” Millie said, “coming from you.”

Rachel looked at her.

“Now,” Millie said, “are you going to let me see or not?”

After a moment or two, Rachel removed her hand from her pocket and pressed the backs of her fingers to her sister’s cheek.

“You’re froze,” Millie said. “You can barely open and close them.”

“I’m fine,” Rachel said.

“Get on,” Millie said.

Rachel shook her head. “I’ll get back on my own.”

Millie leaned toward her. “If he isn’t up for embarrassing things,” she said, “he’s not worth having around.” She motioned her head. “Now, climb on. Let’s go so we can get home.”

Rachel wiped her nose with the back of her hand, then wiped her hand on her coat, then put her arm around her sister’s neck

and swung around so that when Millie stood Rachel was on her back.

“Come on,” Millie said. “What’re you standing around for?”

Harry fell into walking beside them, and once again the near silence became something worse than either extreme.

“You’ve been eating too many cookies lately,” Millie said.

“What?”

Millie said to Harry, “She always has to bake twice as many because she eats half of them right out of the oven.”

“I do not.”

“She’s probably put on a half or even a full stone.”

“Y—”

Millie shifted, near collided with Harry. “Here,” she said, and by some maneuver managed it so Rachel had to shift or else, and Harry had to respond or else, and it ended with Rachel’s arm’s over Harry’s shoulders.

“Well,” Millie said, “let’s get going. Everyone’s going to start to wonder where we’ve been.”

Rachel pressed her face into the back of Harry’s jacket as if she were trying to hide. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s...alright,” Harry said. Then added, “You...on tight?”

Rachel shifted and secured her arms around his neck.

Millie turned to them and faintly smiled. “Just because I came out here not knowing what I was looking for,” she said, “doesn’t mean I’m not going to find it.”



Some days, when it rained, the lower part of the foundry would flood. From the beginning, the timber had been stacked on blocks to deal with the ankle-deep water. Opening the doors, however, did create a kind of tidal wave that either carried across the cobblestones outside, or that crashed against the brickwork within the foundry. The bad of it was the cesspool would often overflow, but since the flow tended to route down a disused alley, it was less of a problem than it could have been. The bigger problem came with keeping everyone's feet out of the water, which necessitated collecting a few planks off the wood pile for rudimentary construction.

Boots and shoes sat around the barrel stove, damp, but not yet hot enough to steam, but just warm enough to feel even worse if someone tried to fit them on again. Taylor removed his socks and draped them over the back of a chair pulled near the stove. He grimaced when his wet pants cuffs contacted his naked ankles.

"What a day. What a day. This is just no way to play." Silverman sang to himself as he removed his trousers and draped them over a chair.

Blue said, "Where's that from?"

"Don't know," Silverman said. "Making it up as I go along."

"Why don't you keep it to yourself," Taylor said.

Someone kicked at the door, and Blue rose to let in Ellison, whose hands were full with a coffee pot and a set of cups. He set all of it on the table.

As with almost everyone else, water had soaked through the shoulders of Blue's jacket, dampened his sweater, and he pulled himself free of it and draped it over the end of his bunk to dry. He adjusted his suspenders while he waited to get a cup of coffee. He poured himself

a cupful, then glanced at Gracefield, who sat on his bunk smoking, and said, "Coffee, sir?"

Gracefield shook his head.

"I don't see," Taylor said, "how you can get thrown out so fast and still have so much army in you."

Blue didn't reply. Gracefield said, "Some people take to water fast."

"That's how they did it when we were little," Leary said. He lay in his bunk looking at the ceiling, socks already peeled off, pants hanging on the back of a chair. "We had this lake. They'd throw you in and let you swim your way out."

Silverman stood before the stove, hands extended. His back to everyone else, he said, "You know how you tell a witch?"

"What's that," Taylor said, "got to do with anything?"

"Maybe nothing," Silverman said.

"Our conversation," Gracefield said, "has become a little too serious for him. And he appears to want to, as one might say, spice it up a bit, upset the course of things, with an injection of nonsense."

"Interesting," Silverman said, his back still to everyone, "that I'm not a kinder person."

"And why," Gracefield said, "would that be the case?"

"Because," Silverman said, and rubbed his hands together, "if I were, I would allow you to live with the consequences of being right all the time."

"And you would be saying I made an error?"

"In fact," Silverman said, "I was just wondering what happened to the children who were unable to manage to swim their way back? And how many of those were there?"

"Don't know," Leary said. He reached beneath his bunk and drug out the stick he had been carving on and had almost finished, the length of it almost indistinguishable from the broken one that lay under there and which would be thrown in the stove as soon as he had finished using it as a pattern. He unfolded his knife.

"Obviously," Ellison said, "they wouldn't leave them to drown."

"That," Silverman said, "goes without saying. Or one would hope so, anyway. Would this then double as a baptism?"

"Don't know," Leary said.

"There is more to baptism than water," Ellison said.

“So they say,” Silverman said. “But it is how you tell a witch, you see.”

“How’s that?” Blue said.

“It’s a simple operation,” Silverman said. “You simply tie the accused’s left thumb to the matching big toe, the right thumb to the same, and so on. Then it’s only a matter of throwing them into a large enough body of water. If they should float, it is a sign that—as is requisite to become a witch—they have rejected their baptism, and as such the water supernaturally rejects them in turn. On the other hand, if they should sink, this proves reasonably conclusively that they were, in fact, not a witch.”

Blue said, “How’d they stop them from drowning?”

“That,” Silverman said, “would invalidate the results of the test.”

“Ridiculousness,” Gracefield said.

“Yet like many things,” Silverman said, “being a ridiculousness has not excluded it from being put into practice.”

“I doubt that,” Gracefield said.

“And you?” Silverman said to Ellison. “How do you regard the history of your own organization?”

“Bad things,” Ellison said, as he sat back with his cup of coffee in hand, “will always be done by men.”

“And as part of that organization, you’re responsible for a part of that?”

“It’s members may fall,” Ellison said, and sipped his coffee, “but the Church itself remains the instrument of God.”

“All of the authority,” Silverman said. “And none of the responsibility.”

“Is church always supposed to be capitalized?” Leary said. “Or is that just when referring to a specific instance?”

“Why,” Taylor said, as he put his ankle over his knee and rubbed his foot, “do I have to end up in this kind of company? Why can’t you people talk about normal things?”

“Perhaps if everyone talked about God more,” Ellison said, “the world would be a better place.”

“Humans,” Silverman said, “have talked about war since they knew another group was over the next hill. Yet where are we?”

“You think we’ll ever be rid of it?” Blue said.

"Men," Gracefield said, "should never be deprived of the right to defend themselves."

"And your analogy?" Ellison said. He set his cup on the table and reached for the coffee pot. "I would take it to mean you're saying we talk about God in an attempt to ultimately get rid of Him?"

"An interesting idea," Silverman said. "I will have to consider that. But of course, if the failure of one says something about the possibility of the other, I don't know."

"I fail to see the utility," Gracefield said, "in trading vacuous arguments as if they were birdies in a game of badminton."

"Men," Silverman said, "should never be deprived of the right to fill time with what they can."

Leary said, "What about women?"

"Speaking of," Taylor said, "where's Harry gotten to?"

Blue said, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Ellison sipped his coffee. "He's helping in the kitchen."

"I'd have figured," Taylor said.



More accurately, Harry had helped some.

"Why is it," Millie said, as she stood over the stove, watching a pot, "that men go off camping and seem to have no trouble cooking things over the fire, but they're helpless in a kitchen?"

"Almost as helpless as a few others," Rachel said. She sat at the end of the table, snapping beans into a bowl. Millie didn't reply.

Mr Cernan stuck his head through the kitchen doorway. "If you two don't need him," he said, "he can give me a hand in here."

Rachel looked at him, kept snapping beans as she said, "We both know what you want." She shook her head, motioned with one hand in the moment between dropping a broken bean into the bowl and grabbing another. "Go on, you two. Just remember that supper will be ready soon."

Sans jacket or cap, Harry's main problem was having nothing to do with his hands as he followed Mr Cernan into the front room. Mr Cernan motioned toward a footstool. "Pull that over." Mr Cernan sat on the couch and leaned forward to pull the coffee table into place.

He opened the box of tiles he had already placed there. "Do you prefer East or West?"

Harry shook his head.

"Take East then," Mr Cernan said. "As guest, you move first." He sorted and distributed the tiles between the two of them, placed the remainder that couldn't be used with just two players back into the cigar box.

They started in silence, the only sounds those of the tiles being placed on the table, the clatter of pots and spoons from the kitchen, the occasional turn of the page by Mr Quegg, who sat in an armchair with the catalog open on his lap.

Mr Cernan placed a tile. "Did you learn to play in the army?"

Harry shook his head. He didn't look up from the pieces in his tray. "Man back home," he said after a moment. "He worked in Asia." He selected a tile. "Briefly. Driving."

"For myself," Mr Cernan said, as he studied the pieces in his own tray, "I can't remember. It was such a long time ago." He examined the field of play. "It's amazing the things that affect our lives, don't you think?" And he glanced at his own tiles again. "And yet we eventually forget the details." He selected one and placed it. "And all we're left with is the thing itself."

Harry studied the field in silence.

Mr Cernan looked down at his own tiles. "Sometimes our memories seem like dreams from other worlds, don't they? Fantasies of other places and other times that don't seem as if they ever could have existed."

Harry placed a tile.

Mr Cernan's eyes settled on the field. "Have you thought about your plans for the future?"

Harry shook his head.

"What," Mr Cernan said, as he reached for a tile, "would you think about the idea of staying around here for a while?"

Harry silently looked from the field to his own tiles.

"Of course," Mr Cernan said, "I guess that would depend on what you want out of life. And what kind of person you are."

"'v'r b'n m'rr'd?"

Harry looked over his shoulder. "No."

"Ever considered it?" Mr Cernan said.

Harry turned toward him but didn't reply. He looked down at his tiles.

"To be effective," Mr Cernan said, "it's one of those things that requires the right people in the right mindset. Wouldn't you agree?"

Harry nodded.

"That is the thing of it though," Mr Cernan said, as he studied the tiles. "People can sometimes fit together in odd ways." He made his move. "It's just that sometimes it's knowing if those ways are compatible that is the problem."

Harry reached for a tile.

"Because if they aren't..." Mr Cernan said. He touched two fingers to his temple. "It's like putting the right parts in the wrong machine," he said. He moved a tile. "You try and run it, and they will destroy each other and the whole thing." He glanced up. "You think?"

He looked up from his tiles and met Mr Cernan's gaze.

"What are you men," Rachel called from the kitchen, "talking about in there?"

"Just talking about the future," Mr Cernan said. He returned his gaze to the field of play.

Millie stepped into the doorway. "And what of the future?" she said.

Mr Cernan moved a tile. "We were just considering as to whether we needed to do some cleaning. Move a few closets out. Make some space." He rearranged the tiles on his tray. "We are just trying to be helpful." He said to Mr Quegg, "Aren't we?" Mr Quegg didn't reply, except to turn a page of the catalog.

"Uh hm," Millie said.

"Don't you think," Mr Cernan said to Harry, "there is no use keeping junk in a closet if you're never going to take it out and use it? Might as well get rid of it. Though, some leave stuff in there so long they forget about it. Or at least try to."

Harry looked up, but Mr Cernan was still looking at his tiles, shifting them aimlessly.

"Well," Millie said, "if you two want to clean something, you can clean up for supper. It's almost ready." She turned to step back into the kitchen, but stopped. "You can go get someone to help take

things down the hall," she said to Harry. Harry nodded and rose from the stool.

"Don't worry about the game," Mr Cernan said. "We'll save it for later. After all, it's not as if it won't keep just sitting here." He looked up at Harry.

"You and your games," Millie said, after Harry had gone out into the hall. She shook her head. "The two of you get washed."

Mr Cernan absently nodded as he examined the field of play. And when she had turned and gone back into the kitchen, he looked up and across at Mr Quegg. "Well?"

But Mr Quegg just shook his head and closed the catalog and set it on the table and rose.



The breakfast dishes lay canted against the prongs of the drying rack. Rachel waited there atop the stool in front of the sink, damp forearms on the edge of the bucket, dirty, soapy water undulating from the occasional droplet that fell from the edges of her hands. She cleared her throat. “Ahmmmm.”

Seated at the kitchen table, Mr Cernan looked up from the field of play, turned, and pushed his glasses up into place. She looked over her shoulder at him. “Ah.” He touched his glasses, turned, again, to Harry. “Apparently,” he said, “I have a prior obligation.” He pushed back his chair. “We’ll have to continue this later. You won’t mind putting the pieces away?” Harry shook his head. “Thanks,” Mr Cernan said. He glanced at Rachel, who looked at him in such an aggravated way he had to start faintly whistling a tune as he collected the bucket and exited the kitchen. He set it by the door so he could gather his scarf and coat. He called from the front room, “Anything else you need while I’m out?”

“No,” Rachel called. She dried her hands.

“I’ll be off then.” A pause. “You sure you don’t need anything else?”

“No.”

“You’re sure now, because—”

“Just go on.”

“Alright,” Mr Cernan called. “I’ll be off then.”

The front door closed.

“They both,” she said, as he put down the towel, “can be so aggravating sometimes.”

Harry herded the pieces to one side of the table and started to sort them. “They care,” he said. And while he was thus occupied, Rachel

climbed down from the stool and then up into the chair opposite him, so when he closed the box and looked up, he met her eyes. "Harry—"

The front door opened, and heavy boots trod the floor. "'m g'n'a t'k t' t'u 't t' g't s'm g's."

Rachel called, "Why did you come up here to say that?"

"' th't 'rry 's h'r," Mr Quegg said.

"He is here," Rachel said.

Mr Quegg ducked through the kitchen doorway. "'h. T'l 'v'yn' 'ls' 't'll b' l't k?"

Harry nodded.

Rachel said, "You could have just walked down to the other end of the hall and told them yourself."

"'s s'm'th'g 'ng?"

"No, nothing's wrong—" Rachel sighed. "Are you going to get back before lunch?"

"'dn't th'k s'."

"Well then," Rachel said, "I'll tell them to go down to the pub and that you will pick them up there."

"'k." Mr Quegg stood there in the doorway.

"Well," Rachel said, "are you just going to stand there all day?"

"'u s'r th'r 's'n't s'm'th'g 'ng?"

"There. Is. Noth—" She breathed in. "You had better get going if you want to get back in time to get anything done today."

Mr Quegg nodded. "'an'th'n ' sh' 't w'l'm ut?"

"No," Rachel said.

"'er's g'n?"

"He's already gone," she said. "I told him he should go pick up something."

"'h," Mr Quegg said after a moment.

"Yes," Rachel said.

"'k." He turned. "'u s'r th'r 's'n't s'm'th'g 'ng?"

"No."

"'k." Mr Quegg turned and went through the front room. The door opened. "Y'll t'l th'm?"

"Yes, I'll tell them."

"'nd 'u s'r th'r 's'n't s'm'th'g 'ng?"

"If I need anything," Rachel said, "I would have said. Now, go."

"y'r—"

"Go!"

The front door closed.

Rachel sighed.

Harry put his hands on the table as if to rise.

"Where are you going?"

"I should probably go tell them—"

"Sit down," Rachel said. "They'll find out soon enough. Five minutes isn't going to change anything." She paused, took a breath. "Now," she said, "there's something I want to talk to you about. It—"

Someone knocked on the door.

Rachel's hands balled into fists. She called, "Who is it?"

"It's me," Blue said, through the closed door.

"Well, what do you want?"

Blue paused, obviously trying to account for her tone. "I...brought the coffee pot back."

"Well," she said. "Bring it in."

He opened the door and entered, stepping through the front room and stopping in the kitchen doorway, pot in hand.

She said, "Well, hurry up. We don't have all day."

"Yes, mam." He placed it back on the stove.

"Not there," she said. "Put it over there."

"Sorry." Blue moved it. He stood there a moment. "Is everything alright?"

"Everything is fine," Rachel said. "Now, go do something else."

"Okay," Blue said. "Um, I noticed Mister Quegg had gone out and—"

"He's gone out to see about gasoline and he probably won't be back before lunch and the rest of you can have the morning off and everyone should go down to the pub for lunch and he will pick you up there this afternoon," she said. "Alright?"

"Okay." He still stood there, looking much like something caught in headlamps.

"Now," Rachel said. "Leave."

"Did I..." Blue said. "Did I do something wrong?"

Rachel sighed. “No,” she said. “I’m sorry. But I would just like a moment alone, please.”

“Oh,” Blue said.

Rachel nodded toward the door. “Alone.”

Blue nodded. “Yes, mam.”

Rachel sighed as the front door opened and closed.

“The thing of it is, Harry...” She had unballled her hands, and absently smoothed the tablecloth with first one, then both. “No... that’s a terrible way to start.” She shook her head. “Where did I start before?” She laid both her palms flat on the table and looked at the ceiling. She sighed. “I want to talk to you about something...” she said. She paused, looked at him. “Don’t you already know about what?”

He shook his head.

“You men...” she said, and closed her eyes and rested her hand on the side of her face. “I just don’t know sometimes.” She took a breath. And placing her forearms on the table and interlacing her fingers, she said, “I—”

Someone knocked on the door.

“GO AWAY!” She paused a moment or two, but no second knock followed. And before anything else could happen, she breathed in all at once and said, “Harry, I think we should get married.” And she let out all the air that hadn’t been needed for words. And she sat there, arms still on the table, fingers still interlaced, looking at him. “Well?”

He sat there quiet.

“Well?”

He ran his fingers through his hair. “I...”

“Say *something*, Harry.”

“I...” He looked down at the tablecloth. “I...don’t think it... would work.”

Rachel sat there just as quietly, fingers still interlaced. “Why...?”

“I...” Harry put his right hand on the table, palm down, fingers spread. “I...can’t... I can’t marry someone. I can’t... I can’t... I... not a man anymore. And...I can’t...be a...husband...”

They both sat there quiet, him looking at the stove, her looking at him.

"I said it wrong." Rachel didn't move so much as a fraction or a decimal. "Will you marry me?"

Harry didn't look away from the stove. "I..."

"Look at me, Harry," she said. "Please."

He looked at her.

"Answer the question, Harry."

"I..." He shook his head.

They sat in silence awhile. Finally, Rachel said, "I can't blame you, either." She sighed. She looked at the ceiling. "I'm sorry if I... embarrassed you. And if you're going to... stay around here, I hope I... haven't made things too uncomfortable for you." She lowered her gaze and finally dis-interlaced her fingers to wipe one of her eyes. "I guess we really shouldn't pretend, anyway," she said. Then she went quiet.

Someone knocked on the front door.

This time, it was as if she had not even heard it.

She said, "would you have liked to?" And added, "If things had been different?"

For a moment, it looked as if he might reply; his mouth opened, but then closed. For more than a while now, he had been looking at the tablecloth.

"There's no need to feel bad about it," she said. "It's just... one of those things." Momentarily, she shaded her eyes with her hand. "You shouldn't let me hold you up," she said. "I've kept you enough this morning."

But he didn't move.

"You don't have to worry," she said. "They won't say anything to you about it. It won't affect anything. I'll make sure of it," she said. "I—"

"Could you be quiet a minute, I..." His eyes flickered upwards toward her. "I didn't mean it... that way." He opened his mouth, closed it. "I..." He balled his right hand into a fist. "I can't be a husband."

After a moment, she said, "What is there to being a husband?"

"I..."

"Some of them just sit around all day in council flats, only ever managing to get anything done but watch television," she said. "You don't even have to do that," she said, "since we don't have television."

Neither laughed. Nothing about their faces showed the slightest hint of change.

"I can't..." he said.

"Who cares?"

He looked at her. Very slowly, he breathed out. "Where would we go..." he said, "to get married?"

She breathed out as well. "We wouldn't have to go anywhere if we didn't want to."

Moments passed in silence. And after taking a shallow breath, Harry nodded.

Rachel wiped her eyes. "I think..." she said. "Now, I think, since I asked you, that you should ask Millie." He looked at her until she said, "You'll find her out in the hall, somewhere," to which he looked at the tablecloth. "You should go do it now," she said.

Harry stood. But his fingers still rested on the tablecloth. He looked at her.

"Go on," she said. And she had to wipe her eyes again.

Harry stepped out of the kitchen and crossed the front room in silence. He touched the doorknob, glanced at his jacket hanging on the wall, but opened the door and went out.

"Hey." Taylor stood there. "What's going on?"

Harry shook his head.

Taylor jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "We're going to go ahead and start down to the bar now," he said.

Harry nodded. But he turned the opposite way.

"Hey," Taylor said. "You coming?"

Harry shook his head and continued down the hallway and around the corner. Taylor shook his head, as well, then turned and went back down the way he had come.

"Where's Harry going?" Blue said.

"How the hell should I know?" Taylor said. He walked out on the platform with his hands in his pockets. "Let's get going. Let him stay where he likes."

Blue was still looking down the hallway, and Silverman put a hand on his shoulder as he passed. "Don't worry about it," he said. He motioned for Blue to follow. And after looking down the hallway a moment or two more, Blue did.

"Something strange is going on," he said, as they started down the stairs.

Around the corner, Millie stood halfway down the hall, looking out through one of the large windows which cold rains had so kindly cleaned. She stood there with her coat on, which wasn't something modified to fit, but something made to fit, so rather than patched over arm holes, there had been none to begin with. The entirety of the look itself, the way it intersected her posture, told as much about her as it invented. "She said you should come and ask me, didn't she?"

"Yes."

"She cried," Millie said, "didn't she?"

"Yes."

Millie hadn't turned away from the window the whole time. A faint reflection of her looked off at the world at an angle. "She does that," Millie said. "That's the way she's always been." After a moment, she added, "If you think you can hurt my sister," she said, "you have another thing coming." She turned her head to look at him. "And if you think you can hurt me," she said, "you're very mistaken." She turned, again, toward the window. "So if you can't handle that, you'd be better off to leave now."

"I..."

"Just don't get down on one knee or anything like that."

"I..." He paused. "I can't be much of a husband."

She turned her head and looked at him, down then up. "Well," she said, "if you think I'm going to be anything other than the wife from hell..." She shook her head and faintly smiled and turned toward the window. "Well, you can figure that out." And after a while, she said, "So are you going to ask me or not?"

"I..." Harry paused, found himself taking a breath. "Will you marry me?"

"Alright," she said. She looked at him. "But make sure you remember your coat," she said. "I'm not going to spend my time babying someone who catches a cold when he should know better." She turned to look out the window a final time. "Come on," she said. She faced him. "Let's go tell her before she worries herself to death."



Mr Quegg dropped everyone in front of the pub, then continued on, the truck puttering into a fog bank.

"It's a lie," Silverman said, as he unfastened his jacket and hung it with the few others that had been hung before his. A low fire crackled. "We're just told fire keeps us warm to cover up the real truth."

Ellison said, "What's the real truth?"

"It is really the raging inferno that builds inside you as you swear at it when hauling it around and breaking it up and trying to saw it and stack it that keeps you warm." He stepped over the bench and sat down, looked at the fireplace. "And the glee of watching it be destroyed after it has given you so much trouble, that warms your heart." He leaned back with his fingers interlaced behind his head. "Ahhh. And it should be forbidden to have contact with pig iron as well."

A barmaid carried around a platter of fresh-filled glasses. Foam slopped over the top of one and ran down the side as she set it on the table. But she didn't step away after she'd finished. Silverman leaned over and sucked off the foam and enough beer to get the level safely below the rim before he set it in front of himself.

Same as every day, at that time, back then, Gracefield extracted his pipe and tobacco pouch. "A notable turn," he said, as he prepared it.

"Oh?" Silverman set his glass on the table.

Gracefield struck a match and angled it into the pipe bowl.

"Would you happen to mean," Silverman said, "that my work ethic seems to have evaporated?"

"Things do appear," Gracefield said, as he waved out the match, "to have modified themselves."

"Or," Silverman said, "have they?"

Gracefield shook his head, said through teeth clenched and around the pipe stem, "I don't care for rhetorical games."

"But since you ask..." Silverman lifted his beer. A dark ring had formed on the table where liquid that had run down the side had collected on the bottom of the glass. "It's capitalism." He sipped his beer. "I always get lethargic when I make prolonged contact with it." He rested both elbows on the table and held his glass in both hands. "But since it's everywhere, you'd think I'd get used to it. But... So I do my best. I usually hide it rather well but...you know how it goes."

Taylor said, "Taking up communism now?"

Gracefield scoffed.

"Well, I would," Silverman said, "But I'm allergic to ushankas. Every time I'm around one, I start sneezing. It's terrible."

"What's that?" Leary said.

"An entire political alternative cut off because of a stupid allergy. Who knows the life I might have had otherwise?"

"Small things to be grateful for," Ellison said.

"Makes you wonder," Blue said, "about what small things would have otherwise completely changed the course of history."

"Or would not have," Silverman said.

"There is no use," Gracefield said, "in thinking about what might have been."

"Don't know," Taylor said, as he watched a barmaid bring out the sandwiches. He said to her, "There's always possibilities, aren't there?" But she didn't reply to that.

Silverman lifted his glass. "What's the word today?"

Neither replied to that, either. But she, too, stayed near the table as the number of sandwiches on the tray quickly diminished. So both of them, the one who had brought over the beer, and the one who had brought out the sandwiches, stood there saying nothing.

"I think," Silverman said to Gracefield, "you would make a rather good communist." And Gracefield looked at him.... Well, it's not difficult to imagine. "You just have that look, you know. I swear you could be Stalin's brother—if you're not him."

"Ridiculousness."

"It depends. How do you feel about reincarnation?"

"Preposterous."

"It says the same about you, too, I'm sure."

Gracefield clenched his teeth on his pipe stem.

"There's no need to get offended just because you happen to look like somebody." Silverman lifted his glass.

It was Blue who really first noticed them standing there for so long, and even then he only discreetly glanced at them, then brought his attention back to his beer and sandwich.

"What or who do you think," Silverman said when he set down his glass, "Stalin would reincarnate as?"

"I thought," Taylor said, as he chewed, "you didn't have a choice about that."

"Depends," Silverman said, "on who you ask."

Ellison said, "You're not actually being serious?"

"Why not?" Silverman said.

"How can you possibly reconcile reincarnation with—"

"If God really can do anything," Silverman said, as he lifted his sandwich in both hands, "I don't see why he can't get up to whatever he wants."

"But that's not how it works."

Silverman shrugged as he chewed. He swallowed. "If God can't do it because of some rule—"—he took another bite, chewed, swallowed—"—then what is the point of being all-powerful?" He took another bite, chewed.

"But he's still omnipotent."

Silverman chewed, swallowed. "Isn't that functionally equivalent of saying God is finite?"

"I never," Taylor said, then paused to wash down a bite of sandwich, "heard as much religion in my life till I ended up here." He took another bite, said, as he chewed, "It's worse than being in church."

"This," Silverman said, "is the problem with the golden rule."

Blue glanced at the two barmaids still standing there, turned his attention back to his beer. "How's that?"

"It's conceited," Silverman said. "Do under...excuse me, I do not know where my mind could be, but do unto others as you would have them do unto you..." He lifted his glass, wiped his mouth before he continued. "It assumes everyone else is like me." He set down his

glass, rested his hand on top of it. "I don't like to get punched. But maybe other people do."

"What idiot," Taylor said, "would want that?"

"A boxer?" Blue said.

Ellison toyed with his three-quarters empty glass. "Knew this guy once, when we were kids. Used to get in fights every day after school. Asked him one time why he did it." Ellison lifted his glass. "Said getting hit was the only way you knew you were alive."

"Someone's always into some weird shit," Taylor said. He reached for the last sandwich, but Leary snatched it first, even as he was shoving the last corners of another into his mouth with his thumb. "Knew this woman... Somewhere... Wherever. Couldn't get revved up without being slapped a couple of times." He lifted his glass. "But once she got going—" —he sipped his beer— "—look out."

Another barmaid appeared from the back, made her way around the bar with another plate of sandwiches and set them on the table. Then she just stood there as well. They had all gathered behind Harry, one to each side and directly behind. Everyone on the opposite side of the table noticed this first, and it was their lifted heads and fixed eyes that made everyone but Harry look over his shoulder. Harry sat there leaned forward with his elbows on the table and his glass cradled in both hands, seemingly looking at it, or more likely looking past it, and after the prolonged silence finally roused him, he looked up at the faces across the table, then glanced left and right. He started to look over his shoulder, but half-turned instead and straddled the bench. For a moment, he stared navel level at the uniform of the barmaid who had been directly behind him, until she touched his chin and pulled his face up and looked down into it. They all three looked down at him.

"Millie will be good for you. She knows her way around," the one on the left said.

The one on the right said, "And Rachel won't put up with too much stupidity."

"Congratulations," said the one in the middle. "And watch out for flying vases." She released his chin. One lifted the empty sandwich plate, and the only thing to do was to watch them go around the bar and into the back.

After a moment or two, Harry shifted his leg over the bench and turned toward the table and found all eyes on him. He reached forward and wrapped both hands around his glass. He said, "I think I'm getting married...?"

Leary said just before he stuffed the last of a sandwich in his mouth, "Who to?"

"A real dog," Taylor said. He pointed. "It's the quiet ones that're always sneaking around and getting up to shit behind your back."

"So," Blue said. "Which one is it?"

"I think..." Harry paused, looked down into his near empty glass. "Both of them."

"Come on," Taylor said. He leaned forward. "Stop joking. Besides, you know how it is at weddings, biological clocks ticking and all that. So which one's left?"

Silverman clamped a hand on Harry's shoulder. He motioned to the bar. "Gentlemen, I would say this calls for another round."

"So," Ellison said, "which one is it?"

"I believe," Silverman said, "he has already answered that question."

"But he can't be serious."

"Of course not," Gracefield said.

"You two," Silverman said, "seem to have confused seriousness with solemnity." He patted Harry's shoulder. "Harry here is always on the solemn side."

Leary swallowed, sipped his beer to wash it down, then when he set his glass on the table, pressed his thumb into the crumbs to gather them up. "So," he said, "in this kind of thing, do they all three stand up at once." He scraped mashed breadcrumbs off the end of his thumb with his front teeth. "Or do they share the same dress and trade off?"

Silverman laughed.

"This isn't fair," Taylor said. "He shouldn't get to just hoard them all like that."

Silverman said, "There should be a limit of one per customer, you mean?"

"Yes. Exactly."

"Just the fact that this discussion is underway," Gracefield said, "is sad enough."

"Has my economic reference offended you?" Silverman said. "I thought you were in favor of capitalism?"

Ellison said, "He can't marry two women at once."

"Tell that to Solomon."

"That was then," Ellison said. "Not now. Times are different."

"Thank you for pointing that out." Silverman patted Harry's shoulder. "But maybe Harry here is a real traditionalist. And maybe it's time we got back to the good old traditional way of doing things."

Gracefield held his pipe in hand. He had left off drawing on it for too long, and it seemed to have gone cold. "In any regard, it is against the law. And—"

Silverman said, "What law?"

"The law," Gracefield said. "And—"

"As I said—what law?" Silverman lifted his near empty glass as a barmaid set a filled tray on the end of the table. He hoisted his glass. "Now, I think we owe the man a toast. Just to show what good friends we are. And that there's no hard feelings. And that we feel as sorry for him as we can. But he got himself into this mess. So there."

Taylor pushed his glass away and stretched to pull a fresh one over in its place. "It's almost as if he's marrying just the one, anyway," he said. "Can't tell 'em apart and all that. Probably shouldn't even count as marrying two." He raised his glass.

Gracefield fumbled with his knife and began trying to clean out his pipe.

Blue said, "Do you know when it's going to happen? The ceremony, I mean, that is."

Harry shook his head.

"And what," Ellison said, "have Mister Quegg and Mister Cernan said about this?"

Harry shook his head.

Leary said, "Are we going to have to have new clothes?"

"This whole thing," Gracefield said, without looking up from scraping his pipe, "is absurd, at best."

"Who'll perform the ceremony?" Ellison said. "The Church won't."

"That's just a problem," Silverman said, "that we'll have to deal with when we come to it." He motioned with his glass. "Maybe we

can find whomever it was who did them before the church existed. He might be happy of the work.”

Leary said, “Will refreshments be served?”

“Did you ask Miss Rachel or Miss Millie first?” Blue said. “Or did you ask them both at the same time?” He added, “Not that it’s any of my business. I was just...curious.”

“Now hold it,” Silverman said. “Enough with the questions. We have a responsibility at hand.” He had held his glass raised the whole time and then extended it a little farther across the table. “To the groom,” he said. “May he avoid God’s help at all costs.”



Gracefield sat on his bunk, pipe stem clenched between his teeth, as had been his general condition most every morning. But this morning he had a further away look than usual.

Blue said, "Something the matter, sir?"

Gracefield glanced upwards at him. But his only reply was to nod.

"Ah," Silverman said, "ambiguity in the morning. What a lovely manure that allows the soil of the day to provide rich fruits."

"What the hell," Taylor said, "does that mean?"

"If I had known," Silverman said, "I would not have said it."

Taylor poured himself another cup of coffee as he finished off breakfast.

"Better to be awake," Silverman said. "Our responsibilities doth be multiplying as a child's times table."

Taylor concentrated on his coffee as he said, "What responsibilities?" He sipped. "And what's up with the highfalutin speaking?"

Silverman leaned against his chair. "We now have the engaged to deal with," he said. "And being our situation is as such, it becomes our responsibility to see that nothing happens to him."

"What could happen to him?" Blue said.

"What could happen to him," Silverman said, "is immaterial. And it is simply our responsibility to make sure it doesn't happen, whatever it may or may not be."

"He'll get no help from me," Taylor said. He sipped his coffee. "Greedy son of a bitch." He said to Harry, "Have you fucked just the one or both of them yet?"

Harry, as he had the rest of the morning, sat on his bunk in silence.

"So," Silverman said, and raised his knife, "it appears."

"What it?" Taylor said. "What are you talking about?"

Silverman pointed his knife at him. "Reveal thy name, dybbuk."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Blue said, "You shouldn't talk about Miss Rachel and Miss Millie that way."

"What way?" Taylor said. He shook his head and returned his attention to his coffee. "You're all loonier than cartoons." He set his empty cup on the table. "Besides," he said, "what have you got against femininity?"

"Us?" Blue said.

"Yes," Taylor said. "All of you. You all want to take the only unique thing a woman's got to offer and throw it away."

"Maybe it isn't the subject," Ellison said, "just how it's broached."

"Same thing," Taylor said.

Silverman snorted. "It appears all are full of surprises of late," he said.

Blue said to Harry, "Has it been decided when the wedding is going to be?"

Harry paused, shook his head.

"Soon," Silverman said.

Blue said, "What makes you think that?"

"I can feel it," Silverman said. "Of course, that is somewhat relative. The only thing that can be said for certain is that it won't happen after Christmas. So the twin processes of logic and of elimination leaves us either before or during."

"Let's not start that again," Ellison said.

"Christmas," Silverman said, "is coming."

"That," Ellison said, "is not the part I'm debating."

"Are we," Leary said, "going to have to come up with a wedding present?"

"I hadn't thought of that," Blue said.

"Why should anybody get him anything?" Taylor said. "What's he not got by this point?"

"Even if that were the case," Ellison said, "that's not the point."

"You're the one that befuddles me, Padre," Taylor said.

"Former chaplain," Ellison said. "Not anymore."

"Same thing," Taylor said. "It just strikes me as odd how easy you've rolled over on this one."

"I've decided to leave it to God to sort out."

Leary said, "What's there to sort out?"

"Oh, nothing," Taylor said. "I can't wait for the whole world to become so enlightened."

Leary said to Blue, "Is there something here I'm missing?"

Blue shrugged.

"As to the subject of a wedding present," Silverman said, "I don't think we can have this discussion properly with the engaged right here in and amongst us." He added, "But since he is our responsibility till said wedding, we can't exactly send him away, either. This puts us in kind of a proverbial pickle." He tilted back his head and looked thoughtful. "Of course, perhaps we could let delivering him safely to the latter be our gift." But he shook his head. "It's bad etiquette," Silverman said, "to give as a gift what you're already bound to do by duty."

"God," Taylor said, "are you really taking all this seriously?"

"As a person who never takes anything seriously," Silverman said, "I can say absolutely."

"Well," Blue said, "it would be nice to come up with something." He looked over his shoulder. "Right, sir?"

Gracefield looked at him, but didn't reply.

"This's a never-ending circle," Taylor said.

"And exactly one of the things we have to guard against," Silverman said. "Otherwise we will get stuck in the this of this too early in the forever, and the wedding will never make it here, and we will have failed utterly. And failure, gentlemen, if I may demonstrate a bit of still extant military contamination, is not an option."

Ellison didn't reply to that.

"Although," Silverman said, "in the end, it is the only option, as well. Ultimately, that is."

Ellison didn't reply to that, either.

"But luckily," Silverman said, "this wedding isn't the culmination of anything."

"We still don't know who is going to perform the ceremony."

Silverman said, "Who performed the ceremony in Eden?"

"That," Ellison said, "was a different case. And besides, they were

married before. God brought them into the Garden. Humanity didn't start there."

"Though," Silverman said, "notably, in this case, the man didn't move out, as is the custom, after the divorce."

Ellison shook his head.

"But it is probably not a good idea to get married and move in with your father-in-law when your father-in-law is also your father."

"I won't take the bait today," Ellison said. He set his cup of coffee down the table. "And besides, God only visited the Garden. He didn't reside there."

"Do you always capitalize," Leary said, "when referring to a specific garden, or just the one?"

"So much for figuring this present out," Taylor said. "You guys would run around in circles all day talking about nothing. That's why they lock people like you up in universities, so us sane folks don't have to stumble over your gibbering out in the middle of the street."

"But seriously," Blue said, "what do you think about a present?"

"Well, I," Taylor said, "have already heard so much about this that I'm sick of it, and it hasn't even happened yet."

Gracefield cleared his throat. He stood, pipe in hand, faint smoke curling from the bowl. "I feel that it behooves me to say something."

"Nothing good," Silverman said, "ever came from a statement prefixed with *it behooves me*."

"In any regard," Gracefield said, "as no one else seems wont to, I have to say something."

"You just did," Silverman said. "So you can sit down now."

"While everyone else may ignore it," Gracefield said, "and I can understand why, the fact of the matter is that this marriage should not take place."

"Why?" Blue said.

"It is inappropriate."

Leary said, "How so?"

"I flatter myself," Silverman said, "that I understand our compatriot, here. In the short of it, there are some people who should and should not get married?"

"Why shouldn't they get married?" Leary said.

"Yes," Silverman said, "what do you have against the institution of marriage?"

"I am not saying they should not get married," Gracefield said.

"Well," Silverman said, "we're all quite confused, then."

Gracefield clamped his pipe between his teeth. "People should stick with their own," he said. He removed his pipe from his mouth. "Everything works out better for everybody."

"You know how you protect sheep from wolves?" Silverman said. Gracefield shook his head in agitation, started to say something, but Silverman interrupted. "You put a donkey in with them. The donkey will kick the wolf to death."

"That's—"

Silverman stood and pushed back his chair. "It's time to be heading out, anyway. Neither money nor firewood floats in by itself. And we have not entered the post-capitalist society yet."

Blue, who had been looking considerably at Gracefield this whole time, turned, again, toward the table and began to stack the cups and plates and to gather the cutlery.

"You understand..." Gracefield, pipe in hand, motioned with his free hand around the room and toward Harry, as Harry had risen to go out. "You understand that I am only trying to help."

Silverman put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Better take the dishes down," he said. And Harry nodded and lifted the plates and silverware while Blue carried the cups and coffee pot.

That left Silverman and Gracefield face to face. "Things like this," Gracefield said, "will only ever end in tragedy."

Silverman shrugged. He turned toward the door. Leary and Ellison and Taylor filtered out behind him. And after a moment or two of having his pipe clenched between his teeth, Gracefield took his jacket off the wall and slipped his arms into it as he walked. Blue and Harry had already made it down to the foundry floor. So had Mr Quegg. But he had not yet started the truck. Gracefield walked downstairs, pipe still between his teeth as he approached the truck. He removed it to speak. "A moment if you don't mind," Gracefield said to Mr Quegg, who had stooped in front of the truck, starter rod in hand. Mr Quegg straightened and looked at him. "I have appreciated the opportunity," Gracefield said. "But there is a time to move on. I hope

you understand. So I will be leaving this morning. And, well, not that I want to be crude or anything of the sort..." Mr Quegg, without nodding or anything like that, set the starter rod on the truck hood and stepped around Gracefield and mounted the iron stairs.

"Sir?" Blue said.

Gracefield turned. He put his pipe between his teeth a moment. "Of course, it has been very nice serving with you all. And I hope you can say the same."

It was Silverman, standing by the truck, who stepped toward him and offered him a hand.

Gracefield nodded as he took it. "I would not have expected it," he said.

Silverman shrugged. "Surprises me too."

Ellison came next.

Leary said, "You'll miss the wedding."

"Yes," Gracefield said, "well..." He looked up at the sound of someone descending the stairs. Mr Quegg approached and parceled out an amount of money from one hand to the other and offered it to Gracefield. "Yes," Gracefield said, and pocketed it. "I will wish the rest of you a good day, then." Someone had already opened a door, so he could just walk straight out with one hand in his jacket pocket, the other ministering his pipe.

"I..."

Mr Quegg looked down and saw Blue standing in front of him, looking at the floor.

"I...guess that I will go, too," he said. "I really do appreciate everything..." Mr Quegg ran a finger over the coins in his palm. "Don't worry about that," Blue said. "There isn't any..." But Mr Quegg put out his hand, and after a moment, Blue opened his palm. "I really do...thank you for everything," he said. He turned. "I...um." Ellison offered his hand, and Blue took it. "I...um."

Silverman put a hand on his shoulder. "Sure about this?"

Blue nodded. "I..." He turned toward Harry. "I hope...really... Congratulations. And I..." He looked up the stairs. Then he glanced toward the door. "Would you please tell Miss Rachel and Miss Millie goodbye for me?" He added, "And thank them?"

Harry nodded.

“And I do...” Blue said. “I really do mean congratulations.” He turned, then, and started toward the door. He went out without stopping, as if he couldn’t risk it.

“So,” Silverman said, after a while, “anyone else departing this day?” He glanced around. He looked down at Spot. “And you?” he said. To which Spot cocked his head, and his tongue lolled out of his mouth. “Good,” he said. “Now it’s time to alienate some labor.”

Mr Quegg retreated back upstairs with what money remained in his palm. And when he descended again, everyone had already climbed in the truck. And he took the starter rod from off the hood and jerked the machine awake. He tossed it into the floorboard and motioned for Spot, who scrambled up and over onto the passenger seat.



Fog had settled on the streets. "This is the thing about clouds," Silverman said. "They look all nice and fluffy up in the sky, but when they get down here, you realize they're all cold and wet."

"I'd have figured," Taylor said, "to not have to be cleaning barracks once I was *out* of the army."

Silverman said, "Never did have to worry about cleaning your own room as a kid, did you?"

"Never had enough to clean," Taylor said. He, as it was the only thing that could be done, walked with his hands in his pockets, through fog that settled at knee level. "Glad you're marrying them and not me," he said to Harry.

"Reminds you," Silverman said, "too much of a former sergeant?"

Taylor laughed. "That one, what, whichever or whatever, that one could make my old sergeant cry, I would wager." He shook his head.

"At least," Silverman said, "you're smart enough not to bite off more than you can proverbially chew."

"No," Taylor said, as he opened the pub door, "it's just that if I'm going to have leather, I prefer to start out with it soft." He added, as he stepped over the bench and sat, "And that's one thing they've got in abundance over there."

"The question becomes," Silverman said, "can you ever go back?"

A barmaid carried out the beers.

Leary removed his jacket and draped it over the bench beside him.

"Well," Taylor said, "I wouldn't go back *there*." He lifted a beer and sipped it. "But there are plenty of places in the Orient." He said after another sip, "That's the thing we're missing here, you know?"

"Of course we are," Silverman said.

Taylor glanced up at him. "You being serious, or...?"

"I'm always serious," Silverman said. "None more so than when I'm not."

"Eh." Taylor sipped his beer and shook his head. "Anyway," he said, "we're totally lacking in any decent accommodations for a bachelor party." And he said to the barmaid as she brought the plate of sandwiches, "Unless we can sweet talk you into it, that is." She glanced at him. He laughed.

She looked down the table. "Tell Cernan not to hurt his back," she said, then turned and went behind the bar and disappeared into the back room.

Ellison cradled his beer. "The point," he said, "of bachelor parties has always been lost on me." He set his glass on the table and reached for a sandwich. "The odd mixture of celebrating something as if you don't want to get rid of it, and celebrating getting rid of it at the same time."

"If one is to compose a definition of humanity," Silverman said, "what must remain at its core, and be reiterated at all levels, is contradiction."

"And it would seem," Ellison said, "that is what separates us from God."

"Or," Silverman said, "proves we are made in His image." He reached for a sandwich.

"I always figured," Taylor said, "you said all this stuff to get under Gracefield's skin. So you really do go on about all this crap?"

Silverman shrugged.

"And you," Ellison said, after a sip of beer, "don't believe?"

"I don't see what it matters talking about it," Taylor said.

"Hm," Silverman said.

Taylor said to Ellison, "What's the matter with him?"

Ellison raised his glass and glanced at Silverman.

"I'm disappointed," Silverman said, "if you must know."

"Okay," Taylor said.

Silverman raised his glass, as if in a toast. "To dissolution."

Taylor leaned toward Ellison. "What the hell's he talking about?"

"I'm talking about," Silverman said, and set his glass on the table, "we were only short a Mohamedian to have formed a perfect axis of

the Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, Islamic quadrad.” He lifted his glass again. “I had hoped we would have come up with one, somewhere.”

“Okay,” Taylor said.

Leary washed down the last of a sandwich. “Did we ever decide anything about a wedding present?” he said. Then he reached for another sandwich.

Harry sipped his beer without saying anything.

“No,” Taylor said. “And that’s another thing I’m sick of talking about.”

Silverman stirred himself from looking down into his glass. “Out of sheer morbid curiosity,” he said, “what is it that you are *not* tired of talking or hearing about?”

“I could think of a few things,” Taylor said.

“Besides,” Silverman said, “we’re still in the same deadlock of having the subject of the present present.” He motioned with his glass, toward Harry.

“We should probably get back,” Ellison said.

Silverman finished his beer and nodded.

Leary, most of a sandwich already in his mouth, held it in place with his teeth as he grabbed another with each hand and slipped them into his jacket pockets.

“Life is always limited by the number of pockets one finds one’s self with,” Silverman said, as he stood.

Leary stood and lifted his jacket and slipped his arms into it.

“There is,” Taylor said, as he stepped out into the damp, fog-en-shrouded street, “something to be said for a wet warmth, rather than a damp cold.”

“Poetry,” Silverman said.

“Who wrote it?” Leary said.

“Now my question is,” Taylor said, “since he’s marrying them, is that going to make him, like, a boss or something? And he’s going to be giving us orders?” When no one replied, he went on, “And names. Is it going to be Mister and Misseses Whatever? Or what?”

Harry said nothing to this.

“In the Eastern tradition,” Silverman said, “it is the man who takes the family name of the wife, should the wife’s family have a higher status.”

"Huh," Taylor said.

"Of course," Silverman said, "that is not entirely true. It is not a uniform tradition. There are many oriental cultures. It's just that I tend to become more absolutist when entering a period of depression."

"Okay," Taylor said.

"Listen," Leary said. He turned his head. "What's that sound?" Something smashed through a puddle. And ahead, Spot appeared out of the fog. "Oh, it's found us." Leary buttoned his jacket pockets as Spot ambled forward to stop in front of them, tongue hanging out the side of his mouth. He huffed a few times, waiting just ahead, then turned to walk along beside as everyone passed.

"Christmas is coming," Silverman said.

Ellison said, "If we could come up with a tree."

"Hm," Silverman said. "You traffic in pagan symbolism and consort with their deities too easily."

"Anything," Ellison said, "can be turned to God's purpose."

"And words and their meanings are made and remade," Silverman said. "And all the other gods of this world wait."

"I thought," Taylor said, "you were only supposed to believe in one."

Silverman shrugged, his hands in his jacket pockets, as it was the only thing to do, except for Leary, who had to hike up his jacket to stuff his into his pants pockets. He said, "As Mister Twain so eloquently pointed out, when God demands no other gods be placed before him, he simply asks for equal footing with all the rest."

Leary eyed Spot as he began sniffing around him.

"But," Silverman said, "we must find a Christmas tree."

"Not exactly any forests around here," Taylor said. "Although, if we're going to come up with anything, it should be some mistletoe, I can think of a few uses for that."

"This all used to be forest, once," Silverman said. "All we need to do is merely take a brief step back in time and make a small collection."

"Ah," Taylor said. "Well, if it's going to be that trivial, I don't see why you haven't already done it in the first place."

"I would imagine," Silverman said, "even God is bound by linear time."

"An infinite and all-powerful God cannot be bound," Ellison said.

"True," Silverman said. "And yet all creation is carried out in an ordered sequence much like one might find on assembly instructions, all to create a world wound up to start and be set on its course to ultimately finish."

"Okay," Taylor said.

"Or," Silverman said, "one can imagine God smeared out across time like jam across toast."

"Alright," Taylor said.

Ahead, the foundry appeared out of the fog. "They must be back," Ellison said, upon seeing the open doors.

And, true, the truck sat parked inside.

"Look at that," Taylor said. And he glanced at Harry and winked. "It's big enough."

And the brass bed frame *was* big enough that it had to set in the truck bed at an angle. Footsteps carried down from overhead. And after a few moments, Mr Quegg and Mr Cernan appeared on the landing and started down the stairs.

"They gonna carry that all up in one piece?"

"I think we should lend them a hand," Ellison said.

Silverman nodded. He dropped a hand on Harry's shoulder. "But not you." He motioned to Leary and said, "Keep an eye on him."

Leary looked up from where he had been eyeing Spot, who, since they had stopped, had been going up on his hind legs and trying to sniff Leary's pockets.

And the only thing to do was to stand there watching as they wrangled the bed frame out of the truck bed and started up the stairs with it. The tricky part came in turning and fitting it through the doorway and then turning it in the hallway, which necessitated a constant flux of angles and repositionings that left everyone cross and shouting at each other, but there wasn't anything for anyone watching to do but try and contribute an opinion, none of them well received. Watching this, Spot stood on all fours and cocked his head as he looked up the stairs, until the bed frame had disappeared into the hallway.

"Wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it," Taylor said. He shook his head. "Still not sure I do."

The noise continued overhead even after Silverman and Mr Quegg came out onto the platform and started down the stairs, though to a lesser degree. "If you're looking for something to do," Silverman said, as he rounded the truck, "you can carry some wood up."

Taylor said, "Who's looking for anything?"

"And keep an eye on him," Silverman said, as he opened the passenger side door. "Don't let him out of your sight, even if you have to. He's our responsibility, you remember."

"Whatever," Taylor said. "Where're you going?"

Mr Quegg yanked round the starter rod, and the truck rumbled and shook. Fog stirred around the exhaust pipe.

"We're on a mission," Silverman said, and slammed the cab door.

So the only thing to do was step aside as Mr Quegg reversed the truck through the open doors, his toboggan-covered head and bare arm hanging out the rolled down driver-side window as he looked back.

The footsteps and shuffling and scooting overhead stopped, followed by Mr Cernan and Ellison emerging from the hallway and starting down the stairs.

"They've gone on a mission," Leary said. He eyed Spot.

Ellison nodded. The only thing to do was step aside to allow them through to the car. "We will be back after while," Ellison said.

"We'll make sure and keep an eye on him," Leary said.

Ellison glanced at him a moment, after opening the passenger side door, then climbed in. And after Mr Cernan had reversed the car through the open doors, Leary went to close them. The car disappeared into the fog.

"Well," Taylor said, "the two of you are more than enough to handle a little firewood, so I guess I'll..." He paused at the sounds of the footsteps that passed overhead, seemed to consider. "Oh, cripes," he said.

Leary said, "What's wrong?"

Taylor sighed. "Women like this..." he said to himself. He shook his head. "It's going to be insufferable around here," he said. "There's nothing worse than a woman getting ready to get married."

He added, "And they'll probably sync up or whatever it is they do, and it's all just going to be insufferable."

About then, Millie appeared on the platform. "Both wood boxes need filling," she called down. She stepped away from the railing, paused, stepped back. "And all of you will have to go to the pub for supper." She added before she turned, "And there are some things that can do with some rearranging when you're done with the wood." Finally, she disappeared into the hallway.

Taylor said, "You see what I mean?"

Leary looked up from eyeing Spot. "See what?"



The chunk of timber Silverman had tossed into the stove before breakfast hissed and whistled. Leary laid strips of streaky-meat over a piece of bread and folded it in half. Ellison nursed a cup of coffee. Silverman had already finished his and pushed his cup away and sat there with his elbows on the table and his fingertips pressed together. Taylor still lay in his bunk. He yawned and rolled over.

"I had a dream last night," Ellison said.

Silverman said, "Portentous?"

"Dreams aren't like that," Ellison said. He sipped his coffee. "They don't divine the future or let you talk to the dead."

"Didn't Paul claim that God showed him things in dreams?"

Ellison sipped his coffee.

"What is it, then," Silverman said, "that is not a message from any divinity or near-divinity?"

"It was a little ridiculous," Ellison said.

"So is life," Silverman said, "most of the time. And I don't know about the rest of the time."

Ellison sipped his coffee. "I dreamt we were having the wedding in the church," he said. He paused as he looked down into his coffee. "There was something about it that was... wrong, maybe? It's hard to explain. Everything was candlelit, but there was nothing there. The walls were still bare. Everything was still emptied out."

"Good," Silverman said. "I would have hated for dream me to have had to carry all that stuff back in and unpack it."

Ellison sipped his coffee. "Will was there, too." He motioned with his cup, toward Leary. "They were both sitting in the front pew. Both the sisters had been escorted up the aisle. And they were on either side of Harry."

"And Mister Quegg and Mister Cernan?" Leary said.

"They had escorted them up and stood on either side."

Silverman said, "And us?"

"That's a weird part," Ellison said. He sipped his coffee. "We were officiating."

"Interesting," Silverman said. "Both at the same time or one after the other?"

"It was kind of...back and forth." Ellison paused, elbow on the table, coffee cup in front of his face. "I would say something to Harry and the one sister. Then you would do the same with Harry and the other sister. Kind of...back and forth like that." He sipped his coffee. "Something like that, I guess."

"Tag team nuptials," Silverman said. "Interesting."

"It was just a dream," Ellison said. He set his empty cup on the table.

Harry entered from the hall, fresh shaven, towel over his shoulder. He dropped his shaving kit onto his bunk. He sat on the edge of it and removed his boots, stood, and slipped his suspenders off his shoulders to remove the old pants he had worn to get ready. The last suit, his, lay draped over the end of his bunk. And he lifted the pants and slipped into them.

Taylor yawned and sat up. He worked his shoulders. He yawned. "You all look like a bunch of dressed-up monkeys."

Leary sucked on his fingers, wiped them on a piece of bread before he ate it, and held his tie in place with his free hand as he bent over the table.

"After all," Silverman said, "we are a bunch of apes."

Taylor scratched his chest. "Yeah." He yawned. "Early, isn't it?"

"Sleep deprivation on the eve of a wedding," Silverman said, "is a noble and ancient tradition. And we wouldn't want to do anything less than we possibly could to get everything off absolutely right."

"Yeah," Taylor said. He yawned. "I hope there's something left."

Silverman tapped a tin plate that had been turned over another.

"You sure you're not coming?" Ellison said.

Taylor shook his head as he rose and stretched. "Must be really desperate for it," he said. He sat on the edge of his bunk and pulled on his boots, but didn't tie them. "To make a whole set of new suits

just for one day.” He stretched his shoulders again as he went out into the hall.

Harry had finished with his shirt by then, and slipped his tie around his neck. Ellison pushed back his chair and stooped to get something from the pack under his bunk. “Here,” he said, and deployed on the table a small round mirror with folding legs, so Harry could bend over it and finish his knotwork. He snugged it and turned down his collar, fought with the little buttons on the corners.

Taylor entered again, pulled back a chair at the table, and flipped the covering plate off his breakfast. He glanced at Harry as he lifted his knife and fork. “Now that,” he said, as he put a piece of meat in his mouth, and said, as he chewed, “is a red tie.” He swallowed. “What’s up with that?”

Harry shrugged and pulled his suspenders up.

“Let me guess,” Taylor said. He ran the knife through the meat again. “One of them picked it out.”

Leary said, “What does that matter?”

“It’s already happening,” Taylor said. He put the slice of meat in his mouth, chewed. After he swallowed, he said, “This is only the beginning.” The knife scraped the bottom of his plate as his arm sawed back and forth. “And you can’t get out from under it.” He chewed. “Even if you divorce them. It seeps into you. Still any coffee?” Silverman set the pot down the table. And Taylor reached for a cup and tipped the pot into it. “Once it’s all over,” he said, “it’s all over.” He sipped his coffee. “Once they lose the necessity of the hunt and get what they want, there just isn’t any reason to go on.” He sawed into the meat. He glanced at Harry, as he brought his fork toward his mouth. “Not that I’m trying to discourage anything.” He chewed. “Just saying.”

Harry lifted his jacket from off the bunk and slipped his arms into it.

Silverman said to Ellison, “Better go see how things stand.” Ellison nodded and rose and went out of the room. And Silverman stood and lifted his own jacket from the back of his chair. Leary, leaning forward, and holding his tie in place, washed down the last of a piece of bread with some coffee before he stood and did the same.

Ellison opened the door and poked his head through. “We’re ready.”

Silverman said, "And the brides are off?"

"Just left."

Silverman nodded. "Ready?" he said to Harry.

Harry finished buttoning his jacket. He nodded.

Spot watched all of this from underneath one of the bunks. Leary ran his fingers back through his hair. He followed Harry out into the hall. And Silverman started toward the door, but paused and looked around, motioned with his head, and Spot scrambled from beneath the bunk and around him and out the door. Silverman took his jacket from the wall, along with Ellison's.

"Just one thing I want to know," Taylor said.

Silverman brushed off his jacket with his hand. "What is that?"

"How does a publican end up with a ministerial license?"

"Maybe they're standard issue with godhood," Silverman said. He moved toward the door.

"Bring me back some cake," Taylor said.

Silverman waved without turning as he closed the door.

Everyone else stood waiting in the hall, jackets on, and Silverman passed Ellison his. "What are you bringing him for?" Leary said, he motioned his head toward Spot.

"Obviously," Silverman said, "we need a fifth point to form a proper pentagram around him," he said of Harry. "The last mile may be the most danger-fraught part of the whole affair."

Spot barked. Leary shook his head, but turned and started down the hall with his hands in his pants pockets. Fog had, as usual by then, settled throughout the foundry's ground floor and submerged the truck up to its headlamps. Spot dropped off the stairs and into it, all but the end of his tail disappearing. Leary opened the door.

Fog and low clouds obscured rooftops only three or four floors above, leaving a puffy, white world overhead reminiscent of cotton batting, but less inviting, knowing nothing distinguished it from the damp cold that hovered over the streets. Turning the corner, in the distance, the pub's dirtied front windows and unreadable sign were the sights that gave some hope and comfort. Silverman put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Hold it here," he said. He nodded to Ellison to go inside and make sure everything was OK, which Ellison nodded and did, although Spot slipped through the door with him.

There was nothing to do but stand there with hands in jacket pockets as the wet chill crept in. Ellison opened the door. "Everything's ready."

A fire already crackled, heat seeping into everyone and everything. Spot sat before it and looked over his shoulder as everyone entered. Everything smelled of the evergreen fronds that had been woven over the mantel, a taste in the air like raw syrup. The only thing to do was to breath it in, standing before the fire drying out. Mr Cernan entered through the back door, pushed up his glasses as he walked down the bar. He looked as if he might say something, but the door behind the bar opened, and a barmaid called him, and he had to backtrack around there, and the door unceremoniously closed after him. A clock chimed on the mantel. The only thing to do was to look toward the door behind the bar. When it opened again, a barmaid—dressed in very un-barmaid fashion—opened it just enough to catch Ellison's eye and nod. He nodded. "Everybody in their places," he said. He touched Spot with the end of his shoe, who looked up at him. He motioned to the side. Spot lolled his head that way, then rose and ambled toward Leary. "Keep an eye on him."

"Why me?"

Ellison shrugged. Leary shook his head. He looked down at Spot. "Just be on your best behavior," he said. Spot cocked his head as he looked up at him.

The publican emerged first, closing the door behind himself, and rounded the bar. He glanced Harry over as he passed, looked at him more thoroughly as he took his place in front of the hearth. He nodded, motioned for Harry to move a little to the left, then nodded again. Silverman put his hand on Harry's shoulder, "Just don't turn around." And he managed not to, allowing himself only the slightest glance from side to side when they stopped next to him. No bar stool has ever been put to better use. And other than footsteps and the crackling of the fire, which remained the only sound for several moments as everyone stood in silence, no music played. And it wasn't that the publican's words blotted out, or even overlaid, the crackling of the fire, as much as they intermixed with it, one into the other, into the other, until it became impossible to separate the two. The faces behind all the dingy, framed glass hung on the wall looked on

kindly, as kindly as the past can look upon anything. And when the ceremony was complete, its participants did not flee. And no one cheered. All anyone had, the barmaids in their not-quite identical dresses, Mr Cernan and Mr Quegg in their fresh-made suits, Spot in the same lack of patterns he had worn since birth, and everyone else, who, whether it had provided any protection against anything at all, who had walked in a pentagramic formation the three-quarters of a mile along fog-encumbered streets from the foundry, all anyone had was the chance to look on kindly, as kindly as the present can look upon itself. And the details of the idle talk that followed after, as the three newlyweds huddled together in a booth near the fire, as the barmaids sat at a table and Ellison and Silverman brought their beers, as Spot lay near the hearth, as Leary stood there beside him with a slice of cake in one hand and a sandwich in the other, are of no particular importance, except to those who undertook them, those who may look back fondly, as fondly as the present can look upon the past.



Silverman jiggled open the stove door with one piece of wood to toss a second in, then slammed it before tossing the first back into the wood box; everything about it militated against the notion that had seemingly pervaded the room, that quietude was called for. And because of it, everyone seated at the table glanced at him.

"Quiet tonight," Taylor said. "You'd think you'd hear something through these thin walls."

A large bowl sat overturned in the center of the table to cover the leftover cake. Leary reached forward with both hands and lifted it and set it aside.

The lamp flickered.

Taylor reached for a piece of cake as well. "The thing about marriage is," he said, "is it's the first step toward divorce."

"Marx," Silverman said, "argued that divorce should always be permitted because if someone wanted to get divorced then it could not have been true love in the first place, in which event it was not a valid marriage to begin with."

"I take it," Taylor said, "he got divorced."

"I suppose," Silverman said. "Why?"

"It sounds like an argument a man trying to get divorced would make," Taylor said.

"I," Ellison said, "have to agree."

"The only way to avoid a divorce," Taylor said, "is to avoid marriage."

"A sensible deduction," Silverman said. He reached for one of the bottled beers at the end of the table. "So long as the man is built to withstand loneliness."

"Who said anything about being lonely?" Taylor said. He lifted

his beer and motioned with the bottle. "Loneliness is easily fixed." He took a sip. "Used to know these two ladies...in this old place that used to be used for a meat-packing plant, or something, butchery, something like that, but—always in these tiger-print dresses—done up to be like twins..." He sipped his beer. "Now they..." He whistled and rolled his eyes. "To put it nicely for the rest of you, you didn't ever have to worry about being lonely with them." He sipped his beer and shook his head. "They used to have this specialty," he said, "don't remember what they called it—never did it myself, you understand, just heard about it, around—where they'd make a guy go off just by sticking their fingers up his ass." He laughed. "And there were these fucking guys who actually paid for it." He sipped his beer. "Now, what sort of man would let a woman do something like *that* to him?" He laughed. "Might as well go bend over and find one to shove it up there." He laughed.

Leary swallowed. "So is that like cumming the usual way or..."

Taylor said, "How am I 'sposed to know?"

"You're in Britain, you should try to pick up the local culture," Silverman said. "It's come." He sipped his beer. "It would perhaps be a shame for us to forsake the tradition of our continually drifting apart, as they say, two countries divided by a common language. Of course, perhaps maybe we can do nothing but." He sipped his beer.

Taylor said, "I don't hear the difference."

"Whether you hear it or not," Silverman said, "it's there."

"I'll remember that," Leary said. He scraped icing off his thumb with his teeth and reached toward the cake plate.

Ellison said, "how much can you stand to eat?"

"Don't know," Leary said, right before he opened his mouth wide, while Spot looked up at him and cocked his head.

The lamp flickered.

"Ever consider getting married?" Ellison said.

"Nope," Leary said around and through a mouthful of cake.

"Talked about it a few times," Taylor said. He leaned back into his chair and hooked his arm over the back. "Forgot about it by the morning."

Spot, having sat there looking on with his head cocked long enough, slowly rounded the table and put his paw on Silverman's knee.

And Silverman lifted his bottled beer from the table and bent to tip it into the nearby bowl on the floor, which Spot wasted no time in lapping at, the violence of it driving white foam up the dented aluminum sides to slowly flow down and reform at the edges of the undulating dark-brown liquid when someone spoke and Spot looked up again.

Leary paused between bites of cake. "Didn't Solomon have some ridiculous number of wives?"

"Seven hundred," Silverman said. "Not counting concubines."

"What's that," Leary said around a mouthful, and swallowed, "in numbers?"

"700."

"That's a lot," Leary said. He reached for another piece of cake. "Nobody does that anymore," he said. "How come?"

"Jesus," Ellison said, "said a man who has more than one wife has hardened his heart."

"Our friend, Harry," Taylor said, "must have a heart like a chunk of flint." He laughed.

"That's not what I meant."

"Isn't the church supposed to be Jesus' bride and all?" Silverman said. He moved his beer bottle to slosh the liquid inside as if to gauge how much remained. "Kind of like a lotta brides all together in one, isn't it?"

"That's not the same thing."

"The piece and the whole," Silverman said.

Taylor laughed.

Leary swallowed more cake, said right before another bite, "Doesn't seem very wise and all. Solomon, that is."

"What is wisdom?" Silverman said.

"What," Ellison said, "does that mean?"

"I'm not wise enough to say."

Leary reached for another piece of cake. "He was supposed to have been somewhat smart, right? That whole baby thing and all."

"All very convenient," Silverman said.

"How so?"

"What if the other woman had not been such a bitch? Or if the first had been just as much of one?" Silverman said. "Plenty of real mothers are." He sipped his beer. "Seems more like a show trial to me."

Leary said, "But if it worked..." But the next few words got lost in his chewing.

"You can write anything to work out however you want," Silverman said. "So what does that prove?"

"Never thought about it," Leary said. Crumbs tumbled down his shirt. He scraped icing off his fingers with his teeth.

"So," Ellison said, and raised his own bottle of beer, "you want to say the Bible isn't true?"

"Big 'T' or little 't'?" Silverman said.

"Why," Leary said, as he chewed, "capitalize it like that?"

"There's a difference in big 'T' Truth and little 't' truth," Silverman said.

"Didn't know that," Leary said. He swallowed, reach for his beer. "What's the difference?"

"Who knows?" Silverman said. "There might not be one." His fingers played over the neck of his beer bottle as if it were an instrument. "Anyway," he said, "I don't have to worry about the Bible. I only have to worry about five books, or thereabouts." He raised his beer. "Not counting the Talmud, of course."

"What's that?" Leary reached for another piece of cake.

"Commentary," Silverman said, after a sip of beer. "And commentary on commentary." He took another sip of beer. "And commentary on commentary on commentary."

Leary chewed. "You read it?"

"One does not *read* the Talmud."

Taylor said, "What do you do with it then? Sit on it?"

"Eat it," Silverman said. He leaned down and upturned his beer into Spot's bowl.

Leary ran his tongue, then his finger, around the inside of his mouth, licked icing out of the corners of his lips. "Is that," he said, "a piece of wisdom, or something?"

"I wouldn't be wise enough to know."

Leary reached for another piece of cake. "What did he do with all those wives?"

"And 300 concubines," Silverman said.

"What's a concubine?"

"A maid that goes to bed with you," Taylor said.

"A rather base view," Ellison said.

"Or," Silverman said, "simply a reasonably accurate translation into the modern vernacular." He reached for another beer and wrung off the cap.

Leary said, "How's that different than a wife?"

"Functionality," Silverman said.

"So," Taylor said, and sipped his beer, "like those ladies I was talking about. Wonder what they charged extra for that sort of thing."

"Can we please," Ellison said, "talk about something other than sodomy?"

Leary reached for another piece of cake. "Is that sodomy?"

"It doesn't serve a reproductive purpose," Ellison said. "And—"

"Careful," Silverman said. He sipped his beer. "I might quote the Bible at you."

"What—"

"And my lover put his hand by the opening of the door and my bowels were moved for him." Silverman sipped his beer.

"That's—"

"Song of Solomon," Silverman said.

Leary wiped his mouth. "The same one that did the baby trick?"

"You're," Ellison said, "taking that completely out of context and making it obscene."

Silverman sipped his beer.

"It just means," Ellison said. "It just means someone left and she's sad to see him go."

Silverman sipped his beer.

"So is that only part of it?" Leary said. He reached for another piece of cake.

"Save a piece for some of the rest of us," Taylor said.

"You could have had some," Silverman said, "if you had gone."

"He went," Taylor said, and inclined his head toward Leary, "and he's still eating."

Leary said, as he chewed, "Is there more? Does he come back?" He sipped his beer to wash part of it down. "Why did he leave?"

Spot put a forepaw on Silverman's knee, and Silverman leaned down to pour some of his beer into Spot's bowl. "After all," Silverman said, as he was down there, and continued as he straightened, "it is

the doorway through which all human life enters this world. Dog life, too."

"That's—"

"What is?" Leary said. He washed down the rest of the cake.

Silverman looked over his shoulder at the stove. "What those ladies were selling."

Leary scraped icing from the tips of his fingers with his teeth. Spot burped and lay down in front of the stove.

"Why'd they stop?" Leary said.

Silverman turned away from the stove. "Stop what?"

"Having concubines and such," Leary said. "Multiple wives and all that."

"It was a violation of God's law," Ellison said. "Deuteronomy clearly states the king is not to have multiple wives."

"Yes," Silverman said. He sipped his beer. "But only the king." He sipped his beer. "As for everyone else, God remains silent." He sipped his beer. "Let us speculate on the meaning of God's silence."

"It says," Ellison said, "that a man shall leave his father and mother to cleave unto his wife, not wives." He sipped his own beer.

"It's best to start with one," Silverman said.

"It's like basic training," Taylor said. "Or sports. A body's got to work themselves up to it."

"There's," Ellison said, "such a thing as overexertion."

"Yet," Silverman said, and sipped his beer, "you attended the wedding."

Ellison sipped his beer. "I'm not talking about that."

"Oh," Silverman said. "We're being abstract." He sipped his beer. "In which case, perhaps we should tackle the perennial unanswered question..." He sipped his beer. "How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?" He sipped his beer. "Or, for that matter, a pen. So the question then is..." He sipped his beer. "Is the broader of the two the easier to answer or the harder?"

"You can't deny," Ellison said, "that God had a plan for marriage—" —he raised his beer to his mouth—" —And—"

"And His plans," Silverman said, and took a sip of beer, "don't seem to ever go according to plan..." He sipped his beer. "Do they?" He wiped his mouth with the back of his thumb. "In fact," he said,

"one might expand upon Shakespeare...all the best laid plans of mice and men and God..." And he tilted back his head and drained his beer and set the empty bottle on the table.

"That's..." Ellison reached across the table for another bottled beer. "That's..."

"Let me ask you something," Taylor said. "Was Marx Jewish?"

"Have no idea," Silverman said.

"Just wondering why you know so fucking much about him."

Silverman shrugged, sipped his beer.

"Why," Leary said, as he reached for the last piece of cake. He paused there with it in hand, looked at Taylor. "You want this?"

Taylor shook his head, sipped his beer. "Not after you've grubbed all over it."

Leary shrugged and took a bite. "Why," he said, as he chewed, "do they call it a," he swallowed, "honeymoon?"

"It refers to the fact," Taylor said, "that marriage is like a full moon, by the time it starts, it's already waning."

"To the ancients," Silverman said, and raised his beer as if in a toast, "it was the time of the moon that signaled the harvest of honey." He sipped his beer. "And to the bourgeoisie—"

"What's that?" Taylor said.

"Communism," Ellison said.

"Right," Taylor said, and raised his beer. "Fuck em all."

Silverman raised his beer. "By your two ladies."

Taylor laughed.

Beer raised, Silverman's arm extended from his sleeve. He looked at his watchband a moment or two, then slowly lowered his arm and set his beer on the table. And he shifted the band around his wrist until it was positioned correctly again, and he unfastened the strap. He laid it on the table next to the beer bottle. "This," he said, and reached over and turned down the lamp, so the radium dial reflected in the brown glass of the beer bottle, "is the power of the twentieth century."



Spot lay asleep under Leary's bunk, and his ears twitched, but he didn't wake as Ellison swung his legs over the side and touched his bare feet to the cold floor. The room filled with a faint red glow as he jiggled-open the stove door and stirred the coals, added another piece of timber on top of them to smoke and hiss until it ignited. Ellison closed the stove, and his eyes adjusted to the darkness again. Silverman's radium-dial watch hung on a nail on the wall above his bunk. The only sound in the dark was Leary chewing and swallowing a sandwich, which he continued to do as Ellison sat on the edge of his own bunk. He lay down again, probably not expecting to sleep, but then woke again. Someone had lit the lamp. And Silverman sat there with his elbows on the table, rubbing the sides of his face aimlessly. He leaned back his head and popped his neck.

Ellison said, "What time is it?"

Silverman turned his wrist; he'd reached up sometime earlier in the dark and taken down his watch. "Six-oh-one. Maybe a few hundred one way or the other."

Leary rolled over, yawned. "What time is that?"

"6:01," Silverman said. "6:02 now."

Ellison sat up and swung his legs over the edge of his bunk. The fire popped and crackled. "What do you think?" he said.

"That," Silverman said, "is what I've been studying on."

Leary yawned. "What's that?"

"Breakfast," Silverman said.

Leary yawned, rolled over, said as if half-asleep, "What about it?"

"It should be fairly obvious," Ellison said.

Leary said, "What's that?"

"I doubt highly they are going to be interested in...getting out of bed the first thing in the morning to do breakfast."

Leary rolled over and sat up. "There's going to be no breakfast?"

"Have you ever bothered," Ellison said to Silverman, "to keep track of when the pub opens?"

"Nope," Silverman said. "For all I know it provides 24/7 service, holidays included."

"Couldn't they do a little something," Leary said, "and then go back to bed?"

"Why," Taylor said, and rolled over, "can't you people let a guy sleep?"

"Time to get up anyway," Silverman said. "It's not healthy to have two days in a row off. That's the third leading cause of death in the civilized world and second stop on the path of semi-eternal spiritual damnation."

"Couldn't we," Leary said, "couldn't we just kind of...tiptoe into the kitchen ourselves?"

"I doubt," Ellison said, "they want to be disturbed with people traipsing through the den."

"And the walls are thin," Silverman said.

"The chinks love to make walls out of literal paper, though, don't they?" Taylor sat up. "And that's workable." He yawned and scratched himself.

Leary said, "We could be really quiet."

"Fasting," Silverman said, "is also often physically and mentally beneficial. Not to even mention the spiritual aspects."

Leary groaned.

"There's no need to go that far with it," Ellison said. "I'm sure we'll find a solution. And—"

Someone knocked on the door.

Spot stirred and sniffed. "You smell that?" Taylor said. He yawned and rose to move across the room. And when he opened the door, the cooking smells that it had barricaded in the hall burst in.

"Breakfast," Mr Cernan said, "is almost ready." He turned to go down the chilled hallway, hands in his pockets. Taylor shut the door. Leary had already pulled his nightclothes over his head and was fitting himself into his pants.

"So much for sleeping in," Taylor said. He slipped on his boots and went out.

Leary pulled his shirt over his head and pulled his suspenders over his shoulders before he tucked it in.

"I'll give you a hand," Ellison said, and he reached for his pants and slipped them on before he pulled his own nightclothes over his head.

Taylor had returned and dressed by the time they returned with the plates and the utensils and the coffee pot. He poured himself a cup while they went out for the rest. Silverman still sat at the table the same as he had when they had first left. And neither had he moved by the time they had returned again and set the plates and pots of breakfast foods on the table. And he hadn't reached for a plate by the time everyone else had pulled out a chair and sat and piled things into their own.

"What's up with you?" Taylor said to him.

Silverman shook his head. "I had decided to fast for ten minutes to see if it would bring me closer to God." He reached for a plate.

Leary sipped his coffee to wash down a piece of bread. "Did it work?"

"Remains to be seen," Silverman said. He lifted his knife and fork. "Though, I would guess we are safe for the moment."

Leary sopped bread across his plate, raised it to his mouth as he said, "Safe from what?"

"God is in his heaven," Silverman said, "or at least not here, anyway, and all is right with the world."

"You mean to say," Ellison said, "that the presence of God is damaging?"

"When," Silverman said, "has an encounter with him ever turned out well?"

"Just what I've always wanted," Taylor said, "to wake up first thing and go to Sunday school."

"Anyway," Ellison said, "we've already had this conversation before."

Silverman nodded as he chewed. He swallowed. "But repetitive things are also so comforting." He reached for a slice of bread. "And men like to be comfortable."

Leary said, "What about women?"

"What doesn't like to be comfortable?" Taylor said.

"Also, man..." Silverman said. He sopped the bread around his plate. "The line between pain and pleasure is often a thin one. And sometimes it is difficult to determine which side you are on." He stuck the bite of bread in his mouth, chewed.

"I never heard a guy," Taylor said, as he dipped some more out of a pot, "screaming and moaning to go at it again after getting hit by mortar shrapnel."

Silverman said, "I have."

"Reminds me of this lieutenant I once heard about," Taylor said. "Used to go up to this little place that specialized in having these little women that a man could pay to get tied up and have them hit you with whips and that sort of shit." He forked a piece of meat into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. "Actually pay for it." He reached for his coffee cup. "Surprised the coffee's this good," he said.

Leary sipped his own. "Why's that?"

"Well," Taylor said, "honeymoon's already over, if you ask me." He whistled. "Real fast shooter. He'll probably be back bunking in here tonight."

"That's a sacrament," Ellison said.

"Well," Taylor said, "it *is* all supposed to be about *I give you my body* and all that." He put down his coffee and lifted the knife and fork.

"Why don't you just fucking shut up for once."

"What's..." Taylor placed a bit of cut meat into his mouth, said around it as he chewed, "gotten into you, Padre?"

"Maybe I'm just sick of your shit."

Taylor shrugged as he continued to chew. "Like it or not..." He swallowed. "You're all just like me, whether you wanna admit it or not." He worked his elbow back and forth, sawing against the plate. "Knew this Catholic girl once..." He brought a bit of cut meat to his mouth, began to chew. "...or twice." Swallowing, he set the knife and fork down and lifted his cup of coffee again. "Ever known one, Padre? Or are you supposed to save them for last?"

Ellison pushed back his chair and went over to check the stove, jiggled open the door, and slammed it again so it would latch, but without having added anything to it. Sitting on the edge of his bunk,

he raised his leg and set it over his opposite knee and unknotted his lace and started to retie it.

"I neglect to know," Silverman said, "whether the Catholic hell is supposed to be the absence of God or the presence of others."

"Why don't you shut up too," Ellison said. He jerked loose the fresh-tied knot, working the hard, thin, black laces round again.

"Both of you," Taylor said, motioning from Ellison to Silverman with his coffee cup, "you're just..." He shook his head and sipped his coffee and set his cup on the table. "It's like insanity is catchy, or something."

"Your error," Silverman said, "is that you expected things to revolutionize." He motioned in circles with his own coffee cup. "And in expecting the wedding to be some sort of apotheosis."

"Apatha what?"

"The culmination," Silverman said. He sipped his coffee. "The climax."

"No," Taylor said, as he sipped the last of his coffee, "I would bet you won't find many climaxes around here."

Leary said, "What are the odds?"

Silverman sipped his coffee. "Let us give it 20:1."

Leary paused a moment, chewing. "Those're," he said, his mouth still full, "good odds."

Silverman nodded. "Yes, the goods are odd."

Taylor shook his head. "You're all crazy."

"Which may be to our detriment," Silverman said. "After all, they say God does watch over fools." He pushed away his bread-scrubbed plate. "Perhaps that is why the mentally ill seem so ill-served."

"For them, then," Ellison removed his leg from across his knee and set his foot back on the floor and rose, "God is not in heaven?"

Silverman said, "Perhaps."

Ellison reached for the coffee pot, lifted it, and poured some. He brought the cup up and sipped from it. "May be right," he said, looking down into the blackness gathered within the tin cup.

"This," Silverman said, "will not do." He shook his head as he rose. "This will not do at all." He placed his hand on Ellison's shoulder. "Already, there is the signs of the start of some kind of possession."

Leary said, "Possession?"

"Definitively," Silverman said. "The only thing to do is to produce a shock to the system to force it out before it can do any more damage."

"Good luck finding an electric light socket," Taylor said. He rolled his eyes.

"Are you aware," Silverman said to Ellison, "that God had a wife?"

"God didn't have a wife," Ellison said.

"And she was worshiped in the temple right along with him."

"No," Ellison said, "she wasn't."

"They tried to paper her over," Silverman said. "But you can still find her in the Torah, even if they do bastardize her to being called the Tree of Life."

"God," Ellison says, "doesn't have a wife."

"I'm not talking about now," Silverman said. "Maybe they got a divorce. But He *did* have one, Her, however you want to put it."

"There," Ellison said, "is only God. The one God."

"And," Silverman said, "He had a wife."

"No," Ellison said, "He did not."

"He," Silverman said, "did."

"He," Ellison said, "did not."

"He did."

"He did not."

"He did."

"He did not."

"Historical revisionist."

"Polytheist."

Silverman removed his hand from Ellison's shoulder. "Demons," Silverman said, "are much like disease. You have to hit them hard all at once." He tore the bottom from one of the remaining slices of bread. "And wipe them out. Otherwise they breed resistance and return stronger. This is the essence of evolution."

"Monkeys," Taylor said, and stood and pushed back his chair. "Monkeys all the way down."

Leary, after emptying his coffee cup to wash down the last of the last piece of bread, started to gather the plates and utensils.

Silverman leaned back in his chair and looked at the ceiling. "If only we could have found a Musulman," he said.

“Not this again,” Taylor said. “Your quadra-whatever. Holy shit, you really are crazy. I should know, I watched plenty of guys pretend to *be* crazy to try and get out on a psycho discharge, but you, hey, I’ve seen guys that go so deep into it that they don’t even know they’re doing it, so they get out and they go on like that.” He crossed the room for his jacket. “Well, I got news for you, you’re out now, and if you’re going to keep it up, you might as well have never started the whole con in the first place, because you might as well have stayed in,” he said. Then he went out into the hall and closed the door behind himself.

“A very strange fellow,” Silverman said. He helped Ellison to gather the rest of the breakfastwares and take them down the hall. Harry was neither in the front room nor the kitchen when they went in or came out, in fact, both stood empty. The bedroom door remained closed, but only empty silence was apparent beyond. “Might already be downstairs,” Ellison said.

The sound of the truck engine carried upward. The only thing to do was to walk out and see. It sat down there engulfed in fog up to its tires but puttering away as Mr Quegg tossed the starter rod into the cab. And Harry stood there beside it, hands in his jacket pockets.

“As you can see,” Silverman said, as they reached the bottom of the stairs, “almost nothing has changed since yesterday. Maybe in this case the phrase *you can’t judge something by how it looks* rings true. Or maybe you really can judge a book by its cover. Or perhaps the exception proves the rule. Or maybe if it looks like a duck and walks like a duck and quacks like a duck... Eh Harry?”

Harry shook his head.



“The question is,” Ellison said, “what’re we going to do after?”

Silverman said, “What makes you think there will *be* an after.”

Leary poked the last of a sandwich into his mouth. “After what?”

“Don’t you even see what’s going on around you?”

Leary looked at him as he chewed.

Ellison sighed. “You *do* realize that everything we can see is months—a year at the most—from being gone, right?”

“Not all of it.”

“Yes, all of it.”

“Yes,” Silverman said, “Nobody wants to see this anymore. It’s the past. You can’t romanticize something if it still exists to contradict you.”

Leary reached for another sandwich. “So what’re we going to do?”

Silverman looked through the window. Night frost had already grown in the four corners of each pane.

“Perpetual Christmas.”

“Hm?” Leary said from over the top of his glass.

Silverman turned and looked at the decorated tree down at the far corner past the bar. “Like Achilles racing the tortoise.”

“Didn’t catch that one,” Leary said. “Who won?”

Ellison sipped his beer. “It was the second match after he beat the hare.”

Leary chewed. “Have any money on it?”

“You’re not for real,” Silverman said.

“Am I?” He reached for another sandwich. “Never thought about it.”

“If I may be so bold,” Silverman said, “what is it you *do* think about?”

Leary paused a moment. "Don't know." He shook his head. "Never thought about it."

"Leave off," Ellison said.

"What? I'm just inquiring into my good acquaintance's thoughts and opinions."

"You've been sour for days."

Silverman didn't reply. He turned and watched the hounds lying before the fireplace. And after a while, he turned and looked over the pub, empty of even the publican, who had disappeared upstairs.

"So who won?"

"Nobody."

"A complete wash, huh?"

Silverman leaned back his head.

"It's an incompleteable race," Ellison said. "Each step Achilles takes is half of his last."

"That's the difference between us," Silverman said.

"How so?"

"Your religion got in bed with Greeks. Mine challenged them to an enunciation contest."

"You're the one who brought it up."

Silverman didn't reply.

"So," Leary said, as he reached for the last sandwich, "do you get your money back on a thing like that? Or what?"

"Let's go." Silverman stood and straddled the bench. One of the hounds lifted his head. "Don't worry," Silverman said, "we're all paid up with firewood." He stepped past them.

Ellison drained his glass and rose. Leary rose as well, still chewing, stepped over the bench, stopped, bent over the table again, and upended his glass, and continued to chew as he headed for the door.

"Clear night, anyway," Ellison said. He wrapped his scarf round his neck and slipped his gloved hands into his pockets as he looked up at the stars.

Silverman looked back at them. "Who forgot the lantern?"

Leary swallowed, shook his head, and turned and jogged back into the pub. They watched him through the frosted window panes as he grabbed the lantern from the table, turned to jog out, then jogged back across the room toward the fireplace, and finally emerged from

the pub, only to take a half-dozen steps, then turn and jog back to close the door.

"The three stooges," Silverman said, and started walking.

"At least," Ellison said, after a while, "there's no windchill."

"Always look on the bright side of life."

They walked in silence. Sometime later, Leary pulled a sandwich from his pocket and took a bite, slipped it back into his pocket.

"It should be a sin," Silverman said.

"What's that?"

Silverman motioned, said, "There's not even anything unworthy of sacrifice around that one can see with the naked eye." He walked on. "Or even a clothed one." He walked on. "Only us." He laughed. The sound echoed crisply.

As they approached the foundry, he looked up at the darkened windows. "The point of the race is to finish in the order you started." He stopped, fixed his gaze on the darkened windows above. Ellison and Leary passed him and opened one of the doors. Leary paused, lantern hanging at his side.

"You looking at something?"

Silverman's gaze drifted down. Hands still in his pockets, he walked towards the open door and slipped inside. Everything was dark overhead. And Leary swung the lantern at his side as if he were carrying a pail upstairs.

"Don't disturb the lovers," Silverman said, as they entered the hallway. They turned the opposite way. Lantern light illuminated empty cots and Taylor asleep in his own. Leary set the lantern on the table and started to slip off his jacket. He turned. A yelp. He tumbled to the floor. Spot retreated farther beneath the bunk.

"Too bad," Silverman said. "Better luck next time."

Leary sat up, paused as if listening to make sure no one had woken, then massaged his elbow.

"I guess you were right," Silverman said. "He is out to get you."

"I told you," Leary said, as Ellison helped him up. Carefully, he eased onto the bunk, and after wincing and rubbing his elbow for a while, he bent and started to untie his boots. "I don't see how you can sleep so soundly with a murder machine right in here with us."

"To be fair," Silverman said, "even you yourself seemed to have

forgotten it there for a while. So it's no wonder we did as well." Silverman, still in his jacket, eased back onto his bunk. "And besides," he said, "it's not after me."

"How do you know that?"

Silverman lay there in silence.

Taylor pulled a pillow over his head. "Do you guys have to make so much noise?"

Ellison piled his jacket on the end of his bunk. "Why don't you say what's really on your mind?"

Leary said, "Something wrong with him?"

Ellison sat down and started the work of removing his own boots, touched his stocking feet to the floor.

"I hate the Greeks," Silverman said.

"I believe you mentioned that," Ellison said.

"I hate them because they solved the problem."

"Only the one?"

"At the end of the day, there is only one."

Leary pulled his sweater over his head. "And what's that?"

"The nature of the infinity of God."

"All of that's beyond our understanding. That's the only answer there can be."

"Yet you can conceive of what you would call a false answer, which would in itself be an answer."

"But an incorrect one."

"But doesn't it say something that the answer which is supposed to be true doesn't overwhelm the mere notion of an alternative?"

"You're merely restating the question of why is there evil in the world."

"A boring question. And pointless?"

Leary snored.

"How so?"

"If you simply eliminate the concept of evil then everything falls into place."

"But then all you're left with is good."

"Exactly."

Taylor said, "Will you two just go to sleep."

"But there isn't just good."

"There is the inside of a field hospital."

"Yes." Ellison unbuttoned his pants and hung them over the end of his bunk. And he sat there on the edge of his bunk, in his undershirt and socks and boxers.

"The next time you go to confession, you should ask forgiveness for being a liar."

"A liar?"

Silverman yawned, closed his eyes. He still hadn't managed to undress, and his boots hung off the edge of his bunk. "You claim God is beyond human understanding. Yet you can define God as good. And good to you means those things that don't cause you pain."

"I believe that God doesn't want us to suffer."

"And what is suffering?" Silverman yawned. "And what if suffering is the will of God, and therefore somehow perfect? If all of the world is somehow perfect."

"I can't believe that."

"It's incomprehensibleness that allows you to hand wave away anything you're uncomfortable with. Yet a truly incomprehensible God is what you're most terrified of."

"And your God is incomprehensible?"

"Job. Buchenwald. Being the people of God...is to be the evidence of His own incomprehensibility."

"I don't think I could live like that." Ellison looked across at Silverman, who still lay there with his eyes closed, one glove on, one glove off, one arm folded across his chest.

Ellison pushed himself forward and sighed. Then, when he reached to extinguish the lantern, he noticed Spot had half come out from under the opposite bunk. Spot turned to look at him, then turned to look back toward the door; his ears went up. He faintly barked, a warbly sound that hung deep in his throat.

Distantly, below, between Leary's snores, glass shattered. Taylor, his head beneath his pillow, didn't move. Silverman turned his head. Spot watched the door even as Ellison stepped into his pants and pulled his suspenders over his undershirt and bare shoulders. Spot barked again. "Quiet." Ellison stepped into the hall in stocking feet. No light filtered from beneath the doorway farther down.

Wood crashed below.

He turned and went back to his bunk and slipped on his boots.

Ellison went out onto the platform. But darkness obscured everything about what lay below, except for that it existed. Ellison stopped at the head of the stairs and raised the lantern. Maybe there were still some rats around, after all. He started down the iron stairs, lantern raised, but it remained impossible to discern anything on the foundry floor. He reached the bottom of the stairs. Lantern light reflected from the truck and car windshields and headlamps, the reflections following him as he crossed the foundry floor, reflecting in broken beer bottle shards. Ellison squinted into the shadows behind the kilns. "W—Blue?"

Another light appeared on the platform overhead, and Mr Quegg raised a lantern over his head and bent over the railing. "Oo's do'n 'e?"

Ellison called up, "It's just me." He looked down, across at the kilns. "Blue's back."

Together, in silence, they climbed the stairs, Ellison behind and carrying the lantern. By then, Mr Cernan had appeared on the platform as well. And Harry in his nightclothes. Silverman still in his boots. Leary, yawning, looked through the doorway.

"Sorry," Blue said. "I...didn't mean to wake anyone."

Spot yelped, and his tail thumped Leary's shin, but he wouldn't go out on the platform. Rachel stopped beside him, but couldn't see anything but everyone's legs. She touched Harry's thigh. "What's happening?"

"Blue's here."

"Well, tell him to come inside," she said. "And get out of the chill." She shook her head and propelled herself around and between legs and onto the platform. Millie stepped toward the doorway. Same as her sister, her hair had been pulled up under a nightcap, but a wisp of hair had sprung out of it and fallen across her eye, so she kept blowing it away and finally had to bend and touch her forehead to Harry's shoulder and turn her head to sweep it behind her ear. Then she stepped onto the platform as well, and moved out from behind Mr Quegg and Mr Cernan.

"I..." Blue almost seemed to try and look no one in the eye.

Millie bent and looked him in the face. "I hope the other guy looks worse."

Rachel shuffled round to look up at him. And Ellison stepped closer with the lantern, revealing dried blood and a bruised cheek and jaw and a blackened eye.

"Oh," Rachel said, "that's horrible." She tugged his pants leg. "You come in right now and we'll see about cleaning that up."

Blue shook his head. "I'm...fine. I just wanted to..."

"Now, don't argue." Rachel motioned to her sister, who bent and grabbed Blue's jacket collar with her teeth and tugged him toward the door.

"Everyone just get out of the way," Rachel said, as she propelled herself after them. She motioned to Leary and Silverman. "Make yourselves useful and go get him some fresh clothes. Well, what're you waiting for?" Leary turned, stumbled; and Spot yelped.

Silverman helped him up. "Come on."

"And you," she said to Ellison, "go get some clothes on before you catch yourself a death." She tugged Harry's nightclothes, and he followed her down the hall.

Watching them go, Mr Quegg yawned and slipped off his sleeping cap, rubbed his head. Mr Cernan scratched behind an antler. "I'll make some coffee," he said.

"i'n."

"Oh, I don't care." Mr Cernan yawned and scratched his chest through his nightclothes. "You're wearing my slippers again, you know?"

"n."

"You always say that." Mr Cernan turned and started down the hall. "You're going to have them completely stretched out of shape."

"ry."

"You always say that."

Mr Quegg closed the door behind them.



“Did you know the Thames used to freeze over?”

“No, I didn’t goddamn know that.” Taylor bundled himself further into his jacket.

“And they used to hold a yearly festival out on the ice.”

“Did I ask for this information?”

Silverman shrugged. He turned to glance up at what snatches of dark-grey sky remained discernible between buildings.

Blue glanced out as well. “Feels like snow, doesn’t it?”

“Who knows?”

Silverman straightened. The cold tarp crackled as the truck’s suspension shifted.

The further and farther out the trucks passed, the wider and better the streets became. They turned onto paved routes. Water rushed in the distance. The truck stopped.

“We there?”

“No,” Silverman said.

The cab door opened and slammed shut. Mr Quegg appeared at back of the truck, toboggan fitted over his bald head. Silverman climbed out without a word. The motor had been left to idle. And when the front door slammed again, Mr Quegg, hands in his coat pockets, stepped back before the machine made a noise as Silverman shifted gears. He receded into the distance as the truck moved away, framed by the edges of the flapping tarp. Blue pulled it back to get a view of the river. No ice apparently marred the rushing water. And past the other side of the bridge, breath didn’t crystallize as quickly or as harshly. Wide, paved streets opened up. Dump trucks passed in the opposite direction. When the truck stopped, Silverman banged on the cab. “That’ll be us.” And the only thing to do was to climb out.

Silverman waved his arm through the cab window. He turned the truck and shifted into reverse. Most of the structure already lay scattered and in shambles. "At least we don't have to break it up." Taylor shook his head. "Watch the nails—Watch it!" Loading boards was quick work. Bulldozers roared in the distance. And on occasion it was possible to discern their bulky outlines within the fog.

"Keep working," Silverman said. "Fill it up all the way. As much as you can get in there."

"Where're we supposed to ride?" Taylor said.

"Nowhere," Silverman said. "That's the point."

"What're we supposed to do in the meantime?"

"Wait."

"The Jews," Taylor said, "sure learned how to drive slaves well."

Ellison slid in another plank. "I don't know if the suspension can take much more." He glanced at the tires.

"It'll hold." Silverman tossed on another plank.

Planks were stuffed up to the tarp skeleton then yet a few more jammed in. Spot hopped out when Silverman opened the cab.

"Don't leave that thing here," Leary said. But Silverman had already started the truck and turned back the way they had come. And Spot plodded toward them and sat and looked up at them with his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth.

"Great," Taylor said. "Now what?" He jammed his gloved hands into his jacket pockets and turned and looked up at the half-shattered structure. Rooms opened like a dollhouse, a cut-away of a building, where a bulldozer or perhaps a wrecking ball had gone through it. Tile work covered part of a room on the second floor, holes in the walls where fixtures had been. A lone chair remained in the corner of one room, and a tattered rug hung out over the smashed edge of the floor. "What a bunch of shit," Taylor said. Darkened rectangles marked where pictures had once hung on faded, patterned wallpapers. "Good thing they're tearing it all down, if you ask me. Probably full of typhus and the plague and who knows what else." Spot barked. Something scampered in the exposed basement, but he didn't opt to go after it.

Leary stood looking up at the over-sized dollhouse as well, and absently produced half a sandwich from his pocket. Spot whined.

And Leary glanced down to see Spot incline his head, but then looked back up at the shattered house as he chewed.

"Looks like what passes for art these days," Ellison said.

"Makes me think of a dollhouse," Leary said. He took another bite. He said, as he chewed: "Found one on the curb once somebody had put away, once." He swallowed. "Might have looked something like this on the inside." He took a bite, said, as he chewed: "Don't recall." Then he added, still chewing: "Wonder what it looks like from the fro—" Spot yelped, managed to scramble up before Leary. "I told you!" He sat up on wet pavement as Spot threw back his head and smacked down what remained of the sandwich. "You see?" He pointed. Ellison and Blue grabbed his arms and helped him up. "I'm telling you—that thing is out to kill me." A dump truck passed and honked nearby, and Leary jumped back, stumbled, almost tumbled into the exposed basement. Ellison and Blue tried to grab him, but he flailed his arms. And he would have fallen if Spot hadn't jumped up and bit his pants. "Gah!" Leary tumbled onto the pavement again. And when he had rolled over, Spot stood over him panting, tongue hanging out.

"God, this's ridiculous," Taylor said. "You're all ridiculous." He removed a hand from his pocket to wave at everything. "This's all ridiculous."

A dump truck stopped. And the driver leaned across the seats and rolled down the opposite window. Taylor wandered toward him, stood there sometime talking up into the cab. The driver nodded. And Taylor turned and walked back. "Finally some luck," he said. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, toward the truck. "They've got some jobs out that way. I say we leave off."

Blue helped Leary climb to his feet. "Did or did not the rest of you not see this thing try to kill me—and tell the truth. I—"

"Will you shut up about the damn dog," Taylor said. "Shitting thing needs to be put down, anyway." He kicked.

Spot yelped.

Leary stepped between the two of them.

"What the fuck's wrong with you people?" He looked at Harry. "Come on, you can't be as brain dead as the rest of this outfit."

Harry adjusted his cap.

“Oh, I forgot. You’ve got your *wives*.”

He turned toward everyone else.

“I’m talking some real pay. Enough for a real place to sleep. And something to do besides fuck all.”

The dump truck honked.

“Fine. Have yourself a merry time. Have yourselves your fucking merry Christmas in the middle of fucking June.” He turned and walked toward the dump truck. The driver leaned over and opened the door so he could climb into the cab. The truck lurched forward as he shifted gears, disappeared around a distant corner.

Ellison, hands still in his pockets, turned and looked out over upturned earth, out where cold fog obscured roving bulldozers. “Anybody got the time?”

Blue looked at his watch, pressed it to his ear. “I would guess they should be back pretty soon.”

Ellison turned toward the splintered house. “Alright. Let’s start trying to get something together. We’ll pile it here.”



And soon enough, there was a nice-sized stack for Silverman to back the truck up to.

“Alright,” Silverman said. “We should be able to get two more loads out like this today.” He tossed a plank on and looked around, as if counting heads. But he said nothing. “Come on, let’s get a move on. I have it on good authority that there will be hot chocolate tonight. And we might even manage to come up with a bit of something else to add to it.”



The skies steadily darkened as everyone waited for Silverman to return from the final load. Adjusting a hat or a collar against the drizzle was the only thing that could be done. Sporadic dump trucks rolled by, droplets fire-lit in their headlamps, roll-splashing through small puddles where pavement had worn from so many heavy loads. The small, dim headlamps on the old truck proved easy to differentiate. And the small, single wiper on the driver side lazily stirred droplets into smears. Silverman drug a lantern from the cab and lit it and

hung it over the truck bed to load by. Stacking everything carefully allowed for a gap on one side, enough room for four men to squeeze inside and brace against the lumber so it didn't slide onto anyone when the truck went into a turn. Spot and Leary climbed into the cab. Silverman steered the truck through the night.

The dim headlamps illuminated Mr Quegg on the far side of the bridge. Silverman slid over to allow him to drive, which forced Spot into Leary's lap. "Don't get any ideas about this," Leary said. But Spot just sat there looking through the windshield with his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth.

Cold drizzle steadily pattered against the windshield and the tarp.

Those in the cab could see the few lit windows in one corner of the building. And Mr Quegg turned the truck and illuminated the double doors with the headlamps. Leary jacked open the passenger door. "Out." But Spot remained where he was. "Out." He sighed. "Will you give me some help here?"

Silverman shook his head, but tried to reach for the dog, but Spot lay right down in Leary's lap and couldn't be budged. "Oh, come on." Leary tried to shove him into Silverman's lap. "Come on—move." The whole while the truck sat there idling. "Alright, that's it. Out." Leary tried to scoop him into his arms, shifted, and threatened to dump him out the door. But Spot just lay there with his tongue hanging out. Leary sighed. He shoved his hands into his pockets. Then...he dug around in there a moment. "Here, boy." He tossed it through the open door. "You want it or not?" And Spot practically rolled over, jumped down out of the truck, and momentarily seemed as if he had glued his nose to the cobblestones. Leary climbed down after him. About then, Spot had found the wadded sandwich wrapper. "Hah. Got you." Leary smiled to himself as he went and opened the doors. Spot still waited outside after the truck had pulled in, and Leary stood there. "Well, come on." Spot eyed the balled sandwich wrapper again. "Come on, dammit." Commotion echoed from inside as they unloaded the truck, piling the planks with the rest. "Come on." Drizzle twinkled over his back, reflecting truck taillights and lantern light and light from the windows above, and he shook it off when he came inside, splattering wet dog on Leary's shoes and pants. Leary glanced down at himself, looked at Spot, but said nothing more of

it. No one had yet kindled a fire in one of the kilns, and a lantern remained the only light, except for the usual faint glow from the doorway at the end of the platform atop the iron stairs. In the near darkness, even with the floor stacked so full with scrap timber, the interior seemed hauntingly vast.

“Hey.”

“Hm?”

Silverman raised the lamp and it lit full his face. “You coming up or not?”

The iron stairs resounded with multitudinous treads, and Silverman motioned for him to follow. Spot padded ahead of them. At the top of the stairs, Silverman hung the lamp on the peg and unfastened his jacket. Droplets that had collected on shoulders and caps dribbled off and passed through the grating and pattered against the dusty floor and brickwork in the dimness below. Silverman raised the glass and extinguished the lamp. The light from down the hall was enough to guide by.

“Well, come inside,” Millie said. She shook her head. “Don’t let the cold in.” And she cocked her head and bit the towel draped over her shoulder and dropped it into Rachel’s hands, who was baby talking Spot to get him to sit still—his tail thumping against the chair as he wriggled—while she toweled him down.

Millie said, “Don’t let the cold in.”



New gloves kept fingers from freezing on the ride out to wherever the job was that morning. Unfortunately, Rachel's and Millie's handiwork—though colorful and warm—wasn't leather. And as it was, even leather could barely stop a body from almost jamming a crooked nail through his hand when he grabbed a board wrong. "Pass me the hammer."

"I hate these." Leary struck the crooked sides of a three-pattern of bent nails and tried to drive the heads far enough out of the wood to get ahold of them with the claws. "The sound makes me grit my teeth."

There was no use bothering with them for scrap, and they just piled up into small mounds around the buildings they'd once held together. "It used to be," Silverman said, "that places like this used to be covered over and buried for centuries and millennia, then some damn fool would come along and excavate them."

Leary said, "What for?"

"Because they're a damn fool. That's what damn fools do. People put things in the ground for a reason and somebody just has to come along and be contrarian."

"I once read an article," Blue said, it was the most words he'd said since he'd returned, "about a guy who was determined the city of Troy existed and went out to find it."

Leary said, "What happened?"

"He found six of them."

"Well, that's lucky." He tossed a crooked nail into the bucket at his feet. "Why does that never happen with socks?"

"Nature is against pairs," Silverman said. "It's an unnatural state

and therefore can't be maintained for long. You can try, but the energy requirements will eventually exceed the capacity of the universe."

Ellison stood loading clean boards into the truck. "You can't just say you're against monogamy?"

"What I'm for or against is of no consequence." Nails squealed as he pulled back on the crowbar. "It's all a matter of the laws of physics."

"God made the laws of physics."

Silverman beat the crowbar into place between planks. "And?"

"He made Adam and Eve. That was the perfect setup. That's the model of how it was supposed to be."

"Now that—"—Silverman beat the crowbar—"—is where I'm going to say you're wrong."

"How do you—"

Nails squealed. "It all depends how you feel about Adam's first wife."

"What do you mean his *first* one?"

"The problem with you Christians is you're so hopelessly ignorant about the history of—"—he leaned on the crowbar and grunted, hammered it—"—your own religion."

"Really? And I assume you're going to give an example of this."

"I was—"—nails squealed—"—just coming to that." Leary and Blue caught the board and carried it away. "For example—"—he hammered the crowbar—"—if you had studied anything about the religion you so liberally like to steal from, you'd know that there's a longstanding problem in Genesis chapter one."

Ellison tossed another board—"Crap."—climbed into the truck to fix how it had landed. He called, "And what is that?"

Silverman hammered the crowbar—"Well, God, of course, manages to create male and female, including man and woman."

Ellison climbed down. "Yes. Exactly my point."

"And—"—nails squealed—"—mine." Silverman hammered the crowbar and put his weight onto it again, but nothing budged. "Then, we get to the next chapter, and Adam's a one-man party—"—he hammered the crowbar—"—and then and only then does Eve come along. So what happened to the first one?"

"The first what?"

"The first woman God created to go with Adam."

"That was Eve."

"Why do you want to be so blasphemous?"

"Blasphemous?"

"Well, you're saying God is stupid enough to create everything else with a mate and completely forgets Adam. And then is like *oh, well I'd better do something about this.*"

"And what is it you propose happened?"

"I don't propose anything." Silverman hung the crowbar on a board still nailed over his head. And he removed his gloves and blew into his hands.

"So," Blue said, "what was Adam's first wife called?"

"Lilith."

"Isn't that the name of a demon?"

"Well, we've found you out," Silverman said. "You appear to have studied this a little."

"I think I read a couple things on it in a National Geographic."

"That sounds like two of your first mistakes." Silverman put back on his gloves. "And you're only kind of right. After getting kicked out of the garden of Eden, she wasn't thought of very well. You know how people talk."

"What did she do?"

Silverman picked up the hammer and took down the crowbar. "Well, that depends on what you mean. What got her kicked out was a bit of bedroom incompatibility. And afterward, she kind of developed a reputation for wandering the world on a hot breeze and sitting on the faces of sleeping men and giving them the kinds of dreams that have prompted the creation of a litany of horrible devices." He slipped the hammer into his pocket and repeatedly jammed the crowbar between two pieces of wood to open a crack. "And they really took off when electricity came into the picture. One was designed so that if you thus became overexcited in your sleep it turned on a phonograph to wake you up."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"And on the other end, they had one that had a series of coils and wrapped round your very sensitive place and was plugged in so it heated up so that if, well, you know...I wouldn't want to be accused of being vulgar, or anything."

Ellison tossed a board into the truck. "This is utterly ridiculous. And I very much doubt a fit topic of conversation."

"It's so good to see you back in form today," Silverman said.

Ellison didn't reply.

"Well, then you wouldn't want me to tell you—"—Silverman took the hammer from his pocket—"—what bone Adam's rib actually was."

"A rib," Leary said. "Wasn't it?"

"A little—"—Silverman hammered the crowbar—"—lower than that." Nails squealed. The board splintered. "You might find it interesting to know that most animals—of the male variety, that is—have a—"—he put his weight onto the crowbar, and the boards split apart—"—free-floating bone in the groin area that—"—and kicked the pieces out of the way—"—slides into place and—"—he hammered the crowbar—"—well, you get the idea."

Harry walked into the distance and emptied the bucket onto one of the nearby piles.

"A bone?" Leary said. "So what if you don't have one?"

"Then—"—Silverman hammered the crowbar—"—then you're normal—"—nails squealed—"—at least for a human male, that is. We—"—and boards splintered—"—lost ours."

"Where did it go?"

"I think," Blue said, as he beat and tried to straighten a bent nail, "that he's saying that that was the bone that made Eve."

Silverman said, "Apparently you have excellent reading comprehension. Did you ever win an award for it?"

"Y—"

The roar of bulldozers and unidentified heavy equipment had provided constant background noise, almost forgotten, hidden behind distant opaque fog. Only the occasional dump truck had passed nearby, glimpsed between buildings, but that had been rare. But then voices carried from the distance. And men in hardhats appeared from around a corner.

"We were speaking on the wrong subject," Silverman said.

Ellison, who had looked over his shoulder at the approaching voices, said, "What're you talking about?"

"Well, I could have been set up to give the line *speak of the devil*

right about now. But I guess I will just have to live with my own disappointment with myself.”

Ellison didn't ask what he meant.

The men approached. “That's the hard way to do it, isn't it?” one of them called. He glanced in back of the truck when they'd come close enough.

“Depends on what you're doing,” Silverman said.

Blue, who had been on the other side of the truck working on a board, carried it around, almost dropped it. And Gracefield, who had before managed a weak smile, seemed, now, unable to. He cleared his throat. “Yes, well...” He looked at everything but Blue.

“How about,” Silverman said, “we shortcut this.” He motioned with the hammer and crowbar as he spoke. “Now, you're probably going to ask at some point what's my name and then you're going to be thinking isn't that a Jewish name? and I'm going to have to say do you want to make something of it and then this and that and you're going to end up walking away. So how about we save all of ourselves some time and you can walk away now.”

The one pushed back his helmet and scratched his head. He said, “Your name's Silverman?”

Silverman sighed. “Do you want to make something of it?”

The man adjusted his cap. Gracefield managed to say something—still managed to look at everything but Blue—and they turned and walked away and disappeared around a corner.

“You see,” Silverman said. “There are no shortcuts in life. Or death, probably. You have to go straight through everything. Even if it isn't important. Even if it does nothing—” —he hooked the crowbar into place and beat on it— “—you still have to do it just because it is for no reason at all.”

Harry said, “You alright?”

“Hm?” Blue looked up. He shook his head, finally tossed the plank onto the pile behind the truck.

“There is another thing,” Silverman said, as he jammed the crowbar into position, “that you are hopelessly ignorant of.”

Ellison lifted a plank and tossed it into the back of the truck. “And what's that?”

“Well—” —he hammered the crowbar— “—since we're on the

subject of wives—” —wood splintered—“ —where the hell did Cain’s wife come from?”

“I suppose you’re going to tell us.”

“Oh, no. Actually—” —nails squealed—“ —I have no idea—” —and he repositioned the crowbar and hammered it into place—“ —Genesis only concerns itself with a particular creation. There’s no saying what else God decided to get up to before, in between, or after—” —and the board popped free, and he jumped back as it hit the ground. He looked down at it a moment and then up at the structure. “Actually, I find your concept of God rather dull. He doesn’t seem to get up to very much. And—”

Blue said, “Isn’t that Mister Cernan’s car?”

Silverman, crowbar and hammer in hand, leaned back to look down the street. “Well,” he said, “it looks as if I will never get to say speak of the devil, after all.”

The car parked beside the truck. Rachel waved from the passenger side. And Millie leaned between the two front seats and said something to her. Harry went over and Rachel rolled down the window. “We brought you something,” she said. “Hopefully it’s still warm.” She handed the thermoses through the window.

Millie, still leaned forward between the two seats, said, “You remember about tonight, don’t you?”

Harry nodded. “We’ll be home early.”

“Be careful,” Rachel said.

And Mr Cernan nodded as best he could. Harry stepped back as he turned the car. And as it retreated into the fog, Harry carried the thermoses and cups toward the truck and set them on the hood.

Silverman, who had divested himself of his crowbar and hammer, stuffed his leather gloves into his pockets and cradled a hot-liquid-filled thermos cap in both hands. Steam curled into his face. “Now, this is why you get married.”

“I would hope there would be more to it,” Ellison said.

Steam curled from everyone’s cups.

“Well, of course there is.” He sipped the hot liquid and looked at Harry. “Who else would there be to forcibly remind one of things?”

“There will be hell to pay if Christmas Eve dinner gets cold,” Ellison said.

“Well, we haven’t missed one yet,” Leary said. “I don’t see what they’re worried about.”

“Because part of being married is having someone to remind you of what you already know. It reaffirms everything that’s—”—he sipped—“—important.”

“I fail to see how you have the experience to talk.”

“Yet—”—sip—“—you’ll trust the word of a guy who’s vowed never to get married.”

Blue looked down the street. “But you have to listen to someone, don’t you?”

Harry just cradled the warm thermos cap in his hands and sipped.



Blue and Harry rode in the front seat. Fog transmuted to droplets that trickled down the windshield. They emerged onto the periphery. Half-demolished houses lay open in a line against raw earth where splintered timbers protruded at obscene angles as thickset fog infiltrated smashed-open rooms and condensed against what picture frames hung on their two or three remaining walls.

Mr Quegg steered the truck onto ripped-open earth. Fog caressed and obscured furrows and tracks, and the truck shook as its narrow tires dipped into unseen depressions and bumped over obscured mounds and ridges. Harry braced his arm against the door. And Blue slammed a hand into the dashboard as he went forward.

The fog thickened and rendered it almost impossible for them to discern their own movement.

The weight of the load helped and didn't. It gave them traction through mud, but crushed the leaf-springs to their limits, and allowed the full and intricate contours of the ground to be communicated through the frame, transmuting them into tender, yet to be visually apparent bruises, so the feel of the earth was as intimate as running a hand over some formerly familiar surface.

Blue and Harry both slammed forward, not from a ditch or mound but the brakes. Mr Quegg shifted the truck into park. And he bent to peer through the dripping windshield as the motor idled.

"What is it?"

"d'n." Mr Quegg opened the door and climbed down. Harry did as well, and Blue followed. Fog turned clammy against their exposed faces. And after only a few steps, Harry's boots and Blue's shoes tripled in weight from the mud that clung to them. And fog turned their throats raw.

Mr Quegg, hands in his coat pockets, looked out into the thick white morass.

The fog and landscape rendered distance impossible to judge. Blue could and should have only been a few steps from the truck, but he looked back to find it obscured. Mr Quegg stood seemingly in the distance, too small a figure. Blue raised his arm, started to call, found himself sliding and skidding and falling and skidding.

"You hurt?" Harry bent and peered into the ditch. Blue staggered up, slipped, staggered up again, smeared with mud. And Harry, grabbing a splintered pole embedded enough to be stable, extended his other hand. They both staggered to maintain their footing as they looked out along what little lay revealed of networks of eroded ditches and open mud. They listened. But no bulldozer or dump truck sounds carried from the distance.

"y."

They turned toward the call. The truck's headlamps scattered into brilliance through the fog and illuminated Mr Quegg as he waved. Blue tried to wipe his hands as they carefully made their way toward the truck but couldn't find enough of himself clean. Harry opened the truck door, but Blue shook his head. And Harry nodded and climbed in first. Blue started to unbutton his jacket so he could avoid smearing that much mud, but Mr Quegg bent and looked out through the open door, said, "'n't 'ry." And Blue, after a moment or two of wrestling with himself, left his jacket as it was and climbed into the cab and closed the door.

The headlamp light that scattered through the fog, reflected and multiplied with painful brilliance through the millions of water droplets scattered like constellations across the windshield and obscured everything until Mr Quegg flicked the switch to cut them off. He turned the wheel.

The bumps seemed less so on their return, as if perhaps Mr Quegg had found a way to slot the tires into the already worn trail of their journey out. For a long while, the fog obscured all but those few shattered poles and the ripped earth nearest at hand. But eventually, shattered, multi-storied house frames emerged vaguely as dim, dark outlines through the fog. Individual shattered pieces slowly became more discernible. They found their way back onto cobblestone

streets and passages, narrow truck tires routing into grooves and jerking the wheel. Even still, the roads seemed too smooth after where they'd gone, and it didn't seem long at all before Mr Quegg stopped in front of the foundry. Stiff, Blue pushed open the door and climbed down. Harry followed, closed the truck door, and followed Blue inside.

A fire burned in one of the kilns, illuminated the faces of those who sat round on the brickwork, bottles in hand, an empty set here and there. And so seemingly entrancing was the fire the two of them would have gone unnoticed had Spot not jumped up, tail wagging.

Leary said, "What happened to you?"

Silverman set his bottle on the brickwork. He started to say something, but noises down the iron stairs interrupted him, and he looked over his shoulder. Rachel said, "We saw you come in."

Rachel smiled as she dismounted the stairs. "You're back early. Nothing's ready yet. We..." But her smile faded when she saw Blue. She always wore leather gloves when she came down onto the foundry floor, to protect her hands from the rough concrete and corrugated stairs and fine slag chips still scattered everywhere. And she wrapped her gloved hand around a kiln handle and pulled herself up onto the brickwork. "Oh, you've even got it in your hair." And it covered three-quarters of his face. If his face had heated, it would have been impossible to tell.

"What's going on?" Millie appeared above and descended.

Silverman said, "What went wrong?"

Mr Quegg honked the horn.

Harry motioned with his head. "We had to turn back. We need to go ahead and unload before it damages the suspension."

Silverman nodded.

Blue turned to head toward the door with the rest, but Rachel caught his jacket. "No you don't," she said. "You're soaked."

Millie nodded. "You should get out of those clothes."

"And straight into a hot bath," Rachel said.

"I can..." He probably did get heated beneath all that mud. "I can clean up after we unload."

"You'll do it right now," Rachel said. "Before you catch yourself a death."

“I...”

“No ifs or buts,” she said.

Millie said, “Except for the ones that need to be cleaned.” And she stepped behind Blue and bumped against him.

“Now come on,” Rachel said. “We’ll heat up some water.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Silverman called, as the two herded him up the stairs. “We’ll take care of it.” He shook his head and turned and closed the door on his way out. He grabbed onto the truck and stood on the running board as Mr Quegg steered the truck around the building. And he hopped off when it stopped, and he guided him back.

“One place,” Silverman said, “is as good as another.”

Tossed scrap metal clanged and scraped across stone. No one stated the obvious, that the embargo had to come sooner or later. Scrap metal wasn’t even scrap metal anymore, just detritus, purposeless material that’s existence was otherwise unremarkable.

Harry climbed down from the emptied truck.

Mr Cernan’s car passed as they worked. Mud caked the side. And Leary went around to open the doors for him, and left them open for when Mr Quegg pulled the truck back around.

Silverman collected one of the half-finished bottles from the brickwork. He looked at the fire. “No use wasting it.” He offered a bottle to Harry, who accepted. Silverman looked him up and down. He sipped his beer. “Better be careful they don’t scrub you down.”

Harry looked down at his mud-encrusted pants. He held the beer while he watched the fire in the kiln.

Mr Quegg went up.

The fire crackled, slowly died, but Silverman didn’t feed it any of the planks piled nearby. Finally, only glowing coals remained.

Footsteps resounded overhead. Millie called down, “Supper’s ready. Are you two coming?” She didn’t wait for their reply or to see if they started toward the stairs, just trusted them to it. And they left their bottles on the brickwork and made their way up the iron stairs. They removed their jackets and hung them on the hooks along the hallway. Enough heat carried through the doorway from the kitchen stove to make the front room pleasant enough to do without them.

“Stop right there.” Rachel looked up at Harry. “Where do you

think you're going like that?" He didn't even bother to open his mouth. "And your boots. Look at the mess." He looked back at the evidence that stretched out in a trail back through the open door. "You go back out there and take those things off right now. The idea." She shook her head, propelled herself across the room. "And you, too," she said to Silverman. She stopped in the kitchen doorway and looked over her shoulder. "Well, what're you two waiting for?"

They went out into the hallway.

And when they entered again, Silverman went through to the kitchen in his stocking feet and passed Millie, who looked at Harry and said, "Change your pants."

And without a word, he went into the bedroom.

When he entered the kitchen, almost everyone was already situated around the table. Blue sat in fresh clothes, face scrubbed almost raw, hair combed. Leary looked at him and shook his head. Mr Quegg and Mr Cernan faced each other from their respective ends of the table. Benches had been placed on either side in lieu of chairs, to be more advantageous space-wise for eight people. Rachel and Millie looked round at him. "Well?" And he slotted himself between them. At first, pots and plates passed haphazardly around the table in conflicting clockwise and counter-clockwise migrations until the only thing to do was to settle into reaching and passing things directly across to one another or acting as intermediaries to ferry something from one end to the other when needed.

Spot waited at the end of the table with Mr Cernan, who had a tendency to drop bits as he ate; whether a piece of meat slipped from his fork or crust of bread slipped from his fingers, something always seemed to end up in the floor, and Spot awaited those opportunities with his mouth open and his tongue hanging out.

General noise, breathing, cutlery, Spot's tail against the floor, remained for a long time the only sounds. But one by one everyone looked up, as if hearing something that no one could be sure was there. And after a while, even Spot looked up.

"What is that?" Leary said.

The only thing to do was to listen.

"I don't know." Harry rose. He turned his head.

Rachel said, "Do you think..."

Harry stepped over the bench. Slowly, the only thing to do was to rise, leaving half-empty plates. Chilled air spilled in from the hallway as everyone went out and unhooked jackets and slipped them on, but didn't bother to fasten them further before passing down the hall and moving toward the far end and the windows. There, inner darkness gave way to outer darkness. Already, a thin white blanket covered nearby roofs. And the only thing to do was to stand there watching as breaths crystallized and gobstopper-sized flurries sifted down over streets and alleyways. Fog droplets had long iced in the corners of the windows, ringing everything seen through them in a cold misty halo. The only thing to do was to watch without yet having buttoned jackets against the in-rushing cold. Spot licked a pane, came away shaking his head as if he hadn't favored the taste. Looking through the lower panes, Rachel wrapped her arm around Harry's shin. And he put his arm around Millie's waist. No one smiled. But Rachel rested her head against Harry's thigh. And Millie rested her head against his shoulder.

The snow continued steadily, neither enough to seem pathetic, nor enough to immediately bury everything in undefinition and white oblivion. It just continued until it didn't.



Silverman carried the glasses to the table.

"Then she's still out?" Leary said.

"That's what they say." Ellison took up his glass.

"So," Leary said, "no sandwiches then."

Silverman shook his head. "There might be some bread in back."

Ellison set down his glass. "I'll go look."

"You go look," Silverman said, and he turned away from the fire and stepped over the bench and sat. He lifted his glass and looked over the top of it at Leary. "Don't worry," Silverman said, "you can always eat your right arm if it comes to that. That is..." He finished a sip and wiped his upper lip. "You're not one of those fellows who does everything but the one thing with one hand, are you?"

"Hm?" Leary turned his head as Ellison stepped behind the bar and pushed open the door.

He set the most of a loaf of bread and a chunk of salted ham on the table. "It's what I could find." He pulled a kitchen knife from his belt and laid it beside everything before he stepped over the bench and sat down.

Silverman reached over and tore a hunk from the already ragged end of the loaf. "A bit stale." He washed it down with beer. He tore off another hunk. "You realize," he said, and raised the hunk in one hand and his glass in the other, "these are the two reasons for the whole situation as we find ourselves in it."

Ellison sipped his own glass. "And how's that?"

"Very simple," Silverman said. "If you're just wondering and wandering out there, a bunch of hunter gatherers, you can scatter a few seeds when you pass through a place once a year and come back the next year and have enough grain to do the one—"—he raised

the bread—"—or the other—"—he lowered the bread and raised the beer.

Leary said, "This sounds familiar."

"Blue was reading it from a National Geographic the other day," Ellison said.

Silverman said, "But if you want to do both..." He brought them level. "You have to stay in one place, get settled down, start farming." He stuffed the bread into his mouth, said, as he chewed, "Then comes a village...which develops into a town...then a city..." He washed down the bread and set his glass on the table. "And eventually you have to connect all them up with an M1 Motorway."

Ellison sipped his beer. "I have to admit I'd almost forgotten about that."

"You may have forgotten about it," Silverman said. "But it hasn't forgotten about you."

Leary, who had fashioned himself a rather butchered sandwich-like thing, said, "When did you meet it?"

Ellison looked toward the window. "You think they need any help?"

"They would have said if they did." Silverman lifted his glass.

The fire crackled.

"I think," Ellison said, "civilization amounts to more than just a means to invigorate more and better production of bread and beer."

"What do you think they will haul up and down all these motorways?" Silverman lifted his glass. "We are merely the instrumentalities of a greater process."

"I prefer to think that greater process is God."

"Yet Jesus did offer bread and say this is my body."

"But wine. Not beer."

"True," Silverman said. "And he even made it." He lifted his glass. "Then again, maybe that just proves he wasn't the Messiah." He sipped his beer. "Perhaps it could be generalized to all fermentation?" He shook his head and set down his glass. "But I would prefer not to."

"Are you arguing with yourself now?"

"Whom else can any man truly argue with?"

Chewing, Leary was about to say something, but Ellison, holding

his glass up, said, "You forgot to mention he multiplied the loaves and the fishes."

"A fish sandwich," Leary said, "can be excellent." He sawed into the loaf again. "Depending on what kind of fish." He put down the knife. "Breaded works best."

"If God," Silverman said, "makes any amendments to the kosher guidelines, I wager that the first one will be forbiddance of combining bread with anything that is breaded. It's too much like cooking the calf in the milk of its mother." Silverman reached for a chunk of ham that had fallen away when Leary had lifted his sandwich. "The second," he said, "would be butter sandwiches." He turned toward the bar. "Who allows this sort of thing in what is supposed to be a civilized country?"

"Who are you talking to?"

Silverman turned back toward the table. "If it came out of some communist-oppressed country that people were eating butter sandwiches, it would be held up as definitive evidence of the inhumanity of the whole system."

"They're not that bad," Leary said.

"So now it comes out that you're a commie plant."

Leary said, "Really?"

"That's the best kind of agent," Silverman said. "One who doesn't even know he is one."

"Never thought about it."

"Well," Silverman said, "that is the point."

"And what," Ellison said, "is he supposed to be infiltrating?"

"Of course," Silverman said, "no one knows that. That's what makes their missions so successful."

Ellison lifted his glass. "I guess it is all a matter of definitions."

"You can see," Silverman said, "what they have already managed to do to America."

"Oh?"

Leary went: "'ey—" as Silverman lifted what remained of the loaf.

"The worst thing that ever happened to America," Silverman said, "was the introduction of sliced bread." Silverman set the loaf down, and Leary began to saw into it again. "It's the foundation for every depraved aspect of contemporary culture."

Ellison lifted his glass. "Uh huh."

"Notice," Silverman said, and pointed at Leary's face, "the individuality of each piece." Leary chewed. "Here is the basis for the communist hysteria."

"Uh huh."

"How else is everyone supposed to talk about what is right in front of their eyes? It doesn't take an idiot to realize that all the things they hold up as dastardly in communist regimes are actually the very same issues that the majority of Americans face. But no one can talk about them directly because it would mean confronting the Myth. And I say that with a capital em. But because they're talking about over there, they are allowed to hate and decry and admit to the injustice and tyranny of it. And therefore with these repeated purges they manage to prop up the system that regulates their day-to-day lives."

Ellison lifted his glass. "Uh huh."

"Bread itself is the constant reminder that they are all uniform and replaceable pieces in a greater system."

Ellison said over his glass, "And the ends?"

"That," Silverman said, "is why no one likes them."

"So man wants uniformity and individuality."

"And," Silverman said, "why man wants free will and to be told what to do by God."

Leary said, "What about women?"

The door opened. Blue and Harry unwrapped their scarves and pulled off their jackets and, rubbing their shoulders as they approached the fire, extended their grease-covered hands towards the flames. The problem with mechanic work is that it can rarely be done with gloves; and touching metal seems to draw out heat the way a knife wound draws out blood. Blue worked his fingers into a ball, flexed them. "Cold out there," he said.

"The universe is a cold place," Silverman said. "And it's just going to get colder as it dies."

Blue said, "I read they call that Heat Death."

"Sounds warm to me," Leary said.

"It refers to when all heat's gone. When everything is so cold even atoms can't hold themselves together anymore."

"Oh." Leary assembled himself another sandwich.

"And," Ellison said, "you don't leave any intervention for God?" Silverman put down his glass. "Nope."

"Uh huh." Ellison turned. "So what about the truck?"

"Turns out," Blue said, "the fuel gauge isn't busted."

"I'll get the beer," Silverman said, and rose and stepped over the bench. When he returned, he offered one to Harry, who shook his head, so Ellison set it on the end of the table and handed Blue the other.

"Thanks." Blue sipped it, turned toward the fire. "Mister Quegg's gone back to see if he can find another gas can."

"Walking keeps you warmer, anyway," Silverman said, and he stepped over the bench and sat.

"You know," Ellison said, "for someone who believes in God, you don't leave him much room."

"There's a story," Silverman said, and sipped his beer and set his glass on the table. He wiped his mouth with his wrist. "Two rabbis are arguing over some theological point. And in the heat of the argument, one rabbi asks God to come and settle the matter once and for all. So God comes down. But the other rabbi says to God that after the world was created his work was done and that he has no place here. God then says *oh, that's right*, and disappears."

Blue turned and sat on the end of the bench and put his elbows on the table, holding his glass in both hands.

Ellison turned toward Blue. "And what about you?"

Blue shook his head. "I figure he exists, if that's what you mean. I just don't figure he cares."

Ellison shook his head. He said to Leary, "What about you?"

Leary swallowed a bite of sandwich. "Me?" He took another bite, said, as he chewed, "I don't know. Never thought about it."

Ellison lifted his glass. "Why do I feel as if I'm going to hell just for being associated with any of you?"

Silverman said, "And why do you feel you feel that you feel that way?"

Ellison shook his head.

Finally, Harry turned from the fire and lifted his glass from the end of the table and stepped over the bench and sat down.

"But more importantly," Silverman said, "what's up with you?"

He looked at Harry. Harry looked up at him over the top of his glass. "I mean, it's too quiet down at your end of the hall these days for all of you to be up to anything good. Are they finally getting you beat into shape?"

Harry shrugged.

"Well," Silverman said, "just so long as I don't have to deal with any marital counseling."

"Why," Ellison said, "would they ask you for that?"

"Well," Silverman said, "I am the de facto spiritual leader of this bunch of rabble."

"Uh huh."

"Besides, having avoided getting married makes me more than qualified."

"I think those are different things."

"Of course," Silverman said. "But the one is harder than the other by far. So if you can manage it, you can manage the other. A married man has no right to give advice to a single man because a single man has already felt the desire to get married, so in that regard the married man has no more experience than the single man. But a man who has avoided nuptials knows something a married man doesn't. And even if a married man did have some hither before unbeknownst experience, it would be useless to try and convey it to a single man because only another married man would have any hope of commiserating over it. Whereas, the married man might still recall his bachelorhood. So I hope you see, it is only the unmarried man who can advise both, while the married man can only advise the one."

"Uh huh."

"And in any regards," Silverman said, "how many people ever understand their own situation?"

"There's nothing," Ellison said, "about any of that that makes sense."

Silverman raised his glass. "If you were married, would you go to a priest for marital advice?"

"Yes."

Silverman motioned with his glass. "Et tu, Brutus?"

"Besides," Ellison said, "we've already been through this."

"And do you," Silverman said, "think actors learn their parts with only one try?"

"Would you mind..." Blue said, and motioned at the bread with his greasy hand. And Leary stuffed the rest of his sandwich into his mouth and nodded as he reached for the knife. Blue took the hunk and tore it with his teeth. "Christmas Eve tomorrow," he said.

"Yet again," Silverman said. "It may stall out before we ever get to Christmas proper."

"You think it will?"

Silverman shrugged.

"Oh," Harry said. He looked thoughtful a moment. "Rachel would like everyone to come help decorate the new tree."

"You see," Silverman said, "we can't even get through the Christmas Eves without a tree having already gone brown. We will never make it to the day itself."

"Miss Rachel and Miss Millie," Blue said, "sure were mad about sweeping up all the needles."

"Maybe we should hunt around for an artificial one," Ellison said. He didn't look up from his beer as he said it.

"Perhaps," Silverman said, "one day all such species of tree will have long ceased to exist, in which case there will only be the, as they say, artificial variety. What then? Will we then go on creating figments of trees beyond even the realm of human memory? So that no one will ever know there was ever some such original to begin with?"

"There's still another couple on the lot," Blue said.

"Yes, but let us first trim the last vestiges of those ancient forests that have managed to perpetuate themselves through the ages and which the memories of whom reach their fingers through the arid soil even unto the ends of the world." He raised his glass. "But what about after eternity?"

"Oh, and..." Harry looked thoughtful a moment. "She also said there would be hot chocolate after."

"And sandwiches?"

Harry paused. "Yes."

"At this rate," Silverman said, "I will never get to say Merry Christmas proper." He motioned with his glass. "And what is the use of doing anything if you can't do what everyone else does?"

Lights flashed across the frosted windows. Blue stood. "Mister Cernan must've brought the car."

"I," Silverman said, "may be a clown, but I am not squeezing into a tiny car with the rest of you clowns." He lifted his glass. "So you two go on. Besides, they would never let us hear the end of it if the husband or the baby froze to death."

Blue said, "It's awful cold tonight."

"Well, of course it is."



Mr Cernan sat on the couch. Harry sat on the stool. And Silverman had pulled up one of the chairs. They all leaned forward, elbows on their knees, as they looked from their trays to the field of play.

Rachel propelled herself through the kitchen doorway and looked over the top of the couch arm rest. "Someone needs to go get some water," she said. Harry placed a tile and rose and moved toward the kitchen and came out again carrying the bucket and set it by the door so he could slip on his jacket before he went out. "And you two," she said, "can start shifting things. Everything on that wall needs to be moved down. And you can put the chair over here. We want to put the tree in the other corner this time." Mr Cernan nodded while still silently looking down at his tray. "Honestly," she said, and shook her head and turned and propelled herself into the kitchen. "It better be done by the time they get back," she called.

Outside, Harry walked along the darkened hallway with practiced ease. Yes, as usual, it was cold, but the snowy cold that assaulted his cheeks as he stepped outside was a livelier and multitudinous sensation in the clear darkness of the night air. He turned along the walkway. A lantern below illuminated the scant snowfall that remained on the banister, even after Ellison had swept it. After having finished with the bottom step, Ellison looked up, leaned on the broom.

"They back yet?" Ellison said.

Harry shook his head. "Not yet." And he stepped past him and set the bucket under the spigot.

"I'll leave the lantern" Ellison said. And he took the broom and shovel and carried them upstairs.

Water ran down icicles that clung to the spigot as the bucket filled, and grew just a fraction longer when Harry cut the flow and the few

remaining droplets froze on the icy tips. He carried the bucket and lantern upstairs and inside. Walking down the hall, the doorway opened before he reached it. "... honestly," would have been what he heard, the first part of it being, "I just don't know," followed by Rachel shaking her head. "What is it you men think?" Ellison backed into the hallway. "Get those dirty things off." Harry stood there holding the bucket and lantern as Rachel looked round him. "And you, too," she said. "Don't come through here traipsing the whole outside in." Harry looked down at his shoes. He knelt and set the bucket and lantern down and started to untie his laces. Ellison passed him going down the hall, bent and lifted the lantern. Harry set his shoes against the wall and lifted the water bucket again and went into the front room wearing his socks. By now, Mr Cernan and Silverman had temporarily suspended the game and instead worked at shifting the furniture. Mr Cernan carried a lamp across the room and set it on the other table.

"Thank you," Rachel said, as he set the bucket beside the sink. She sniffed, dropped off the stool, and propelled herself toward the stove and pulled open the door. "Very nice," she said. And after she closed the oven, she looked at Harry's stocking feet. She shook her head. "Will you go in and help Millie in the bedroom?" she said. "If they've gotten everything moved around, there are some things..." She craned her head to see into the front room. "Be careful with that." She shook her head and propelled herself past Harry and climbed onto the stool in front of the counter. "Millie will show you."

Harry nodded and went into the front room, dodging around Mr Cernan and Silverman as they shifted a chair, to make his way into the bedroom. Wrapped boxes lay strewn over the comforter, Millie sitting with her back against pillows to keep from falling between the bars of the headboard as she finished tying a ribbon. She pushed the box away with her foot. "Are they back?" she said.

Harry shook his head. "Not yet."

"Well," she said, "we can just leave these in here until then." She shifted across the bed and slipped her legs over the side and stood. "What are they doing out there with all that noise?"

"Shifting the furniture."

"With a bulldozer?" Millie shook her head, and she followed him

into the front room. "Is that going to be a big enough space?" she said.

"Hopefully," Silverman said. He looked over the field of play as he lowered himself into his previous chair. "It's your move," he said to Harry.

Harry stepped toward the coffee table and looked down.

"You men and your games," Millie said, and shook her head as she moved toward the kitchen.

Ellison entered while Harry still stood there contemplating. He, too, walked in his stocking feet. Rachel waved at him with an oven mitt as she closed the oven door. "Could you please go down the hall," she said, "and there's a box in the sewing room, about this big, sitting on top of the case right next to the treadle, could you bring it?"

"Alright." Ellison turned and went back out into the hall.

Harry selected a tile and made his move. Mr Cernan, returning from the kitchen with a mug of coffee, sipped from it as he moved sideways between the couch and the coffee table. He looked over the field of play as he eased down. He set his mug on the table and massaged his knee.

"Coaster," Rachel called from the kitchen.

Mr Cernan motioned to Harry. "Would you mind?" And Harry stepped toward the side table and opened the drawer. "Thank you," Mr Cernan said, and he accepted the cork circle and lifted his mug and placed it beneath it. He flicked his eyes between the tiles in his tray and the ones on the table.

Ellison entered with a cardboard box under his arm and closed the door. Rachel, sitting at the table, leaned back to see through the doorway. "Just set it anywhere," she said.

Millie caught a rag between her toes and pulled open the oven door and peeked inside. "They're going to burn," she said.

Rachel turned. "No they're not. Now, close it and let them finish. You—" She turned her head and listened. "Is that them?"

Ellison, who had been standing in the kitchen doorway, looked over his shoulder. "Why don't you go see," Rachel told him. But the truck horn blared and left no need to guess. Ellison stepped across the front room and reached for his jacket. And Harry turned away from the game to do the same.

"I'll go," Silverman said. "It's your move."

Mr Cernan sipped his coffee as Silverman rose and Harry retook his position on the stool.

The sound of footsteps carried from down the hall, stopping, starting, much the same as the grunts and shouts that accompanied them. As they approached, Harry moved to open the door. Evergreenery protruding over Leary's shoulder brushed by Harry's nose, and he stepped back to keep it from jamming into his eye. "Watch it," Silverman said, somewhere behind all the branches and needles. Rachel leaned back in her chair to see into the front room. "Be careful," she said. "Go to the left," Mr Cernan said to Leary, who tried to look around to see where he was going, but couldn't for all the branches. "Watch it," Harry said. He pushed aside the stool before Leary could stumble over it. "Keep going," Silverman called. "Keep going." Blue squeezed through the doorway behind them. "Turn it into that corner, there," he said, and pointed. "I know that," Silverman said. "Go that way," he said to Leary, "and let me go the other." The branches brushed by the lamp, and Mr Cernan reached down the couch to steady it. "Be careful," Rachel said. "Swing it around," Silverman said. "Lean it into that corner," Blue said. "'rn 't 'r'd," Mr Quegg said, standing in the doorway. "No, not that way," Silverman said, "the other way." "Push your end up," Blue said. Harry stepped out of the way. "Hold," Silverman said. "Hold it." Millie watched from the kitchen doorway. "What's going on?" Rachel called. "Alright," Silverman said, "swing it around." "It's not going to fit," Ellison said. "Keep going with it," Silverman said. "Just keep going with it." "It's not going to fit," Ellison said. "If you'll angle it that way," Blue said. "Hold it," Silverman said. "Wait. Let me come around." "If you'll just..." Blue said. "There," Silverman said. "Straight in come on right there straight—" "It's not going to fit," Ellison said. "Hold it," Silverman said. He huffed and stepped aside. "Alright," he said, "push it up." "It's going to hit the ceiling," Ellison said. Mr Quegg moved across the room, extracted a set of clippers from his pocket, and lopped off the part that bent over against the ceiling. "There," Silverman said. He started to unbutton his jacket. He stepped out of the way to allow Blue through to start to untie it. "Is it in?" Rachel called. "Looks like," Millie said, and turned and walked into the kitchen.

Rachel reached into the oven for the last tray and set it on the low shelf of a nearby cabinet. She closed the oven and removed her oven mitts, then turned and propelled herself into the front room. By then, Blue had finished with the cording and stood gathering it around his arm. "It's very nice," she said. "Now, you men get out of those damp coats. And shoes..." She shook her head. "Honestly. Everyone go right outside and take those things off right now." She turned and propelled herself into the kitchen. She called, "then come and get some coffee and warm up."



"That smells good," Blue said, when he entered again. Pine scent had melded with baking smells from the kitchen. He hung his jacket.

"Come and get something hot to drink," Rachel called. She added when he stood in the kitchen doorway, "you must be cold." Blue poured a fresh cup and cradled it in his hands and stepped aside to allow Silverman through. And when he turned around sipping the steaming coffee, he eyed the trays spread over the table. "Don't even think about it," Rachel said, and waved a spoon. "Those're for later." She motioned with it toward the front room. "Now, go on." She looked under the table. "And you, too," she said. "Shoo." And Spot squeezed between two chairs and ambled into the front room and almost tangled in Leary's legs as he came in for a cup of coffee.

"Watch it, you two," Millie said.

"He is out to get me," Leary said. He looked over his shoulder to ensure he hadn't come back, before he lifted the coffee pot.

"Oh, honestly," Rachel said. She said to Millie, "We'll move the stool over there." Rachel waved her spoon. "Hold it," she said to Leary. "Move that hand. Those are for later. Now, go on." He sighed but took his coffee into the front room. "Honestly," Rachel said. She wiped her fingers and climbed down from her chair and opened a cabinet. "Put this on the stove," she said to Millie. And Millie bent and nudged up the handle and grasped the wooden portion with her teeth and lifted it. Rachel dug into the cabinet again. "And where's the lid? The lid's always disappearing." She called, "And what about the corn?" And Mr Quegg, who had settled into his chair with the catalog in his lap, set it aside and rose to get his coat from the wall and

root through the pockets. He brought in a paper bag and set it on the table. Rachel tossed the pot lid up on the counter and shifted the stool and climbed up onto it. "Did you get something to drink?" she said.

"'ll g' s'm'th' l'd'r," Mr Quegg said.

"OK," Rachel said. "Hand me the corn, please." She shifted how the pan set on the stove. "We should be ready in just a few minutes."

Mr Quegg passed back into the front room and took his seat again, lifted the catalog from the side table. Mr Cernan, Silverman, and Harry shifted their gaze from the field of play to their trays, looking up only as the popping and pinging from the next room quickened; and occasionally Harry looked over his shoulder at the sound of snippers as Blue trimmed the tree. Ellison, sitting there with nothing else to do, had opened the box he had brought in earlier and rummaged through the crocheted pieces inside. "Harry," Rachel called. And he stood and went into the kitchen, emerged a moment later carrying a bowl of popcorn, Rachel and Millie in his wake. Rachel propelled herself over to the coffee table and pulled her sewing kit out from beneath it. "Now," she said, "before we get started," and she motioned to Millie, who knocked her shoulder against Harry's and motioned her head for him to follow her into the bedroom. Rachel had climbed onto the couch and sat threading a needle when Harry emerged with the packages. "It's a little out of order," she said, and looked around the room at all those sock-clad feet, "but that's just the way it'll have to be." She glanced down at her needle. "Pass them out, Harry. They're all labeled." And once packages lay dispersed into laps, she said, "Well, what's everyone waiting for?" And the room filled with the sounds of rustling paper. "Now," Rachel said, "there's going to be a new rule." She reached for a piece of popcorn and pierced it with the needle and drew the thread through it. "All shoes outside." Which no one objected to. In fact, Mr Quegg had already put on his slippers and reached across for the catalog and, again, opened it on his lap. "And," Rachel said, as she reached for another piece of popcorn, "they all have your names embroidered inside. So there should be no more confusion."



Down the hall, Blue said, as they sat round the table, “What time is it?”

Silverman looked down at his wrist in the lamplight. “Late.”

Ellison stretched backwards in his chair. “Does it matter?”

“I was just curious.”

Leary sighed, lay back on his bunk with his eyes closed and one hand over his stomach and his other in his pocket.



Down in the kitchen, Mr Cernan covered his fingers with a rag and opened the stove and fed in a couple sticks of wood before he closed the door again and turned toward the table and sat.

In the front room, knitting needles clicked against each other. And by then half of a sweater draped over the cushion and front of the chair, while one sleeve touched the floor. Rachel looked up from her work. “You’ve been awful quiet tonight.”

Harry, sitting on the opposite end of the couch, jerked upright. “I...”

Rachel said, “Do you feel alright?”

“I...”

Millie had curled up in another chair, book balanced on her knees and the chair arm. She nosed one of the pages aside, but it fell back into place when she stopped to look over at him.

“I...”

“What is it, Harry?”

He paused, looked down; his eyes flitted to different points along the floor. “It’s just...”

Millie: “Harry?”

"I just..." He looked up. "I keep thinking about something and I can't get it out of my head."

Rachel: "What is it?"

"It..."

Millie: "Just say it."

Harry glanced at her, then at the floor. "I just keep wondering... I just... I know it's stupid..."

"What is it?" Now Rachel sounded concerned.

"It's just..."

Millie: "What?"

"I just..." He looked up. "Do you think we would have gotten married if there wasn't something... wrong with...? Is that—" He sat there dumbly as the unfinished sweater smashed into his head and enveloped him, yarn trailing across the room to the ball that had fallen off and rolled beneath the coffee table.

"How—" Rachel looked as if she could boil away.

In was in stumbling up and trying to untangle himself from the sweater, and getting the yarn tangled around his shoes and legs, that put him in the path of a vase Millie had kicked high and toward an opposite wall, so when he had managed to halfway extract himself from a sea of red wool, he was just in time to see the vase before it struck his chin and ricocheted off. He didn't see where it went; he was too busy tumbling backwards and falling. He found himself looking at the ceiling.

With all the commotion, Mr Quegg and Mr Cernan couldn't do but poke their heads in from the kitchen. And Millie, apparently, horrified and dumbfounded, rolled out of her chair and knelt beside him. "Oh my god, I'm so sorry. Are you hurt?" Harry blinked.

Mr Quegg crossed the front room and helped him up.

Rachel: "Are you alright?"

He seemed to have lost the ability to look any way but straight ahead.

"WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?" Rachel yelled at Millie, who turned.

"IT WAS AN ACCIDENT."

"AN ACCIDENT—"

Mr Quegg placed his hands on Harry's shoulders and propelled

him toward the door. From the hall, the yelling still carried through the door, even after Mr Quegg had closed it behind them.



Down the hall, Silverman said, "I wonder what he's done this time."

Ellison shook his head.

Silverman stood and picked his pullover from the end of his bunk and pulled it over his head. "You coming?" he said to Leary. He reached for his jacket to pull it over his pullover.

Leary lay in his bunk looking up at the ceiling. "No."

"Sure?"

Leary yawned.

"Want us to bring back a sandwich for your other pocket?"

"If you have the time." Leary rolled over. Then he rolled over again. "Where is it?"

Ellison buttoned his jacket. "Down the hall."

"Good. Make sure you shut the door on your way out so it won't get in."

"Want us to lock it, too?"

Leary rolled over again. "It'd probably steal the key." He pulled himself upright.

Ellison said, "Should we wake him?"

Blue lay asleep.

Silverman shook his head. "Let him sleep if he can."

A lantern and a torch lay on the table, and Ellison lifted the torch after he'd buttoned his jacket. He clicked it on and looked into it.

Silverman leaned across the table and shielded the globe with his free hand and blew and reduced the room to being illuminated only by weak torchlight. They went into the hall. Silverman touched Harry's shoulder. Mr Quegg had already gotten him into his jacket. "We'll take it from here," Silverman said. Mr Quegg nodded. He and everyone but Harry looked back down the hall as yelling momentarily rose to shouting, then tapered off again. Mr Cernan emerged into the hall, both women's yellings momentarily allowed to crash into the hall at full volume until he had closed the door after himself. "Come on," Silverman said. And the both of them led Harry out onto the platform. And down on the foundry floor, they opened one

of the double doors enough to slip into the night. The torch only illuminated a few paces ahead, but the path was familiar enough.

"Now that," Silverman said of the glowing-gold windows, "is a pretty sight." He opened the pub door, and they led Harry in. And inside they pulled off their caps and hung them on the pegs, then undid their jackets. Then removed Harry's cap and undid his jacket.

"What's that?" Silverman said, and studied Harry's jaw. "Oh, boy, we're serious this time."

Ellison looked, too. "That had to be an accident."

"Downright unsportsman is what it is," Silverman said, as they led Harry to the table. "Any referee with half a blind eye could see he is not above bantam weight, at best." They sat him down.

"A bit of consolation, if you please," Silverman said to Ellison.

Leary said, "Any sandwiches still around?"

"I'll take a look in the back," Ellison said.

"Should probably take home a spare," Silverman said. "Maybe he's like Santa Claus. If you leave something out to appease him, he leaves off you for another year. Or in this case, another day."

Leary considered that as Silverman went around behind the bar and pulled out the glasses and stuck them under the tap.

"Now that we've got one problem solved," Silverman said, "Let's move onto something interesting." He lifted his glass as Ellison returned. The publican had stepped out of the back room and gone out through the back door. "I think we should formally complain to the committee. Obviously this whole thing's against regulatory rules." He glanced at Harry. "Was it a knockout?" He shook his head. "No, never mind. It's completely invalid, no matter which way you go at it."

Leary said, "What were the odds?"

"Doesn't matter," Silverman said. "It's all completely invalid. An illegal play top to bottom. They could get barred from the league for this." He took a swig from his pint. "Wouldn't surprise me."

"I'm sure it was an accident," Ellison said, and took a swig from his own. "Anyway, I guess it's better than the other way round." He set his glass on the table. "It's not exactly the sort of thing they have rules about, is it?"

Silverman shrugged.

“What does Jewish law say about a woman who assaults her husband?”

“I suppose it depends on how big of an ass he’s been.” Silverman glanced at Harry. *His* beer still sat untouched in front of him. And Silverman reached over and moved it beside his own. “What?” he said to Ellison, but Ellison just shook his head and lifted his own glass.

Ellison said, “Do you think it was like this with Solomon?”

“I think they probably had to import enough beer to cover it annually.” Silverman drained his and set it down to lift the second.

Leary said, “That’s a lot of duty.”

“Like everything else,” Silverman said, “as they say, it is good to be the king.” He started on the second glass.

Ellison said, “Are you in a hurry tonight?”

“I am drinking for two.”

Ellison looked at Harry, who seemed just slightly less rigid than he had been, for what that was worth.

“Also,” Silverman said, “I am working up my courage.”

Ellison lifted his glass. “For what?”

“To tell you that I might be willing to convert.”

Ellison stopped and looked over the top of his glass at Silverman.

“Of course, if that is alright.”

Ellison lowered his glass. “That would seem to be a bit of a miracle.”

“Well, we’re supposed to believe in them, aren’t we?” Silverman motioned with his glass. “That is, if you think the church will have me.”

“The Church is always open to those who are ready to come to her.”

“Now you see,” Silverman said, “that is the problem. I take to heart what Marx said about not being willing to be a member of any club that would have me.”

Ellison closed his eyes and sighed.

“What,” Leary said, “does anything have to do with communism?” He reached over for another piece of bread and meat, looked up as the publican entered and carried something from behind the bar and went into the back room again.

“We could do with another round of these, too,” Silverman said. He rose, holding his glass. “And as to the former,” he said, “Groucho,

not Karl. Although, I don't know that I can tell the difference sometimes." He drained the last of Harry's glass. "Though, if Karl had been born eighty or ninety years later, he probably would have ended up in motion pictures."

Silverman carried both glasses over behind the bar and filled them, set them both on the table when he returned.

Ellison said, "What would he have done?"

Silverman lifted a fresh glass. "I don't know. But I think the culmination—the crowning achievement—of his career would have been to get a workable adaption of *Atlas Shrugged* produced. I don't think anyone else will ever manage it."

Leary said, "Is that a book?"

"I can loan you my copy if you want."

Leary chewed his sandwich.

"It will be the biggest thing you ever read."

Leary said, "I've got some *Vault of Horrors* that I still need to read first."

Silverman shrugged. "You know," he said, "the thing I like most about Marx, he tried the stock market and lost so so so so so badly. A man with a losing streak—and I mean a real losing streak—level of Job losing streak—is the only man that you can really really trust in this world." Silverman set his half-empty glass on the table as if it were too heavy. "It's those people that people like you should be truly thankful for."

Ellison looked over the top of his glass. "How's that?"

"It's the only thing that proves we're not all in hell right now."

"Uh huh."

"It does make perfect sense. Otherwise, why build three places, when you can build two?"

"There isn't enough pain here to be hell."

"But *that* is the point in favor of the theory." Silverman lifted his glass again. "Continual pain, if it's not bad enough, you just learn to live with it. And if it is that bad, it kills you. And if you heal the body every day or what have you, you have to heal the mind, otherwise the person just checks out, and then you just have a flopping bit of meat, like a steak wired to an electric outlet. But how can you heal the mind without making it forget? because if you remembered, well

that would just undermine the whole thing, in which case either way the whole threat is invalidated. It has to be right in the middle.” He knocked his glass against the table. “And of course there is the seasoning.” And he paused.

“Which is?”

“Hope,” Silverman said. “It’s the evil little thing that makes everything so much worse.”

“I don’t—”

“All you have to do is give someone a little something good,” Silverman said. “And they’ll worry about losing it all on their own.” He waved a hand as he drank. “No need to deploy the pitchforks.” He set his glass on the table. “So all that fire and agony in the Christian hell is quite unnecessary.”

“And what,” Ellison said, “about the Jewish hell?”

“Oh—” —Silverman motioned aimlessly— “—that’s just a boring place. Dull. Like a bus terminal you are stuck in forever.” He ran his finger around the rim of his glass. “The perfect example, a man takes great pleasure in the devil’s brew, yet to do so... well, perhaps the consequences of such are best left not elucidated upon. And—”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“That’s what Blue would say if he were here.” Silverman sipped his beer. “So it only seems appropriate.”

Ellison set down his empty glass. “Where did you say you were from again?”

“Battle Creek, North Carolina. Why?”

Ellison shook his head. “Just... wondering. Not... a place I would think there were that many Jews around.”

“There’s never been,” Silverman said, “at least, not any that I know of. Though, there’s a supposedly Mennonite church not far down the road, and no one’s ever seen any of them, either.”

Ellison said, “You’re too drunk for this.”

“Maybe.” Silverman glanced at Harry. “Has he loosened any yet?”

Ellison shook his head.

“It used to be Babylonian kings used to get drunk at night and have their scribes write down what they said so they could read it in the morning and see if they came up with anything good.”

Ellison said, “Why not?”



The conversation continued on the way back. Although, neither could fully stand. But fortunately, Harry hadn't managed to thaw enough yet and so provided a nice, steady, but moving, post for them to lean against either side of as Leary went ahead with the torch and a sandwich in each pocket.



Most of the tiles in the center of the kitchen table still retained some resemblance to a small, pyramidal tortoise. The rest lay beside it in a 3-by-7 rectangular pile. Rachel put her hand on Mr Cernan's shoulder and leaned over to kiss his cheek. "You're sure you don't need anything?" she said.

"No." He removed a tile. "You're sure you don't need me to go along?"

"Oh," she said, "I'm sure Harry will be more than adequate." She smiled as she climbed out of the chair. "And don't stay up too late," she said, before she propelled herself around the table. She collected her hat and gloves from the shelf in the front room. "Millie," she called, "hurry up." She adjusted her coat collar and wrapped a scarf around her neck.

"They're not going anywhere," Millie said, as she entered from the bedroom. She pushed her boots over from beside the door and sat down and worked her feet into them before she set one then the other on her opposite knee and leaned forward with the hook tool between her teeth and pulled the clasps together.

Rachel had just finished with her gloves when Harry entered from the hall. "There's a pot with a lid on it on the counter," she said. "We'll need that."

Millie raised herself from the chair. "That all you're taking?"

"I didn't want to take too much," Rachel said. "We can always take something else tomorrow." She looked up at Harry as he entered from the kitchen, the pot held against his stomach. And she moved forward and reached up to open the door. "And don't stay up too late," she called, before she closed it.



Outside, in the crystalline night air, cold—the clarity of which having been the only benefit of the plunging temperatures which had frozen the fog and left it sparkling faintly on the street—raked their cheeks as if it had been a brier patch with ice-coated thorns. Frozen ice twinkled between cobblestones, iridescent in what light filtered down from what stars remained overhead, and catching the yellower reflections of the lantern Millie carried in her teeth. Frosted windows hung in darkness, faintly illuminated by the same combination, yellow lantern light spreading as if a lesser sun had quickly risen as they approached and set as they passed.

“I’m glad it’s peaceful,” Rachel said. She looked up at the velvety-black night sky. The solidness and serenity remained just as it had earlier when everyone was up on the roof shoveling snow. And other than Rachel’s comment, they seemed content to walk in that silence. Thin ice crunched under Harry’s and Millie’s boots. And dark, icy patches where rain had once pooled glinted in the lantern light, which they carefully made their way around. Their breaths, rendered visible, curled ahead of them, breaking around their more substantial bodies as they caught up passed through them.



The pub lay ahead, lower windows dark. But two sets of frosted panes on the floor above still glowed; shadows pantomimed across them. The unreadable sign hung over their heads as they stopped before the door. And as Harry’s hands were still indisposed with the pot, Millie kicked the door. And after a moment, she kicked it again, until a lamp appeared hazily through the frosted glass and approached. Residual heat still remained downstairs, but the most of it carried out the door as soon as the publican let them in.

“How are they?” Rachel said. She looked up at the publican and unwound her scarf.

“The same,” the publican said. Millie deposited the lantern on the bar, and the publican turned to lead them into the back and upstairs. The first floor had been divided into three rooms, each only accessible through the other, and they passed through the first two.

Two pieces of furniture occupied the third: a large bed and a dresser wedged between it and the wall such that only the top drawer could be opened. And in addition, the door would only open three-quarters of the way before it ran against the bed frame. A burning lamp already sat on the dresser. Coughs and sneezes fired in sequence as Rachel moved sideways through the door while the publican held it open. And she pulled herself up onto the bed.

“How is everyone feeling tonight?”

The one barmaid pulled her shawl up and tighter over her shoulders. Their hair pulled under white caps, they looked as if the publican had been growing mushrooms in the back room. Rachel pulled off her gloves and looked over her shoulder, back through the open doorway. “Harry, go down and start a fire and set the pot on to warm.”

He nodded and turned, passed Millie, and carried it downstairs.

The hounds lay under the bed, tails slowly thumping the floorboards.

The publican still stood there holding open the door and with the lamp in hand. Millie, who stood near the doorway, but a step removed from it, winced when any of the barmaids coughed or wheezed. She stepped back, again, at a particularly violent cough, and when Rachel looked over her shoulder and saw her almost halfway across the other room she said, “You can go down and see about some clean cups.” To which Millie seemed more than relieved to nod to before she turned and departed.

“Now,” Rachel said, turning back to the barmaids bundled in the bed, “let’s see what we can do.” One leaned forward and coughed into her hand, and when she straightened and leaned back again against the pillow propped against the wall, Rachel touched her forehead with the backs of her fingers.

Another of the barmaids coughed, said, “You look very beautiful.” She sighed and suppressed a cough and weakly tried to smile. “We’re very happy to see you happy.”

Rachel smiled, as well, and touched the back of her hand.

Another, breathing heavier, said, “We’re sorry.”

Rachel looked at her. “What do you have to be sorry for?”

The second coughed. “We wanted to tell you something good

about the future,” she said, after she had recovered her breath. “But it has all run out.”

The third sat forward, adjusted how her shawl lay over her shoulders. “It’s good to see you happy,” she said. “We don’t...” she said, but started to cough.

So the second finished for her, “We don’t want to drag you down.”

“Hush,” Rachel said. “You’re not dragging anyone down.” She turned and looked at the publican. “Maybe you should go see how they’re doing with the fire.”

The first coughed. “Tell her,” she said.

Rachel looked from the publican to her and back to the publican. “We have to leave,” he said. He looked neither happy nor sad about it. It just was.

Rachel turned, again, to the three barmaids. “Are you sure?”

They nodded in unison.

“We found a piece of an old truck,” the publican said. “We were hoping Harry might have a look at it.”

“There’s no need for that,” Rachel said. “We can drive you.”

The first barmaid touched the back of Rachel’s hand, and said when Rachel turned toward her, “Your uncle may not make it back in if he goes out.” She breathed steadily to keep from coughing.

“Well,” Rachel said, and turned to the publican, “you can’t use a truck.” She turned, again, towards the barmaids. “No, you can’t sit out in the back of a truck on a night like this.” She shook her head. “No,” she said, and turned to the publican. “Go down and tell Harry to go back and get my uncle and tell him to bring the car. That’s the only sensible thing to do,” she said. “And that’s what we’re going to do. Now, go on.”

After a moment, the publican released the door, which slowly started to close because of the slight crookedness of the wall or the foundation or both. Rachel turned toward the barmaids. “Now,” she said, “let’s get you ready.”



Later, sometime after Harry had gone, Millie sat alone in a chair before the fireplace. Old timber crackled, popped. The pot lid faintly danced, and she touched the pot with her boot to move it farther

down the grate. She looked up as light refracted through the frosted glass panels, illuminated the pub in patchwork and grids. She could still hear the car puttering and idling outside when Mr Cernan and Harry entered. "What did you do?" she said when Silverman and Ellison followed them in, "bring everybody? This isn't a party." She shook her head and motioned toward the back. "They're waiting for you upstairs." Then she said to Silverman and Ellison, "Not you two." And she motioned toward the fireplace. "You can watch this." She stood there behind the chair and watched Mr Cernan and Harry disappear upstairs.

A clatter followed as one by one the publican and Mr Cernan and Harry helped the barmaids down the stairs, wrapped in quilts against the night chill. And Rachel followed last, after the hounds had bounded down. Outside, Harry stooped, and she climbed onto his back to see through the passenger window.

"You understand," the one in the front seat said, and reached through the rolled down window. Rachel released one hand from around Harry's neck and took hold of hers. "We tried to avoid it. We really did." Rachel faintly smiled. She nodded. But the barmaid continued, "It's just that the lists were made so long ago, and we had forgotten." She squeezed Rachel's hand with what fragile grip she could manage. "We did not choose salvation. We tried to avoid it." But Rachel just smiled, she nodded her head. And the barmaid sighed and released her hand. "We were glad we could see you happy," she said. She looked through the windshield, quiet.

The one behind her snaked her hand through between the seat and out the window as far as she could. And Rachel took her hand as well. "Be happy," the barmaid said. Then she released Rachel's hand and withdrew her arm into the car and adjusted her shawl. The hounds stuck out their noses from behind the driver's seat, sneezing in sequence and shaking their heads.

"Be happy," the third said, barely hearable over the puttering of the engine.

The publican, who had been discussing something with Mr Cernan, turned and looked over the car, and coughed with his fist against his lips. He rummaged in his pockets a moment, grasped something that he turned round and round. And after a while, he removed it and

stood there in the backwash of the car's headlamps and lantern and starlight and looking down at his open palm. He extended his hand toward Silverman, offered the keys. And without another word, but coughing into his hand, he climbed into the idling car. Mr Cernan closed the door and stepped back. It puttered into the distance, eventually, even in the sharp clarity of the crystalline air, reduced to simply two small, red, brake lights that disappeared into choked streets and around a narrow bend long after the puttering of the engine had faded into the night. The only thing to do was to stand there watching, hands in pockets, except for Rachel, who hung around Harry's neck, and Millie, who didn't have to be bothered about her fingers freezing.

Rachel looked around. "Would someone please take the pot home?" she said. "But be careful, it's still hot."

Ellison nodded.

"We could stay a while," Silverman said. "There is no use in wasting a fire."

"Uh hm," Rachel said. She smiled. "I think we'll start home." And she said into the back of Harry's ear, "Don't you think?" She looked around at Mr Cernan.

He nodded. "There is no use in letting a fire go to waste."

"How's your singing?" Silverman said.

Mr Cernan looked at him.

"I'm considering something new," Silverman said, head bowed in contemplation. "I have not got the rest of it yet, but it ends *three barmaids, two dogs, and a forrrrmerrr pub-li-can.*"

Millie laughed. But Rachel didn't. She settled her cheek against Harry's shoulder.



Harry carried the lantern that lit the dark night. Cold, frosted glass glowed at their passing, so at odds with the pathetic warmth of the light. It illuminated Harry's and Millie's breaths, which seemed to crystallize and fall as they passed through them. But Rachel's breath warmed the side of his scarf where she bent her head close to him and held on with her arms around his neck. Water that had once trickled along the gutter flashed semi-opaque in the lantern light, white and translucent streams that snaked frozen between paving stones and sometimes made treading careful business on the way back, the same as it had on the way out, which was only to be expected.

"It's quiet," Rachel said, "isn't it."

The moon had long since dissolved, leaving only stars to faintly illuminate the silhouettes of cramped rooflines. With the moister frozen from the air and everything allowed to be rendered so crystal sharp, the faintest starlight in frosted, far distant windows revealed the intricacies of the frozen spiraling patterns that covered them, as easily and as clearly as if they were at touch distance. And the stars broadcast in no lesser definition, almost painful pin pricks in the sky, hard white-and-blue shards chipped from cold-burning diamonds. And though that image is too romantic, it fails so profoundly to convey the beauty...

It's the cold that delivers a kind of horrible magic. It draws together people to share the warmth they hadn't before known they had possessed. It draws them together around the fire, around the light in the darkness. But that sounds too romantic as well.

When did romance die?

Why is it so unseemly?

Too many used it to bring about too much pain. But everyone

who had remained had shot past pain and settled in the end of the world. There will always be something romantic about the end of the world. Something that will, in the end, defy description. And it would be nice to claim that as the reason why it seems so impossible to describe the romance of walking through such a cold and quiet night, of looking at the stars until one's eyes hurt and one's neck aches, of stopping before shop windows glazed over with Precambrian frosted patterns and looking at them more intently and more preciously than one had looked at anything that had ever sat behind those windows. How does one describe the subtle sense of a person, the feeling of heat so near by, of the warmth that settles through clothes as someone presses close for so long? How does one describe the silences such that as one stops to peer into the distance the other does as well, and the whole silence of what is left of the world rings in one's ears so that one thinks the church bells may have started, but they haven't? How does one describe the soft sounds of hard leather soles on cobblestones as they started to walk again without a word, walking close enough that sometimes their shoulders rubbed and each glanced at the other? How does one describe the clarity in another person's eyes on a cold night when the expanded wet darkness amidst iridescent whiteness momentarily reflects the cold brilliance of all those few stars left overhead? How does one describe the pleasure of bearing a weight that at the same time hardly seems there at all, not out of obligation or requirement, but out of the indescribable pleasure and satisfaction of doing so, yet also just done for the doing? How does one describe the choking narrowness of crooked streets where buildings seem to lean in as if ready to topple and shop windows squeeze so close as to make it seem possible to walk down the center of the road with both arms stretched out and play one's gloved fingers through the ice encrusted to each pane? How does one describe the darkness of shadowed corridors where darkness threatens to swallow lantern light and the flame seems to weaken and allows one to barely see beyond how far a hand can reach and forces one to seemingly press their nose into the darkness to find what lies ahead? How does one describe the prickling numbness that spreads along the cheeks after being out so long, the infinitely tiny crystalline icicles that form just from breathing on the short hairs around the corner of one's mouth when

so long past shaving that morning, the feel of a cold cheek against a woolen scarf damped by breath, but breathed on continuously and kept just warm enough not to freeze?

"Maybe," Rachel said, "you should grow a beard." Her hair brushed against his ear. "It might be warmer."

"Don't," Millie said, "put salt on my eggs."

"I bet that you would eat them anyway." Rachel leaned forward until her nose touched his cheek. "Maybe not."

How would one describe the solitude, the silence in those moments when stopping to rest when everyone collects their breaths at once and the empty distance pervades in around everything as if the whole world had suddenly shrunk to the limits of what can be touched and some before-undeveloped sense indicates so plainly that nothing remains in even the smallest nook, the most distant cranny, cubby, hiding place, because there is nothing left to hide or be hidden there, nothing left to be concealed in the darkness, nothing left that wants to or need be, and yet everything is? How would one describe that sense of the fragile outline of the world, where starlight glows along the edges of slate shingles and irregular brickwork and hanging trickles of ice, illuminates frosted window panes out of blackness, a negative world where only ephemeral hints of forms emerge from nothingness and as easily retreat? How would one describe instinct, the sense of a person near without seeing them or smelling them or hearing their footsteps over one's own?

Harry put his free hand around Millie's waist.

Is it possible to describe the intangible? To really describe it? Not to describe its effects, not what comes from it, not the domino effect of this then that then that, but the thing in itself that is not a thing. But this is too romantic a question. Romantic questions always seem as stupid as they are. If only because they so utterly refuse to allow any species of solemnity. But is it possible to describe the intangible? If that is too romantic a question, it is only because romantic questions can only be as stupid as they are.

Icicles hanging from a low roof glinted in the lantern light. And Millie stepped toward them, but not far enough to go beyond Harry's grasp, and licked one. She broke the tip of one with her teeth and rolled the chunk of ice around in her mouth until it had melted.

Then she leaned in and bit another chunk free, which dislodge the whole piece from the roof, and it crashed down around her feet and shattered, but she had still managed to keep hold of a chunk, which she spat, and the chunk shattered translucent and milky on the paving stones in the distance out where lantern light fuzzed against the darkness. “Bet you can’t make it that far,” she said.

Rachel looked over Harry’s shoulder. And holding tighter to him with one arm, she reached with the other and snapped an icicle in half, which then broke into threes, and part of it shattered at Harry’s and Millie’s feet. The ice rolled in her gloved palm, and she shifted not to lose it before she popped it into her mouth. And she wrapped her arm around Harry again and leaned over his shoulder and threw back her head and spat. Ice arched through the lantern light, twinkling where the outside had partially melted, and shattered out there in the remnants of Millie’s piece, so it was difficult to tell what pieces had formed which shatterings.

“Cheater,” Millie said. She bent and broke free an icicle between her teeth. She bit and the longer piece cracked and fell from either side of her mouth. And she dropped the chunk into Rachel’s gloved palm. Rachel said, “Open up,” and Harry accepted the chunk of ice. He shifted his head a moment, rolling it around in his mouth, until Rachel said, “Hurry up, before it melts.” And he angled back his head as best he could with her there and spat. The piece tumbled end over end, shattered two or three steps away. Millie and Rachel laughed. And Rachel nuzzled against his neck and scarf. “Try again.”

Millie turned her head and bit another icicle, stepped back closer to Harry and went onto the toes of her boots and slipped it from her mouth into his. “Now tilt your head back more,” Rachel said. She moved one hand up to touch the side of his neck. “Up. And let it sit on your tongue and blow hard.” She breathed into the back of his ear. “Now.” The ice arched and tumbled down through the cold night air, shattered on cobblestones a few paces ahead.

Everyone laughed.

Why try to explain the sense of void and darkness, of the stars moving overhead, hiding behind rooflines, winking at passersby, carrying themselves beyond the edges of perception? Why try to convey the glintings and sparklings embedded in the surfaces of

darkened and frosted streetlamps illuminated by passing lantern light, of the cold solidity of cast-iron standing in the night? Why try to communicate the stop and start of footsteps as Rachel pushed up the back of his cap so the brim dropped down over his eyes and when he released his hand from around Millie's waist to push it up and when a few moments later Rachel smiled and did the same again and when Millie said for him to lean down and when she rose on the toes of her boots and pushed it back into place with her forehead and when he put his arm around her waist again and they continued on?

Maybe it's just not possible anymore to describe the romance of walking through a cold night. But that's too romantic a statement. It's too stupid a statement, which in itself testifies that it might be in and of itself romantic. Don't fall too far is not a romantic statement. It doesn't push to the excess. It doesn't illuminate the very end that always remains too far away. It wants survival. It wants a lack of belief. It wants continuance. It wants reproduction. It wants. It wants to avoid the abyss, the fall, the dissolution. That's why love can only happen at the end of the world. And why they always coincide.

But all of that's too romantic.



In the distance, two high windows lit with a warm yellow glow. And these windows passed in and out from behind other rooftops as they walked, the windows always seemingly hiding and reappearing but always remaining in the same place. Illuminated by starlight, a faint silver-grey smoke ribbon rose out of one of the many formerly dis-used chimneys and twisted upwards as a sharp, askewer corkscrew. Rachel held onto Harry tighter with one arm and raised her other. "Look." She pointed. A line of crystalline light streaked towards nonexistence. Millie rested her head against Harry's shoulder. He lowered the lantern as they watched, but no more followed. "Did you make a wish?" Rachel said. But before Harry could answer, she put her gloved hand over his mouth. "You're not supposed to tell," she said. "Otherwise it won't come true."

"Then," Millie said, "you should wish for something you don't want to happen. And then tell what it was."

“Then I wish,” Rachel said, “that we couldn’t stay like this forever.”

“I wish,” Millie said, “for a cold bed.”

Rachel said into the back of Harry’s ear, “What do you wish for?”

It’s not that romance is dead. It’s just that it’s only recently been born.

“I wish...” Harry said, “to forever be alone.”

And it’s still unsteady on its feet.



“Wake up.” Rachel reached up and touched his leg through the quilt, but he only shifted. “Wake up.” He rolled over.

He’d pulled the quilt to his nose and his voice carried muffled through it.

“You have to get up.”

He pushed the puff ball on the end of his sleeping cap off his face.

Muffled: “What’s wrong?”

“The water’s out,” she said. “And breakfast is almost ready.”

“Hm.”

“Don’t go back to sleep.”

Muffled: “I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.” She gripped his leg through the quilt and sheets and shook him. “Now, get up. I don’t want everything getting cold.”

Muffled: “I’m up.”

She pulled herself onto the bed and on top of him, tugged down the comforter and pecked him on the side of the mouth.

“Hm.”

“You’re not awake.”

“I’m awake.”

“Then open your eyes.”

He opened his eyes. And they cut toward the doorway when Millie appeared with a wooden spoon between her teeth. “It—s—gon—na—urn,” she said around the spoon.

Rachel rolled off the bed, and Millie squeezed to one side as she propelled herself toward the kitchen. “Get—up.” She turned and followed her sister.

Harry lay there a few moments. Somewhere, someone banged

something, hammered it repeatedly. He finally sat up and shifted beneath the covers to get his feet into his slippers without having to get his bare feet from under the blankets. He watched his breath appear in the small mirror inside the wardrobe. Faint heat drifted through the open doorway all the way from the kitchen. It soaked through his clothes as he stepped into the kitchen doorway. Only a few pieces of planking lay in the wood box, something else to be taken care of. And he hovered his hands over the cook stove briefly before Millie pushed him aside and dropped a towel on a pot handle and leaned over to pick it up in her teeth and carry it to the table.

"You're going to be one of those married men who go to seed," Silverman said. He moved the pot into position after Millie had deposited it.

The cook stove had provided enough warmth for everyone to remove their coats and jackets, which hung over the backs of chairs.

Rachel placed the coffee pot on the table, then climbed into a seat. "Where are they?"

The front door opened. Mr Quegg and Mr Cernan carried arm-loads of planks through the front room and deposited them beside the stove. They brushed themselves off and went into the front room to remove their coats. "Everybody sit down," Rachel said, as they emerged into the kitchen. "Before it gets cold."

"Is there any milk left?"

Rachel looked at Harry. "You didn't put it on the window sill again, did you?"

He shook his head. She dropped off the seat and propelled herself out of the room. What was left in the bottle sloshed in her front apron pocket, and she pulled herself up into her chair again. She set it on the table and passed it across to Leary. "I could have gotten it," Leary said.

"Maybe she doesn't want you in the bedroom," Silverman said.

"Why?"

"It's courtesy," Ellison said.

"She comes in where we sleep all the time."

"That's different."

He stirred the milk into his coffee. "How?"

"It just is," Rachel said.

Blue passed Mr Cernan the eggs. "We're going to go out hunting today," he said. "Is there a list?"

"Whatever you can find," Rachel said.

"But anything specific?"

"Anything you can find."

"Yes, mam."

Ellison sopped egg yolk with toast. "Maybe we'll find another ham."

"Or a lamb. Or a chicken. Or a piece of a cow."

"If God delivers a ham, maybe that means something."

"Now, boys," Rachel said. "No arguing at the table."

"Did they tell you," Blue said, "we found a slew of pop yesterday?" He took a piece of toast. "But it had all frozen and busted."

"It's no good after it's frozen, anyway," Millie said. The warmth from the cook stove allowed her to remove a sock. And she brandished her fork. "Even if you melt it again it completely ruins the taste."

Rachel said, "They're bad for your teeth, anyway."

Mr Quegg lifted a sopping piece of toast from his tea and placed it in his mouth and gummed it.

Harry picked a roll from those piled on a nearby plate. "Aren't you going to comment on how well the bread thawed out?" Rachel said. He nodded as he chewed.

"Taking everything for granted," Silverman said.

Harry said, "I'll help clean up."

"Yes, you will," Rachel said, then pointed her fork at him. "After you see about the water." He nodded.

"Need any help with that?" Blue said.

Leary said, "How is he supposed to know? He hasn't even been out there yet to know what's wrong." He sipped his coffee. "Other than it's froze, that is."

"Just offering to help," Blue said. "Would you please pass that?" Ellison handed across a plate. "Thanks."

"You know what I think?" Ellison said.

Silverman said, "What do you think?" He took one of the thawed puffed pastries and put it on his plate. "These did thaw out very nicely," he said. "Didn't we find a few cakes with these, too?"

"We're saving them," Rachel said.

Millie said, "Should we tell them?"

Silverman swallowed part of his puffed pastry, rested his forearms on the table. "Should we feel conspired against?"

"Maybe," Rachel said.

"Alright." He put his other palm against the table. "I don't know about everyone else, but I am braced for it. Let us have it."

Millie said, "Don't be so melodramatic."

"I'm afraid," Ellison said, "that advice is completely wasted."

"Don't tell her bad things about me. She is perfectly capable of figuring them out on her own without any help from you or anyone else."

"Well," Rachel said. "You'll be happy to know we found a goose." She glanced at Harry, patted the back of his hand. "And I've already plucked it." She looked at Silverman. "So you won't have to worry about the pig." She turned to the rest of the table. "So tonight's Christmas is going to be very traditional." She smiled. "And if you two—"—she looked at Blue and Mr Cernan—"—can come up with one or two things, I think we might even have a pudding."

"Hopefully," Millie said.

"Hallelujah," Silverman said.

Ellison sipped his tea. "It's not as if you have any practical problem with pork."

"Only impractical problems are worth having," Silverman said. "Besides, I was speaking of the pudding."

"Why," Leary said, "would anyone turn down an excuse to eat?" He had decanted his coffee into his saucer and airily sipped from it. Spot's tail thumped against a table leg at intervals.

"Now," Rachel said, as Leary reached for the bread tray, "don't go giving him that. It's not good for him." She added, "And besides, he gets plenty enough as it is." On cue, Spot poked his head from under the table and laid his chin on the bench and breathed against her apron. "Now..." And she touched his forehead and pushed him back. "Go on." His tail thumped against a table leg. Millie shifted. "Go on," Rachel said. And he slipped between legs and across the kitchen to the water bowl that set beside the stove, and after a few laps, settled there in front of the warmth, looking at them.

“p” th’ e’, pl”.”

Ellison moved the tea pot down the table toward Mr Quegg, who refilled his cup. He reached for a hunk of bread and tore it in two.

“The thermometer shattered last night,” Millie said.

“So don’t forget your cap,” Rachel said to Mr Quegg. He nodded.

“Be nice if we had something to wrap down over the ears,” Leary said. He reached for the coffee pot.

“Well, you’ll just have to wait and see what you get for Christmas.”

“Presents again too?” Silverman said. “We *are* going traditional this time.”

Ellison said, “What about some carols?”

Millie cut her eyes toward her sister. “I think he’s trying to insinuate that we make them sing for their supper.”

“If,” Silverman said, “all it takes to get a slice of goose is a few rounds of dashing through the snow, I am more than willing to comply.”

Leary nodded between sips. “Yes.”

“However,” Silverman said, “I will leave the silent nights to you.”

“Now, boys.”

Mr Quegg upended the teapot and managed to half-fill his cup. “r?”

Rachel shook her head. “Not unless somebody gets the water fixed. Otherwise we will have to melt some snow.”

Harry pushed back his chair. “We should go check on that.”

Leary tipped the saucer into his mouth and slurped the last of his coffee. “Uh hm.”

“And,” Rachel said, “make sure you don’t let Spot out. It’s too cold out there for his feet.”

Silverman said, “What about our feet?”

“Aren’t,” Millie said, “you wearing the other night’s Christmas presents?”

Silverman put his leg over his knee and tugged his pants cuffs to reveal his rainbow-clad shins.

“Well,” Rachel said, “he isn’t fortunate enough to have shoes or wellies, is he?”

Millie said, “But if he did, he would have the sense to wear them.”

“I think Harry’s right,” Silverman said, and pushed back his chair

and stood. "We should get a look at those water pipes." He tapped Leary on the shoulder, who nodded and reached for a roll, put it in his mouth, reached for another as he stood. They moved toward the door.

"Haven't you forgotten something?" Rachel said to Harry.

He nodded and bent and kissed the one then the other.

"If the conjugal obligations are discharged," Silverman called from the front room, "can we get on with the work?"

"You watch yourself," Millie called.

But Rachel just shook her head and patted Harry's arm and motioned for him to take his jacket off the back of the chair and go out. He slipped it on as he entered the front room. Leary finished fastening his wellies. And Silverman finished buttoning his overcoat. "Sleeping in. Eating too much. Not hard to tell who the married man is here," Silverman said. He glanced at Leary, who was busy tying on his ear muffs. "Makes you want to put an end to your bachelor days, doesn't it?"

"What?" Leary stopped and moved aside the muffs.

"Makes you want to get married, doesn't it?"

Leary shrugged. "Never thought about it." He slid the muffs back into place.

From the kitchen: "We can hear you, you know."

Leary shifted his muffs aside. "What?"

Silverman shook his head, reached for his hat and the scarf to tie it on with.

"Be safe," Rachel called.

Leary shifted his muffs. "What?"

"We're going," Silverman said. "You'd better hurry up."

Leary just shook his head and settled the muffs into place again. Silverman stuffed one of his gloves into his pocket before he went into the hall.

From the kitchen: "Watch him."

And Harry used his legs to bar Spot's way. He backed up toward the door, slipped through, but got it only partly closed before Spot wedged his snout between the door and jamb. "Come on, boy." Blue knelt and pulled him back. He waved to Harry and Harry nodded as he closed the door. And by the time all that had finished, Silverman

had done lit the lantern. He lowered the glass and extinguished the match and lifted the lantern from the hook. He held it high as they made their way down along the platform and down the iron stairs. Below, the truck sat ensconced amid stacks of splintered lumber. They opened the doors just enough to slip out into the darkness. Overhead, the remaining stars shown with a hard-edged brilliance. Snow drifts reflected starlight, white seas punctuated with black-void islands fitted with frosted window panes.



Boxes wrapped in paper held by twine allowed all three to be reused almost indefinitely. Mr Cernan's habit later, when the gifts had been opened, was to sit on the couch and gathering the wrapping paper and smoothing it on the coffee table. The small pile of it, thin sheets of white one side and multi-color on the other, crinkled as he carried them into the next room and put them on the shelf. Then he would settle onto the couch again and pull out the box of tiles as Silverman and Harry moved their chairs or the stool into place. Christmas nights by then generally passed quiet that way, Mr Quegg, as usual, seated in his chair with the catalog open on his lap, Rachel sitting on the other end of the couch, knitting a hat, or more often a sweater, varieties of which constituted the main, if not only part of the gifts opened, Spot lying in the kitchen doorway, his rear half closer to the stove, his front half attempting to maintain maximum proximity to everyone else, Ellison reading, Leary generally managing to get roped into managing yarn for Rachel, bright pink wrapped around his spread fingers as if he had stumbled into the web of a giant, overly feminine spider, Millie sitting on the floor, bent forward wielding a pencil over a sheet of paper, Blue sitting cross-legged by the tree, breathing the smell of pine that infused the room, contemplating each page of a weather-worn issue of National Geographic with a fastidiousness that somehow merged the passionate and the clinical. The click of knitting needles, the occasional pops and crackles from the kitchen stove, the click of tiles against the coffee table, the scratch of pencil against paper, the turning of a page, tended to be the only sounds for long comfortable stretches, punctuated by the occasional, "Mahjong."

Silverman sat back in his chair.

Blue looked up, said, "What's the time?"

Silverman looked at his wristwatch. "It says almost a quarter after eleven."

Ellison looked up from his book. He closed it and set it on the table beside him and rested his arms on the chair's arms for a moment before he bent forward and removed his slippers. "I'd better get going," he said, and pulled himself up. He deposited his slippers by the door and stood there in his socks as he put on his jacket and overcoat and scarf.

"Would you be interested in company tonight?" Silverman said.

Ellison looked over his shoulder.

Silverman raised his hand, "I even promise," he said, "to be as quiet as the proverbial church mouse."

Ellison turned and stepped toward his chair, lifted from the table beside it the newly knitted cap he had just unwrapped that night. "I have no objections," he said. He fitted it onto his head, but didn't tie down the ear flaps yet, which always seemed such an embarrassing thing to do indoors.

"We'll wait to hear from you," Rachel said. She paused in her knitting, looked up at the two of them before they went out, the animal ears of their knitted caps alternatively pointing and drooping in regards to the respective species they emulated.

"'night," Blue said.



They folded down their hats' ear flaps as they walked down the hall, the one making a double knot under his chin, the other a bowknot. And although the night was still, just as it had been for many Christmases, the claw-like brush of cold against one's cheeks lent itself to the conceptualization of and wish for a knitted cap modeled after the cheek guards of a Roman centurion's battle helmet. And even wearing Rachel's knitted woolen gloves, it was still necessary for them to walk with their hands in their pockets. Even what heat leaked upward from the lantern as Ellison carried it did little to keep his gloved fingers from starting to ache by the time they had reached the church. It stood dark and tall, swallowed in the night. And although a handful of stars still remained, the only one currently visible hung in the

darkness off to the right. A shallow pool of lantern light surrounded them as they ascended the front steps, revealed soot-and-acid-rain-stained grey stone. The doors remained unlocked, and Ellison pushed one open enough for them both to pass through. He stopped on the other side and pushed it closed. The pews remained, things worth nothing to sell, and of no value to move, and too varnished to burn, the only extant furnishings. Near the front, as they passed up the aisle, it was one of these Silverman slipped onto, watched from as Ellison continued forward. He set the lantern on the ground, dropped to his knees, and raised the glass. A few candles still remained, odds and ends already half melted, and he lit one to light the others. They congregated across the cold grey-stone floor, white and yellowed melting masses that had already started to flow into one another, as if in huddling together against the cold they had found themselves losing the cohesion of their identities, one becoming the next, becoming the next, set on the path of eventually merging into a singular entity, yet multi-headed with its numerous dozen or so flickering flames. Ellison placed the lighting candle into a pool of semi-melted wax to hold it upright and lowered the glass on the lantern. Rising, he stepped toward the pews and set it nearby. And then he turned and walked forward again. Just beyond the pews, he knelt on the cold stone, head bowed in the direction of the candles, and removed his cap and gloves. Light flickered against the bare stone walls, illuminated pock marks where hangers had been torn free, wires and spikes where they still remained. He interlaced his fingers, bowing his head, leaning forward. If the candles provided warmth, it was not enough to prevent the solidity of his breath as his quiet words formed substance and curled against the cold grey-stone floor, but instead their weakness proved the means by which his words were de-cloaked from darkness and proved extant. Silverman sat in silence, watching all of this. He neither bowed his head nor interlaced his fingers but instead silently turned his attention to the shadows, and flickers that licked the stone walls. He remained that way until Ellison unbowed his head, dis-interlaced his fingers, leaned forward and touched the cold stone and pushed himself up. He stooped to gather his gloves and cap. He still held them in his hands when he walked back along the pews. "What's the time?"

Silverman turned his wrist, shielded it with his hand to try and discern what faint glow yet remained. “Three till.” Ellison nodded, transferred his gloves and hat to one hand, knelt, and lifted the lantern and started past him.

Several minutes passed, so it was definitely past the wristwatch’s midnight when the bells started to ring. Christmas had passed, Christmas was here.



Silverman waited in silence until the bells had stopped, and he waited until footsteps approached down the aisle. Ellison stepped beyond the pews, beyond where he had knelt, and set down the lantern. He leaned forward and blew out the candles one by one until the lantern became the only light, and the church’s darkened interior smelled faintly of smoke. He raised himself with the lantern in hand, his knee popping and the poppings echoing through the darkness, and turned and walked down the aisle. Silverman sat there, still, looking vaguely ahead, the blue-and-red, cat-like ears of his cap pointing at the ceilings. He gripped the back of the next pew with a rainbow-colored glove and stood.

The stone of the church had been so long in cold, sunk so much of it within its own mass, that there was no difference in the feel of the cold outside versus in. Ellison closed the door behind them on the way out. Outside, he adjusted his scarf with his free hand and pulled it up over his mouth. Silverman didn’t. Perhaps that is one of the benefits of having a beard. Although, if he worked outside long enough, ice formed in it such that after a while it appeared purely composed of it. Already, in the lantern light, water droplets frozen on the end of upturned hairs faintly glimmered.

Another star had risen, or at least moved to become visible, in the direction toward home, seemingly situated directly over where the foundry lay, a kind of sharp blue counterpoint to the lamp’s hazy yellow luminescence. Something of the sound of the bells still seemed to linger in the air. Ellison looked over his shoulder, once, at the church, the star that had set askew over its shoulder then missing. He faced forward again when he almost slipped, corrected himself, and looked down at his footing. They weaved down the street, snaking

their way between pools of frozen rain water that had gathered around clogged drains and beneath the snow.

"I never actually went to college," Ellison said, his voice slightly muffled through the scarf. He spoke through the ice that had gathered in the fibers. "Wasn't ever even an altar boy." His breath solidified in the night, swirled amid lantern light. "I used to listen to my grandmother all the time when we'd go to church... And I'd listen to the priest. When I got old enough, I tried to read some of the books in the library. And the Bible." He paused, looked up at the sky. Silverman stopped and looked at him. But after a moment, he lowered his head and started forward again. "But it just made everything worse," he said. "I thought if... I thought if I could do something to forge my faith, to heat it and try it in the old senses of the words, to hammer it over and over again, not trying to break it but to make something stronger, I thought... That's why I forged the paperwork to get into the army as a chaplain. I thought if I could help others through hell that might..." He paused again and looked up at the sky. "Be sure your sins will find you out," he said.

As he stood there, the ice in Silverman's beard reflected milky in lantern light. "Maybe all of us are forgers," he said, bits of ice twinkling in movement. "All of us forging ourselves." He, too, looked up at the sky. "Forgers of originals that never existed."

"Perhaps."

"Were you very good at it?"

"Very."

"At least you can say that much."

"Perhaps."

Ellison sighed. He started to walk again, and Silverman kept pace with him. "Would you mind if I asked you a question?" he said, after a while.

"OK," Silverman said. He looked vaguely ahead, walking with his hands in his pockets, the amount of frozen ejecta slowly growing in his mustache and approaching the overtly crystalline.

"How did you feel when you got a psych discharge? Was it a relief or..."

Silverman walked in silence.

"Sorry," Ellison said. "I didn't mean to..."

"Oh, it is not that," Silverman said. "It is just that it is a rather strange question. And I am sorry I am not able to answer it."

"I understand," Ellison said. "I didn't mean to pry."

"No prying," Silverman said. "I just would not know. And I cannot say what I do not know. At least, so far as I know."

"I don't..." Ellison said. Neither man looked at the other, but focused on the general direction of their mutual destination. "I don't understand."

"My discharge was honorable," Silverman said, with no note of anything but the factual in his voice. "I did my duty," he said. "Whatever it was."

Ellison began to laugh. The sound of it carried into the darkness no farther than arms reach. He paused a moment to catch his breath, breathing slowly to avoid drawing too much more cold air in at once. Silverman, who had wound up a few steps ahead of him, stopped and looked back. "May I ask you a question?" he said. "A kind of hypothetical one."

Ellison straightened. He nodded and took two steps forward to meet Silverman, and they walked along together, as before.

"If, for arguments sake," Silverman said, "let us say that God did not necessarily create the preacher and the legal and social structures necessary for him to issue a marriage license and be licensed to perform such ceremonies, the magistrates and clerks and such to handle such administrative paperwork and the janitors to clean their offices and so on and etc, but just assume that God just pronounced Adam and—well, for argument's sake, any wife that he may have had—and that was that. At the opposite end of that, of time, that is, and let us say a priest were the last man on Earth. Who performs the last rites for him and takes his confession? After all, a priest would have to be the last man, wouldn't he? Otherwise, a layman would have no chance for a last confession."

Ellison remained quiet as they turned the corner. The foundry loomed ahead. "I don't know," he said.

"Perhaps," Silverman said, "he is allowed to take his own confession?"

"That would...sound difficult," Ellison said.

"It might be the most difficult," Silverman said.

“The Bible,” Ellison says, “never says God won’t give us more than we can handle.”

“No,” Silverman said. “It does not.”



Silverman opened the door enough to poke his head through. "Can we borrow him for a little while?"

Rachel looked up from her knitting, three quarters of a jumper draped over the couch cushion. "What's it for?" She looked down at her needles again.

"Just a small errand," Silverman said.

"Uh hm," she said.

Harry stepped into the kitchen doorway, cup of coffee in hand, and Rachel glanced across at him. "You'll have to ask him," she said.

Harry looked from her to Silverman.

"Just a small errand," Silverman said. "We will have him back before you know it."

"Uh hm," she said. Her needles clicked against each other. "Just don't be out too late," she said. Spot, who had been lying in front of the couch asleep, jerked and looked up. "Not you," Rachel said, and he turned and craned his neck to look up at her.

Silverman nodded and motioned for Harry to follow. Harry stepped into the kitchen and set his mug on the table. He moved toward the front door and put on his jacket and overcoat and grabbed his cap and gloves and pushed off his slippers.

"Have fun," Rachel said. She glanced up and smiled. "But not too much."

Harry faintly smiled and nodded and stepped out into the hall to put on his boots. Silverman waited out there, hands in his pockets, as Harry knelt and tied his laces. Leary and Blue and Ellison already stood waiting out on the platform, caps on, ear flaps tied under their chins, a herd with multi-colored, knitted ears that always made Spot cock his head whenever he watched them going out.

The truck bed had been piled over with old timber taken off the outside of nearby buildings, and would have been better off outside and out of the way, but pushing it through the snow had proved too much, even with it in neutral and Rachel at the wheel and everyone else putting a shoulder against it. Blue had suggested digging a path for it, but eventually everyone had agreed on it being more work than it would have been worth, so instead it was left in place to be piled over.

Several wheelbarrows sat propped outside the door, some of them from halfhearted and useless attempts at hauling smaller pieces of wood any way other than by hand, and so they sat ready to be broken and disassembled to be fed into the oven.



Snow crunched beneath boots, thick enough to have to step high through, Silverman breaking the way, lantern held high, everyone else following in his tracks until the last man traveled over snow compacted into crunchy ice. The lantern illuminated the pub's unreadable, soot-blackened sign as Silverman rummaged his pocket for the keys, worked off his glove with his teeth, and dug for them again. He tried one, but it didn't turn.

"Maybe it's the wrong one," Leary said.

But the other was too small. Silverman clicked the first key back and forth until something clunked inside the mechanism and allowed him to push open the door. Silverman kicked snow from his boots in the entry way and moved through the pub and along the bar. He leaned over it and looked behind as Blue took one of the lamps down from the wall and carried it to the mantle over the fireplace and searched out the matchbox. "I'll check downstairs," Silverman said. "Just in case." Blue extinguish the match and lowered the lantern glass and set it on the table and turned the wick up enough to light the most of that part of the room. Ellison finished knocking snow from his boots and, hands still in his jacket pockets, looked around at the interior. Light from Silverman's lantern preceded him down the stairs, swallowed through the doorway. "No more down there," he said when he emerged again. Everything had been gathered and stacked in front of the bar on a previous night.

What remained weren't the large barrels. Those had been rolled out many nights before, when the snow had been shallow enough to allow for makeshift sleds. So the rest could be carried one to a man, even though the contents had frozen. Silverman knocked on the side of one, and the only thing to do was to notice the hard tone.

"Can it be thawed and still be any good?" Blue said.

"Perfectly fine," Silverman said. Although, he had scratched an X atop those with his jackknife.

"One leftover," Ellison said. "I was hoping not to have to make this trip twice again." A sentiment generally agreed upon, but that also lacked any visible or verbal acknowledgment.

"I found a partial one," Blue said. "It's completely frozen, too, though."

Silverman raised his lantern and turned along the bar and stepped behind it. He set it down and lifted the barrel up to set it on the bar. He rooted among the things stacked back there. "What're you looking for?" Ellison said. But Silverman's only reply was to set a large wash pan and a hammer on the bar. And he lifted the barrel and put it on the floor, reached up again for the hammer, and bent over it. Ice cracked and spritzed into the air and sprinkled along his shoulders and the back of his overcoat and sifted onto the floor and scattered coldly along the dark-polished bar. He tossed the hammer on the bar, straightened with a groan, and set the tub on the bar, filled it with ragged chunks of dark brown ice. "There is no use letting it waste," he said.

Blue tossed what little wood remained beside the hearth into the fireplace and reached for the box of matches. He looked over his shoulder, "Anyone got any paper?" Leary tossed over an old broadsheet that had been stuffed in the corner of a shelf behind the bar. The sickly odor of burning paper momentarily tinged the air, and Blue stomped a stick of wood into splinters to add to the kindling. And as it started to crackle, Silverman set the washtub nearby on the hearth. When the fire had started well enough to be on its own, Blue stepped toward the table and sat on the bench, watching it.

"I'm going to see if there's anything in the kitchen," Leary said.

Everyone else sat around the table when he returned, and he moved past to set on the grate a part of a loaf of bread and a plate with a

few slices of frozen meat, found where no one could have said, as the pantry had already been gone through three or four times by then. He pulled over a seat and sat there to keep an eye on everything.

Cold spiraled from the chunks of thawing beer, and as liquid began to pool, Silverman stirred it with a ladle he had found in the kitchen. Ellison carried over the chilled glasses from behind the bar. "Equal measures," Silverman said, and tipped the wash tub to ladle out the contents until finally he had to upend the wash tub itself into the last glass, none of it enough to amount to a full set of pints, but enough to momentarily bulwark against at least a fragment of the cold, seemingly eternal night. Meat sizzled in the plate, and Leary pulled a leather glove from his back pocket and used it to carry the plate to the table. He broke off a piece of bread and pulled out his knife and skewered the meat and laid it atop it. The fire had started to burn strong by then, crackling hard and fast, illuminating the backs of those turned away from it, and the faces of those not. And with the fire burning so, Blue had turned down the lantern wick to save the kerosene.

Silverman sipped his beer. He grimaced and looked down into the glass, but took another sip. "I suspect," he said, "we have finally found God." He took another sip. "Or at least his favorite creation." He set down his glass and reached across the table and tore a chunk of bread, which had toasted a little too much on one side. He held it up. "And what is it that allows this too?" he said, and paused a moment as if to contemplate it. "Does not the yeast eat the sugar and cause it to rise." He put it into his mouth and chewed. "And does not..." He raised his glass, mouth still full, and washed it down. "Does not it do these same to produce this?" He looked through the glass, at the brown liquid as firelight played through it. "And does not the whole history of western man come down to the propagation and preservation of these unseen creatures? Do they then select us who are fit to carry them on, discarding those who would not do so as unfit? And then perhaps is our whole fortune the cultivation of this species and the tales of Eden and being cast out and being the images of God our own fantasies to assuage ourselves against the knowledge that man's destiny has been exactly that stewardship of and servitude unto this favored race of microscopic beings? After all, I reiterate,

what of society is not accomplished as to affect their perpetuation, their distribution over the face of the Earth? Yes, we claim it is merely the product that we carry forth, but how can the results be produced without the process? So here perhaps stands before us the results of those created in the true image of God, their blessings given unto us their humble servants.”

“God,” Leary said, “would be very small then.” He took another bite of meat and bread.

“If God is to be all things...” Silverman said, and tipped back his head and drained the last of his beer. He wiped his mouth with his woolen glove. “Then God must also be small.” He set his glass on the table. “After all, man has always been told to understand his place by being humble before God, by the realization that he is such a small thing in comparison to Him, and such a small component of the whole of the universe. Perhaps, then, it is our size that creates man’s numerous challenges that stand in the way of perfection.”

Leary said, “And what about women?”

“Well,” Silverman said, as he reached and tore free another chunk of bread, “women are after all so often smaller than men.” He put it in his mouth, chewed. “And babies smaller still,” he said, with his mouth full. And after he had swallowed, he continued, “and it is only, after all, when they reach a certain size—which just by happenstance is attached to age—that we recognize they have passed from a state of being held blameless for sin, to one of being held to account.” He leaned back, burped. “Our priests,” he said, “then, should be midgets. For it is only they who can have adult minds yet be so close to God.”

“We pray then,” Ellison said, “on our knees, not to be humble, but to pretend ourselves smaller, and thus closer to God?”

“Not just on our knees,” Silverman said, “but alone in our own closets, where we have nothing to which to compare our own size and are thus free to conceptualize a more plasticized version of ourselves more freely.”

Blue finished the last of the bread, washed it down with the last of his beer. “What’s the time?”

Silverman sighed and leaned forward and looked at his wrist, the outline of the glowing hands almost overcome by the feeble firelight.

“Time to go,” he said. Not much longer and it would be only embers. Fragments of it still glowed as they accounted for the barrels once again. It faintly stirred to life when the door opened, but winked out from that exertion, turning to a puff of smoke.

Silverman carried the lantern balanced atop a barrel. Every man, barrel against his chest, same as him, following in his wake up the snowy path as fresh flakes sifted down from the cold blackness stretched overhead.



Silverman rolled over in the darkness, pulled his quilt higher over his shoulders. Pinholes in the barrel stove, the edges around the door, faintly glowed. He rolled over and looked at the wall, but the radium dial had become too faint to discern. He pulled the quilt up to his nose and lay there awhile longer. He turned his head when someone opened the stove door, the faint light of the coals too dim to allow anything to be discerned of who it was, rendering just a faint glow around a human outline. Smoke scent faintly tinged the room as he closed the stove door. The sounds of whoever it had been punctuated the darkness as he climbed back into his bunk, only to settle into the vague sounds of someone shifting or rolling over, intermixed with Leary's light snoring. But the problem with lying awake in the dark is that it's impossible to tell how many others are as well. And when daylight doesn't exist, it takes someone willing to inquire aloud as to that fact for such circumstances not to continue until the end.

"You awake?" Blue said.

"Yes," Ellison said.

Silverman lay there a few moments more, the quilt still pulled to just below his nose. He said through it, his voice muffled, "I believe I am."

Blue said, "Should I put on the light?"

"A light against the darkness," Silverman said. He didn't move at the sounds of Blue rising from his bunk and crossing the floor, of feeling for the matches, the sharp crack of one being struck, though he winced at the flare. Blue waved it through the air to extinguish it as he set the lamp glass into place. "I would consider," Silverman said, "that writing is merely transmuted light."

Ellison sat up on his bunk, put his legs over the edge and his feet into his slippers but wrapped his quilt over his shoulders. "How's that?"

"The light burns," Silverman said, "and darkens the glass, and it is the soot, the lampblack, scraped away, that is made into ink and thus deposited upon the page."

"Couldn't..." Blue said, sitting on the edge of his own bunk, "at least thinking about something I once read, couldn't you say that everything comes from light? The sun is the engine that powers the world and almost everything on it?"

"And all those lights in heaven," Silverman said, "all the magnificent brightness that must have been realized in the beginning."

Blue said, "You're talking about the Big Bang?"

Leary still lightly snored.

"You know," Silverman said to Ellison, "the idea was conceptualized by a Catholic."

"I was aware of that."

"One then must wonder," Silverman said, and his voice remained muffled where the quilt still lay just below his nose, "if with all that light, it is man who are the lampblack?"

Leary mumbled, "... what about women?" then went back to snoring.

"However," Silverman said, "it does produce an interesting conundrum."

Blue said, "What's that?"

"The most of the vast quantities of lampblack manufactured," Silverman said from beneath the quilt, "were from fires burnt for expressly such a purpose, to heat or light nothing, only to obtain the byproduct."

Blue scratched his head but shrugged. And he pushed off his slippers and crossed the room to go out into the hall and put on his boots.

"Do you ever wonder," Ellison said, "if we use words to fill the silence to keep ourselves from having to confront something?"

"And yet," Silverman said, "the words in themselves produce things we want not to confront."

"Damned if you do," Ellison said. "Damned if you don't."

"Perhaps," Silverman said, still looking at the ceiling, "it behooves us to fill the world with an active silence."

"What's an active silence?"

"I," Silverman said, "do not know." He lay there in silence a

moment. "But if such a thing could exist, perhaps such a thing could break the deadlock."

"But can such a thing exist?"

"It," Silverman said, "can be conceived."

"But the possibility of imagining it doesn't make it possible."

"Yet," Silverman said, "one of your own church's forebearers argued that it is our ability to conceptualize of God that proves he must exist."

Ellison rubbed the side of his nose. He looked up as Blue returned. "I was going to say," Ellison said, "I don't like the mornings."

Silverman hmmd.

Ellison shook his head. "They're faintly depressing, it seems," he said.

"Everything," Silverman said, "is more depressing before breakfast."

"Is it time for breakfast?" Leary mumbled. He would have rolled over, but couldn't for Spot, whose nose protruded from beneath the quilt, his chin resting on Leary's shoulder.

Blue said, "What time is it?"

Silverman shifted his head to look up at his watch. "Don't know," he said. He turned, again, to look at the ceiling.

Ellison rose, quilt still around his shoulders, and crossed the room and leaned over Silverman's bunk and squinted at the wall. "Almost six," he said, and turned and moved toward his bunk and sat down.

"Thought I might have heard something down in the kitchen," Blue said.

Leary stretched his legs beneath the covers. He yawned, eyes still closed. Spot faintly stirred, snuffled, but didn't open his eyes.

"Quickly," Silverman said. His fingers came out from around the edges of the quilt and gripped it. "It behooves us to speak about something. I feel the silent silence invading."

Ellison shrugged off his quilt and moved toward the stove. "And what are we supposed to talk about?" He jiggled open the door with the end of a stick of wood and tossed in a couple pieces of timber. "Remember what you told Gracefield?" he said, as he closed the stove door.

"There was so much of it," Silverman said.

Ellison sat on his bunk, pulled his quilt over his shoulders again. "About nothing good ever coming from a sentence that started with behooves."

"I am unaware of having ever stated this," Silverman said, his voice still muffled. "But if I did, I may have been right, or I may have been wrong. And in any event, it is what it is, and was what it was."

"My mother," Blue said, "used to say nothing good could come of ... well, quite a lot of things, really. Hmm."

"Life," Silverman said, "is such a befuddled customs clearing house of desire."

"I don't even," Ellison said, "know what to do with that. Are you saying that this world is the portal through which the desires to be fulfilled in the next have a tax levied upon them? Or that all things must pass through this world that are to be received in the next? Are you talking about how people don't understand what their desires are? What? Or are you just saying something to say something?"

Silverman lay there with the whole of his body but for the ends of his fingers and everything from his nose up under the quilt. "Yes," he said.

"And when he shall die," Silverman said, his voice muffled, "take him out and cut him into little stars, and he will make the face of Heaven so fine that all the world will be in love with night and pay no worship to the garish sun."

"I'm not sure there are any left," Blue said. "I tried to look for them the other night when shoveling on the roof, but I couldn't see anything."

"I will go peacefully," Silverman said.

Someone knocked on the door. It opened, and Rachel stuck in her head.

"Merry Christmas," she said.

"Merry Christmas," Blue said.

She smiled and nodded. "If one of you wants to go outside, we need another bucket of snow."

Blue rose. "I'll go." And Rachel nodded and closed the door. Blue pushed off his slippers.

Leary stirred. He sniffed the air let in through the open door, and Spot stirred to do the same. Leary sat up. He stretched and yawned.

"Tomorrow is dead," Silverman said.

Leary scratched himself. "Who killed it?"

"We are all," Silverman said, "merely a tale of ourselves told to ourselves, full of nothing but sounds and whimperings and signifying nothing."

"Everything," Ellison said, "is depressing before breakfast."

"If I do not rise now," Silverman said, "I shall never do so."

"Then get up," Ellison said.

"Said by you," Silverman said. "But what does Christmas morning hold for me? No matter how many times it comes."

Blue had returned by then. And having left his shoes outside the door, he removed and hung his jacket before he walked in stocking feet toward his bunk. Leary and Spot sniffed the air. Blue gathered his pants from the end of his bunk and slipped into them and then let his nightclothes fall down round them before he pulled them over his head. "The snow's a little deeper," he said. "You almost can't see the trough we dug out yesterday."

"There was no yesterday," Silverman said.

Blue turned and looked at him as he buttoned his shirt.

"A tale told by an idiot," Silverman said.

Ellison said, "And who is the idiot? Not God?"

"Dostoevsky?" Silverman said.

"He's dead," Leary said, "isn't he?"

"If God can be all things," Silverman said, "then he can also be dead and Dostoevsky." He breathed deeply out through his nose. "And if God *is* all things, then any act of consumption is then a sacrament, the consumption of the body of God in food and water and breath and heat."

"If God is the universe," Blue said, "then what does that mean for the heat death of the universe?"

"The universe cannot be, as a whole, God," Ellison said. "Perhaps a part of him, yes. But not the whole."

Leary yawned and pulled back the covers. And Spot shifted and craned his neck to watch him as Leary swung his legs off the side of his bunk and stood, scratched himself, and yawned as he moved toward the door. And Spot shook himself and climbed down and followed him out into the hall.

"But which part?" Silverman said. "Is the universe then the brain

of God, to become more scattered and addled with the passage of time and the ever upward climb of..."

"I believe I read they call it entropy," Blue said.

"Then, the ever upward climb of entropy until there is nothing left but pure senility? Or is it merely the pancreas, filling with the slow poison of too prolonged and too heavy drinking?"

Ellison sighed. He pushed the quilt off his shoulders and reached for his pants.

"And is not," Silverman said, "the return of such a state purity in itself? Would not the uniform destitution of the divine mind, after the decay of all its constituent parts, be that which we would call innocent? Having been removed not just from the knowledge of sin, but from the knowledge of anything? So perhaps our midget would have had too much brains to be a holy man."

"Purity," Ellison said, as he button his shirt, "is not ignorance."

"And yet," Silverman said, his voice still muffled through the quilt, "it was the fruit of knowledge which was that which inoculated against innocence in the Garden."

Ellison tucked in his shirt and pulled his suspenders over his shoulders.

"But how could man," Silverman said, "in the Garden be free? And if man is not free, how can he be in the image of God? Is God, then, not free, and thus by making us in His image needed do the same, and thus His righteous anger was kindled against them for doing what He would or could not? Is this to be the horrid state of man, then, to be better at being God than He Himself is? And if God, knowing this before He had done such, because He is God, did He thus create man to have something of which to aspire to? Because, if God is to be all things, must He also not be less than Himself and yet still more than Himself? And must He not be capable thus of creating something yet still even more so greater than even He Himself is?"

Ellison tugged his sweater into place. "Are you getting up?"

"And is He not that which was and is utterly incomprehensible? And did not the fruit of the tree reveal unto us our own incomprehensibility? Therefore must we not stand as gods? Or be threatened with such?"

Leary entered, the opening of the door stirring the scent of ham through the room.

"I shall rise," Silverman said, his voiced muffled. And he pushed down the quilt below his beard. "Again." And he pulled aside the covers and swung his legs over the side of his bunk. "Merry Christmas," he said.

Ellison said, "It's never anything else."

"Then it remains yet true."

"Mm," Ellison said, but nodded. "Merry Christmas."

Silverman stood, stretched his shoulders. "Now let us fret our hour upon the stage."

"Tomorrow," Ellison said, "tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Silverman said, "is dead." He reached and took his watch off the wall, looked at it thoughtfully a moment before he wrapped the band around his wrist. "Died of natural causes."



The candles, wax running over the holders that anchored them to the tree limbs, burned low, almost gone, and wavered and flickered when Leary entered from the hall, bundled against the cold, looking like a sickly version of a tire shop mascot as he tried not to drop any of the wood he carried. Ellison, who had opened the door when Leary had kicked it, held it and stepped aside to let him through. Rachel looked up from her work, looked at the tracks on the floor, and sighed. She shook her head and, again, turned her attention to her knitting. Absently, Mr Cernan lifted his cup of chocolate, his eyes still on the field of play, sipped it as cold rolled in through the open door, and set it down again when Ellison closed the door and silence ensued, punctuated only by knitting needles and clicks of tiles and graphite scratching against paper and the turning of pages and of Leary unwrapping himself and unfastening his overcoat and jacket. "Thank you," Rachel said to him. From the kitchen carried the sounds of Millie opening the stove and feeding a stick of wood into it. "We still have a little hot chocolate left," Rachel said, "if anyone wants some." Rubbing his hands together, Leary went into the kitchen. He reappeared holding a cup in both hands, sipping from it with punctuated, airy slurps. Idly, he stood there looking down at the coffee table.

"Mahjongg," Mr Cernan said.

Silverman sighed and sat back. He looked up at Leary. "Want to be the East?" he said.

Leary slurped from his cup. "Never played before."

"Everyone," Mr Cernan said, "has never played at some point." He started to gather the tiles, motioned across the room to another stool. "Have a seat."

Harry stood and carried it over, set it on the fourth side of the table, and Leary straddled it, slurping as he looked down at the tiles while Mr Cernan continued to gather them.

Millie entered from the kitchen carrying a basket in her teeth and deposited it on the couch between Mr Cernan and Rachel, since there was nowhere else for it. "This is the last of the gingerbread," Rachel said. Leary reached for a piece, but she tapped the back of his hand with a knitting needle. "Presents first," she said.

New sweaters and socks were dispersed. Mr Cernan stacked away wrapping paper that had been folded so many times the creases had begun to separate, the ghost-like fracture lines crisscrossing the colorful sides of the papers like spiderwebs flattened in the process of fossilization. Millie sat and arched forward to hook a pair over the end of her foot, multicolored with individuated toes, and pulled them up her legs with her teeth. She wiggled her toes. And as if to test just how much dexterity they allowed, she stood and weaved around the room to help Blue rearrange some of the ornaments to better balance the tree. "One more," Silverman said. And he pulled a small box from beside him on the chair and offered it to Blue. Blue took it, looking at it quizzically. "Well," Silverman said, "open it." Blue did and looked down into it even more quizzically.

"This is yours," Blue said.

Mr Cernan had started to organize and disperse the tiles. "Not anymore," Silverman said. "I pass it to you."

Blue raised the watch from the box and looked at the depleted radium dial.

Leary bit the head from a gingerbread man as he leaned forward and looked at the tiles.

Ellison, too, stepped across the room and extracted one from the basket, broke off an arm with his thumb and forefinger and popped it into his mouth as he observed the game. "Would you mind checking on the stove?" Rachel asked him. And he stuck the gingerbread man's head between his teeth and turned and went into the kitchen and stepped before the stove. Eventually it would probably be necessary to start tearing down the building around it to feed it. Already, the number of bunks down the hall had been reduced to those five absolutely necessary ones. Although, that had also added room to

stack the barrels of beer, though that space, too, had begun to open again as the barrels were broken down. He closed the stove and set the poker beside it and held the gingerbread man between his teeth as he lifted the sauce pan and swished the hot chocolate within and poured some of it into a cup. He grasped the gingerbread man's torso and broke off his last arm with his teeth. He returned to the front room, looking around idly as he chewed, the remains of the gingerbread man in one hand, hot chocolate in the other. Spot, who had been lying to one side of the doorway, as usual, half in and half out of the room, back end nearer the stove, nose nearer everyone else, looked up at him. Ellison looked down at the arm-less, soon to be legless gingerbread man. He put the head between his teeth and cracked its neck. Mr Quegg sat in his usual chair, slowly turning the pages of the same tired catalog, wrapped in the ankle-length, multi-colored knitted robe he had received several Christmases ago, a matching peak cap on his head that drooped down onto his shoulder, while a nose and large reindeer eyes peeked between it from the front of his sweater. With his free hand, he soaked a piece of gingerbread in a cup of coffee until it softened enough to gum. Lantern light somehow added to the riotous, garish colors everyone wore, bestowing yet more comfort on the cavalcade, such as Blue's quilt-pattern pants, and their myriad of geometric interconnections. Even Spot had his own quilted vest. And as with the line between pain and pleasure, the dividing line between ugliness and beauty can often be found to have gone missing, leaving it difficult to determine which of the two sides are which, or even if two distinct possibilities had ever existed, a chain of thoughts that segue and fracture into other images that a sip of hot chocolate momentarily conceals.

Rachel stopped her work and draped it over the couch cushion in front of her and reached behind herself to pull her hair into a ponytail and tied it with a ribbon.

Tiles clacked against the coffee table. Rachel had knitted the three of them special gloves that left the fingertips free. But Leary, having only the regular fashion, had removed one and between moves kept his hand either in his pocket or absently held it beneath his other arm. She watched him doing this, and already it was possible to discern what her next project would be. She took up her knitting again and

quietly watched the rhythmic motions through and into which she propelled the needles and thread.

Even the tree had not escaped the garish, yarn-based festivities, tiny new-woven-and-knitted creations bowing its branches farther each Christmas night and Eve, as well as the round quilted mat that lay beneath it, on which Blue kneeled to add a little more melted snow into the reservoir.

And neither had Mr Cernan. Giggling, Rachel had playfully hung a couple of fresh-knitted pieces from his antlers, which, though she had protested it, he had decided to keep, and they still dangled over his head as he looked down at the field of play and reached out to make his move.

Rachel looked up from her work. "Wouldn't you rather sit here?" she said to Blue, who had taken his usual spot in front of the tree, cross-legged, with a tattered National Geographic open on his lap. She shifted as if to move the gingerbread basket, but Blue shook his head.

He smiled. "No," he said. "I'm good. I wouldn't mind one of those, though." Rachel started to pass the basket to Leary, who would in theory pass it to Harry, but Blue said, "No, just one will be fine." And Harry reached over and took one from the basket and stretched and dropped it into Blue's outstretched hand. "Thanks," he said. And when he nibbled off a foot, he added to Rachel, "They're really good."

About then, Spot started to whine, vaguely moving his tail as he watched the basket and individual cookies circulate around the room. "Oh, no," Rachel said. "Uh uh." She shook her head at him. "They're bad for you." She said to Blue, "Would you mind? There's a canister in the kitchen on the table." Blue nodded and set aside his National Geographic and pulled himself up after stuffing the last of a gingerbread arm into his mouth. He chewed as he went into the kitchen.

"The one with the Santa Claus on it?" he said.

"That's it," Rachel said. She took up her knitting again, looked down at it as she said, "But just one."

Spot looked up when Blue stepped through the doorway, sniffed, wagged his tail as he tried to draw the morsel into his mouth with just his tongue and without getting up. Blue scratched him behind his ear as he chewed. And after he had swallowed, he vigorously sniffed Blue's hand. "Sorry," Blue said, "but those're orders." He scratched

him behind the ear once more before he rose and crossed the room and moved toward the tree.

"Are you sure you wouldn't prefer to sit here?" Rachel said. "It would have to be more comfortable than that hard floor."

But Blue smiled and shook his head. He sat there turning the pages of the National Geographic in the flickering light given off by what few tiny Christmas tree candles remained unmelted.

Silverman snorted.

"So," Leary said, "what happens now?"

"You say mahjong," Mr Cernan said.

"And that's it?" Leary looked down at the table as he sipped hot chocolate. "Mahjong, I guess, then."

Silverman sat back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest. "I refuse to believe this," he said.

Leary popped the rest of a gingerbread man into his mouth. He said, "And that's all there is to it?"

Silverman shook his head. "You probably know what the square root of five-million-two-hundred-eighty-thousand-and-seven is as well."

Leary sipped his hot chocolate. "What's that in numbers?"

"52,280,007"

"7,230.491477," Leary said. He sipped his hot chocolate. "Approximately. Why? Is that part of the game?"

"Cheating," Silverman said.

"It's not cheating," Blue said. "He did it all himself."

"Just another form of cheating," Silverman said. "Just because he has an advantage doesn't mean he should have an advantage." He motioned, and Leary leaned toward the basket and passed him a gingerbread man. "True democracy can only be achieved when everyone is exactly the same."

"That," Ellison said, "you have backwards. It's communism that requires everyone to be the same in order to work."

"Just because they're different," Silverman said, and broke away one of the gingerbread man's arms with his fingers, "doesn't mean they both don't have the same problems." He popped it into his mouth.

"Now, boys," Rachel said.

Tiles clicked against the table as Mr Cernan arranged them. "We still have time for another game," he said.

"Only," Silverman said, "if there's a handicap figured in." He broke the gingerbread man's neck, then cracked his torso in half, and laid the pieces on the table and reached for his cup of chocolate. "We have to have equality."

Rachel shook her head. "You boys could play that all night," she said. "But let me remind you, our husband has his obligations, and we're not going to let you hold him up from them."

"Yes," Millie said. She put down her pencil and leaned back against the couch and crossed her leg over her knee and wiggled her color-clad, individuated toes at Rachel, who passed her a gingerbread man.

Rachel looked up at Ellison. "It's getting a little cold again," she said. "Would you mind checking the stove?"

He nodded and finished the last of his hot chocolate and stepped past Spot, into the kitchen, where wood smoke intermixed with the lingering, warm scent of the last of the gingerbread.