



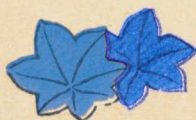
The

Secret History

OF



Mars



VOL. I



DFHall



Love is the most powerful force in the universe. But you cannot light even a candle with it. It cannot move a single stone, nor even a grain of sand.

It is too great to power any but the smallest of things.

—Reïncarnate proverb
(As recorded by the scribe Juri)

The Secret History of Mars

D. F. Hall

Hardboiled Babylon

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To S., who saved this book from its Author
Function.

Ťē Sēkṛt Hṣtrē ∫ Mṛz

but also most of this wasn't written by me

She said, “Sometime, but not too long, after all those things had happened, seven friends departed from the third and started across the city. Though, the seventh wasn’t a friend, so to speak.”

“But six’s a not-lucky number,” Genie’d said. And as much’s Helena and Kayla’d shaken their heads and grumbled, and more, the sun’d set, the air’d cooled as much as’t’d’ve till the moons rose, and Mara’d said, “No use wasting light.” And none’d’ve argued with that.

One night they'd camped on a helical stair and strung their hammocks between stone railings and lay there and looked up.

"The stars," Genie said, "they seem different out'ere, don't yuns thin? As'f we're lookin at'em from a completely different angle."

"The city'sn't that big."

"It'd've t'b'over half the planet for that t'happen."

Helena dug through'er rucksack. "I'll just b'glad when we get there," she said.

"We just started."

"I'm sicka eatin dried stuff."

"Complain complain."

They'd've carried a lightjar for when they'd've'd t'pass through darker passages not-touched by moonlight and'ts oil'd've swished side-t'side and globbed'n on itself as Lucille raised t'extinguish—"Freakin' heck"—but a moth fluttered against'er cheek and she jerked. It alighted on the jar's fire-warm glass. "It's huge," Kayla said.

"I've seen bigger," Helena said.

"Scared yuh though," Li said.

Kayla'd've glared. Lamplight'd've flickered'n'er eyes.

"Everythin'sn't t'b'a competition," Ambeth said.

Kayla shifted'n'er hammock. "Oh, everybody b'quiet. All I wanna do's sleep. I thought that last seta stairs's gonna go on forever. My legs're puddin'."

"Don't talk bout food." Helena tore away fibrous fish chunks with'er teeth, chewed hard.

Ambeth said, "Welcome t'travelin'."

Kayla shifted'n'er hammock t'watch the moth. "It reminds me bout the policeman," she said.

"No!" Genie said. But even though she'd said't with such definiteness and speed, she paused, chewed'er lip'n the same way Helena chewed'er fish. "No..." She moved'n'er hammock, as'f wrestling'er self.

"I thought yuh liked the policeman," Kayla said.

"Of course..." Genie still chewed'er lip. "But..." She wriggled.

"Dump yuhrself outa'ere'f yuh'ren't careful," Li said.

Genie stilled, mumbled t'erself. "Oh..." Finally, she sighed. "No," she said. "No, we can't tell that'ne tonight." And she shifted and looked outa'er hammock and over'er shoulder at Mara. "Yuh've still gotta finish the'ne from last night."

But Mara shook'er head.

"Yuh promised."

"Yuh've already heard't a thousand times."

"But I'ke hearin bout'em back then too," Genie said. "It's fun." She shifted'n'er hammock t'better see. "And yuh've already started."

Mara shook'er head.

"Please."

"It's late."

"Please."

Kayla groaned.

"Ambeth can do't."

"Not me. I've got too much dust'n my throat."

Li leaned outa'er hammock and hooked a waterbag and offered't t'Ambeth, but Ambeth shook'er head.

"Careful with that."

Li wiped'er mouth with the back of'er hand. "We'll come t'a fountain by tomorrow."

"Please," Genie said. "Besides, yuh do the voices the best."

"Yuh'll wear'er out fore we'ven get there," Li said.

"Please."

Mara shook'er head. "Fine."

Genie grinned and lay back'n'er hammock, would've probably almost swung side-t'side'n anticipation as Kayla puffed-out their light and smoke curled into darkness.

"Start where yuh stopped last night," Genie said.

Seemingly iridescent, the moth'd've fluttered among darkened

passageways till't finally rose between towers towards what stars't'd've seen between buildings and finally perhaps disappeared through a high window.

“Where'd I get to?”

“Y—”

“Nevermind,” Mara said. “I remember.”

“Nathaniel Walcott!” His grandmother’s voice’d’ve carried upward as a broom’s handle tap-tapped the kitchen ceiling. “If any young men round here are planning on eating breakfast, they’d best find themselves at it in a hurry.” He danced outa’is pajamas and snatched up fresh clothes and jammed’is feet into already laced sneakers. And’e jerked the cupola’s cantilevered shutters open and looked out on the seven corners of the world, the house across the street, birds gathered on powerlines, the distant ghost-image of ancient ruins out there just’n front of the horizon where heatwaver’d’ve rendered’em seemingly not-sure of their own existence. “Nathaniel Walcott!” Tap tap.

He knelt and jerked open the trapdoor, dropped down the ladder, ran along the hall and pattered downstairs loud enough t’mask the grandfather clock’s thrombic ticks, grabbed the banister and swung round and down the hall and skidded t’a stop right before the dining room doorway.

Tall thin windows framed’is father at the table’s far end. “We’re glad you could see fit to join us, son.”

“You know what they say,” his mother said. “It’s only natural at his age to need a little extra sleep.”

“I’ve heard that too,” his grandmother said. She smiled and leaned toward Nathaniel as’e pulled out a chair and she winked at’m as’e sat beside’er.

His father cleared’is throat. And’e took’is wife’s hand and offered’is other t’Nathaniel and Nathaniel took’is grandmother’s hand. “Dear Lord, thank you for this new day and this meal and those who prepared it. Ahmen.”

† This is supposed to be an anecdote attributed to the scribe Juri that relates the tale of two scribes waiting on an embankment where the oxen forded a river.

“Do we’ve t’mention food?” Helena said.

“Yuh’re always thinin with yuhr stomach, nowise.”

“Well—”

“Do yuns want me t’continue orn’t?”

Quiet.

“Ahmen.”

And they released each's hand and dis-furled napkins across their laps.

“Breakfast,” his father said, “does look as good this morning as ever.” Then t'is wife: “Pass the biscuits, please, dear.”

“You know what they say, breakfast is the most important meal of the day.” She set the bowl by'is plate. “Now, not too many.”

“Never,” he said. “Though, some margins can be stretched quite a ways before they break.”

“I know there're some margins around here that will be stretched.”

“Yes, mam. If you will notice, two, and only two, grace this plate. How many would you like, mother?”

“Just the one, thank you dear.”

“Son? Here, set the platter at that end.”

“That's the way,” grandmother said as Nathaniel pried apart several biscuits and spread the halves around'is plate. “A young man like you needs to eat good to get the right start on the day.”

“And what about my start on the day?” his father said. “Like this, I'd be surprised if I have the energy to make it out the front door.”

“We would hope,” his wife said, “you have finished growing.”

“And I suppose there're restrictions on the gravy as well—here, son, be careful, it's hot—and I suppose the eggs are equally off limits.”

“Eat as many as you want, dear. They say a good dose of protein is important to start the day.”

“And who says that?”

“I believe it was in the paper.”

"Oh." Mr Walcott nodded t'mself as'e worked'is cutlery. Well, young man, I hope you're ready for your finals."

"I guess so." Nathaniel lifted the gravy ladle.

"That isn't very reassuring, son. I hope you have more than guesses when it comes examination time. Those don't get you very far in life—guesses, that is."

"He's going to do quite well," grandmother said. "He's been studying night after night this whole week."

"That's another thing," his father said, after'e'd swallowed a slice of fried egg and'd touched'is napkin t'is mustache. "Believe it or not, I remember being in school. And there wasn't *that* much. At least, not enough one should have to stay up half the night to get a handle on it. I would have thought you would have read the whole textbook cover to cover by now."

"You know, dear, they say young people sometimes study better at odd hours."

"They say that, do they?" He forked another egg slice and the gooey yolk drip-dropped against the plate.

"Yes," his wife said. "They do."

Her husband nodded. "Anyway," he said, "to get to the point. Have you thought anymore about what we discussed on Sunday?"

"Some."

"You don't need to rush him," grandmother said. "All these things come in God's time."

"But it's up to us to recognize it," Mr Walcott said. "So, son, I want you to put some serious thought into what we discussed."

From the front hall, the grandfather clock's long, drumbic tones echoed back through the house.

"May I be excused?"

"It's still early" his mother said. "Why are you rushing off? There's plenty of time to get to school."

"I know, but there's some things I have to do on the way and—"

"What things?"

His father raised'is free hand. "You're excused, son. Have a good day. And remember what we talked about."

Nathaniel nodded, pulled the napkin from'is lap and dropped't onto'is empty plate and pushed back'is chair and stood and fitted't

back under the table. "Goodbye, mother. Grandmother." And'e bent and kissed the nearest's cheek.

"Don't run in the house." his mother called.

"Springtime," his grandmother said. "It's the new shoes. Puts a spring in your step."

"He'd do better to conserve some of his energy for the remainder of the year," his father said. "Would you pass the jam?"

"Another biscuit, dear?"

"Since you mention it."

She set the bowl aside. "And do you know something about these things?" his wife said.

He'dn't look up as'e bifurcated a biscuit with'is fork. "What would I know?"

"A great deal more than you let on, I would say."

He shook'is head and touched'is napkin t'is mouth and mustache. "Besides," he said. "There's been enough scheming around here already."

"Harold—what a thing to say."

"I have to admit I've sometimes wondered what you ladies converse about so intently after Sunday services."

"Maybe you should have another biscuit, dear."

"No, thank you." He patted'is vest. "I believe the margins are full." And'e touched'is napkin t'is mouth and mustache. "And if you ladies will excuse me, I have to get to work."

"Are you still going to invite Mr Endercott for dinner, dear?"

"I thought so," he said.

"Yes," grandmother Walcott said. "It'll be good for him to eat someplace besides the diner. I'll put out a pot roast."

"Sounds good," he said. He bent and kissed'is wife's cheek. "See you this evening."

"Don't work too hard."

He smiled. "We can only do as much as we can."

The screendoor slammed behind'm. Birds on wires cocked their heads as'e passed, remained still, scattered just before, somewhere, a phone rang. A woman waved a garden-gloved hand as Nathaniel ran by. Cars backed from driveways. He jammed t'a stop t'avoid's knees being knocked out by a chrome fender and'e waited as the car settled into the road and clunked as the driver adjusted gears. The driver called through a half-down window, "Morning, Nathaniel. Off to school?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Always upward. Remember that." The car shuttered and built momentum as't started down the street.

"Good morning, Nathaniel." The woman waved'er trowel.

"Yes, mam." He jogged, broke into a run once'e'd passed their yard. She called, "Don't be in such a hurry all the time." But'e'd've already been too far away t'hear.

Someone honked. "Onward and upward, young man. Onward and upward."

And past'm and along with'm all traffic'd've seemed t've funneled down Mainstreet, as'f't were the literal heart of the town, taking'n vehicles and dispersing'em through various arteries. Delivery truck horns blared. Grocery clerks carried topple-full crates and balanced'em against their hips as they refilled window displays. Azaleas'd've been just'n bloom then, fragrant as'e cut through the park and rounded the bandstand, as the gardener contemplated those bushes while'e leaned on'is shovel. A horn'd've blared as'e burst between azaleas and dodged toward the crosswalk. Mr Tolley'd've leaned against the newspaper's doorway and drawn on'is pipe and pulled'is

watch from 'is pocket and looked down the street at the bank and snapped 't shut again. He 'd've called over 'is shoulder, "How's it going?" Acrid, sulfurous fumes and hisses 'd've belched from a basement doorway. Across from the hardware store, cashiers yetn't fitted with their blue sleeves and matching visors 'd've filtered'n up the bank's front steps and inside. And at a window above, old Mr Prescott 'd've stood with 'is arms behind 'is back as'e looked down on the street. And Nathaniel 'd've momentarily slowed under 'is gaze till'e'd passed safely beneath the hardware store's awning.

A paint can propped open the screendoor. But the lights weren't on. Daylight filtered through the open rear door. Oilish-metallic-burlap scents pricked 'is nose as'e stuck 'is head'n. "Hello...?"

Catherine poked'er head from between tight-packed aisles. She squeezed out and set a crate on the counter and brushed off'er dress as she walked toward the door. "Good morning."

"Morning, Mrs Stowe."

She faintly smiled. "You're late this morning." She glanced over'm, paused. "What've you been doing?"

He shook 'is head. "Sorry... I just... I had to run. I forgot my... I forgot my bike."

She shook'er head, half-smiled, sidestepped between'm and a barrel, and'e stepped back. And'e cleared 'is throat as'e followed'er round while she surveyed the shovels and brooms organized'n barrels beneath the window. "Anything I can do?" he said.

She glanced up, turned and looked across the street. And with a faint, bemused smile, she pointed. "I'm afraid you don't have the time."

He followed'er finger.

He groaned.

"You shouldn't stay up so late," she said. She glanced at and away from an advertisement slotted'n the window frame where wind'd eroded glass putty. And she seemed t'try andn't smile. "Better hurry unless you're going to be late," she said. "Better not forget your bicycle next time."

He nodded. Dry-mouthed, he turned and ran along the sidewalk.

Catherine sighed, closed'er eyes. Softness brushed'er ankle. And she opened'er eyes and looked down. Odin rubbed against'er leg

and she dropped and lifted'm. "You looking at something?" Odin turned'is good eye on'er. And she shook'er head and straightened and carried'm inside, slid the paint can away with one foot and let the screendoor slam.

"Mrrrrrrr."

"Alright. Alright." She stooped and deposited'm'n front of the counter. When she straightened, she'd've glanced at the dark ovoid frame hung high and acenter the wall behind the counter. And what'd remained of'er smile'd've faded.

The road cut through rust-red embankment and spiraled up the hill t'the schoolhouse. Girls clustered beneath the single elm. And Regina Prescott sat'n the swing that dangled from one of'ts sturdier branches while someone whispered'n'er ear. Two girls rounded the tree and their skirts blew back and wrapped their legs. Older boys leaned against the schoolbuilding's blue-painted siding and watched younger boys chug aggies'n attempts t'punch t'other's marbles from a dust-scribed circle.

"Hey, Walcott—where's your bike?"

Nathaniel still panted as'e approached'em. "Forgot it."

The boys laughed. "You turning into a *girl*?"

"Cut it," Ron said.

"We were j—"

"Yeah," Ron said. "You were." He moved toward Nathaniel. "What's the matter?"

Nathaniel shook'is head. "Nothin'."

Ron regarded'm a moment. He glanced round the corner at the front steps. "Dad's gonna let us have the tent."

The older boys closed round'em and one or two of the younger looked up from their game.

"What're you looking at?"

The younger boys snickered or pulled faces and turned back t'their game.

"So here's the deal," Ron said. "The late train has a pick-up that night—"

"What if somebody's out there?" Trent said.

"They won't be," Ron said. "There's only one person who checks on things out there this time of year. And he'll be gone for the week."

"Are you sure?" Jimmy said.

"Shut up," someone said.

"So all we've got to do," Ron said, "is sneak around to the station after dark."

"What if they've got cows in there or something."

"It's always something with you," someone said.

"They'll be empty," Ron said. And he glanced round the corner again. "All we've got to do is borrow one of the trucks when we're out there."

"And you're sure there's a road?"

"I've seen it," Ron said.

"When?"

"When I rode along on a fuel shipment," Ron said.

"That don't mean it goes anywhere. Besides, it might've been a mirage. Or something."

"Not something," Ron said. "It's a road. And it goes all the way there."

"But how do you *know*?"

"Because that's how the wiener[†] stand gets out there," Ron said.

"So all we got to do—" He glanced at Nathaniel. "You alright?"

"Huh?"

"J—"

A horse neighed. And they all turned as first an old grey mare then a buggy crested the hill. Mr Endercott gently tugged the reins. But the mare ambled on till she'd come under the elm's shade and the girls moved t'surround'er. Mr Endercott looked out from beneath blue buggy fringe, smiled and climbed down.

"Good morning, Mr Endercott." Mrs Holtcraft waved from atop the schoolhouse steps and clattered down'em'n'er high-hooked boots. She brushed'er dress as f't might've been chalk-tainted and re-buttoned'er cuff. "I'm so glad you could make it."

"Always a pleasure," he said, and took'er small hand'n'is own. "Always a pleasure. After all, if one cannot serve the youth of the community..." He glanced round. "Well, I'd say one cannot serve the community then. Isn't that right?"

“Of course, Mr Endercott.” Mrs Holtcraft turned and glanced over the schoolyard. “Pauline, would you please ring the bell.” The girl nodded, turned and jogged—“There’s no need to run, young lady.”—“Yes, mam.”—up the steps and grabbed the bell rope. Mrs Holtcraft returned’er gaze t’ Mr Endercott. “They can be so impatient sometimes.”

He laughed. "Can't we all."

The bell turned'n'ts moorings and rang out from overhead.

"May I?" Mr Endercott offered his arm.

“Thank you, sir.” And arm’n-arm they ascended beneath brass clatter as younger boys scattered t’collect their marbles and join the two lines that marched up behind the teacher and Mr Endercott and divided’n the front hall, boys right, girls left, and filtered into wrought-iron seats fashioned so the back of each folded into the writing surface of the next.

Mrs Holtcraft and Mr Endercott parted arms by'er desk.
"Councilman, would you care to lead us?"

"Of course."

“Everyone.”

The students rose and bowed their heads and Mr Endercott, who'd already removed his hat, did so as well. "Dear Lord," he said. "Thank you for this day, this hour and your blessing. Ahmen."

"Ahmen," the class repeated.

“Okay, everyone,” Mrs Holtcraft said. “Be seated.” She clasped’er hands’n front of’er as she waited for hushed silence.

“Class, I want you to pay special attention today. Mr Endercott is, of course, a very busy man, but he has come here today to share a few words as we prepare for our final week. So I want you to pay very close attention to him. You younger students, as well.” She turned and smiled. “Mr Endercott.”

Mr Endercott nodded. “Yes, eh-h-h-h-m-m-m.” And an iron rod seemed t’ve slid up’is back. “Right. It’s a very important thing, after all, this graduation. And I, for one, find it inestimable how proud I—we all—are.” His hat brim deformed from’is grip and’is eyes seemed t’mist. His free hand tightened on’is lapel. And’is thumb rubbed rhythmically against the polished tin forestry badge’e always’d pinned by’is buttonhole. “And I know how your parents must feel. I can’t

tell you the...inestimable...when my own s..." He glanced round, grabbed a worn volume from Mrs Holtcraft's desk and clutched t'is chest. "And we shall persevere with the full knowledge of the truth and guidance of the Lord. Just as *He* guided that lone Rocket in the vast darkness between worlds—we know that He has guided us and will guide us every day." He paused. "Yes... Yes, be proud. You will see the world's fullness spread before you in all its majesty and take your rightful place among creation. So that you may glorify him... Even... So you see... You see... You... Y..." He looked slightly up as'e stood there, The Book still clutched t'is chest.

Mrs Holtcraft cleared'er throat. "Yes," she said. "Yes, thank you for that, Mr Endercott. I'm sure everyone here will be greatly inspired by your words." And she motioned t'the class, who nodded, and after a moment or two began t'clap. Mr Endercott faintly tittered...but inhaled and subtly inclined'is head, as'f t'bow. Mrs Holtcraft raised'er hands for quiet.

"Of course," Mr Endercott said. "We must all realize and take joy in the all encompassing"

Mrs Holtcraft looked at'm during the prolonged pause that followed. "Yes," she said after a few moments. She smiled. "Thank you, Mr Endercott. But I'm sure we wouldn't want to detain you from your work any more than we already have. You are, of course, a very busy man."

Mr Endercott nodded. "Yes, there are many thing ... Many things." A fraction of iron seemed t'flow from'm. "Yes, I'd better go." He looked over at Mrs Holtcraft and seemed t'try and smile. "Yes." And'e turned t'look over the class, still somewhat misty-eyed. "Remember." He motioned with'is hat. "We always walk with the Lord. No matter what has... No matter what." And'e glanced at Mrs Holtcraft once more before'e started down the center aisle, The Book still pressed t'is chest.

They'd've heard the carriage as't turned outside and started down the hill.

"Alright," Mrs Holtcraft said. "Let's begin, shall we. Will everyone take out your textbook, please. All of you in the first grade, please—silently—read part twenty-five in the first section." She wrote 'part 25' on the blackboard. "And all you older students, please

turn to the history section. We're going to have a quick review." And Mrs Holtcraft replaced the chalk on the ledge. "Does someone want to start with pre-history?"

"I can tell you that, teacher."

"I'm sure you can, Peter. But you're supposed to be reading part twenty-five right now. So eyes on the page." And she opened a desk drawer and brushed a rag over'er fingertips. "Okay. Rob, why don't you start us off."

He cleared'is throat and looked down at'is textbook.

"No," Mrs Holtcraft said. "No, stand up first. Shoulders straight. Yes, that's it. And remember to enunciate."

And the Lord created the first man and called him Adam and saw that he was good. But the Lord saw that the first man Adam remained without aid. And the Lord fashioned for him a helpmeet which was the Rocket. And the Lord placed the first man Adam within the Rocket that he may go forth into the void...

Mrs Connelly jerked a broom over the sidewalk as a wind rose. And she broomed the steps again on'er way up and fresh dust puffed off each. "...a mess..." she'd've said. But she'd've stopped before adding, 'as God ever created' or something of that nature. No, the reverend's wife'dn't've uttered such'n public, or alone. So instead, she gave the top step one more swift broom whack before she turned and looked over the street. The grass needed cutting. And watered. Always watered. And she knelt atop the steps and turned the small handle plumbed low there beneath the banister, till crystalline drops arched through air. Turning and stepping into the church, she ran'er hands along a pew, grimaced at'er red-orange-smudged fingers. A door hinge squealed. She turned. "William?" Late-spring wind swung back a door and overturned a rag bucket. And dust-laden wind danced over the pews.

Catherine closed the shop door against the wind. And she rolled'er sleeves past'er elbows as she rounded the counter. "Move, dear." Odin silently mounted nearby boxes. She twisted the control knob and watched the overhead fans remain still. Odin crossed the counter and sat by the register and turned'is eye on'er. "What're you looking at? Why don't you get up there and fix it?"

"Mrrrrrr." Odin yawned, stretched, moved along the counter and padded down stair-stacked cardboard boxes. His erect tail disappeared among equipment and wares. "What're you good for, anyway?"

Catherine turned and lifted the phone's earpiece from'ts cradle and double-tapped the fork.

"Sarah."

"Yes."

"Fine, Sarah."

"Yes, it's out again."

"Yes."

"I know, Sarah."

"Yes, I know."

"Sarah, could you please just get him before I roast over here."

She sighed and listened t'the vacant line pop and crackle as she waited. And after a moment or two she turned and raised t'tiptoe t'look into the store's depths. "Where have you gotten off to?"

The line popped, clicked.

"Sarah?"

"Yes, I'm still here?"

"Out? Alright, but will you give him a message for me?"

"Yes, tell him to come over as soon as he's free."

“Alright, Sarah. Thanks.”

“Alright. Goodbye, Sarah.”

“I know, Sarah. Goodbye.”

When she hung up the phone, she glanced at the ceiling, reached and turned the knob again. She sighed, clicked off the knob. Shaking'er head, she walked out from behind the counter.

The bell fastened t'the shop's screendoor jittered and she looked round as someone poked their head'n. Maybe she thought't'd been the reverend and that there'd've been some strange repetition of the last time...

“Sorry,” the man said. “Didn't mean to startle you.”

Catherine shook'er head. “Oh, nothing,” she said. “I was just... somewhere else for a moment.” She'd've tried t'smile. “What can I do for you?”

Out'n and amidst of desert, train steam hissed along steel tracks and Reginald Thurbor climbed astride's wiener stand and stomped'ts crank till'ts engine sputtered and belched greasy-black clouds that smelled of deep-fried onions. And'e adjusted's goggles down and throttled't up just enough so't puttered off a flatcar and onto the platform. He waved a gauntletted hand at the engineer. A steam whistle shrilled. As the train groaned and gained momentum t'leave'm behind, Thurbor puttered off the platform and rolled humpety-bumpety over railway ties and eased down steep track bed.

The mirror-polished, refrigerator-sized box bolted t'the machine's side'd've glinted under near noon sun as'e throttled up and roared along a barely discernible service road toward distant, crumble-worn spires.

“Of course,” he said, “the missus has me take it out and of course ’bout half the nails get bent when I pull ’em out. No winning some days.”

“I guess not,” Catherine said. She rolled down the top of a paper bag and pushed’t across the counter. “And just let me know if you need anything else.”

“Will do,” he said. And’e placed a coin’n’er palm and replaced’is hat and stepped past the counter and opened the door t’step into bright day.

Catherine sighed, shook’er head as she looked down at’er palm and instinctively punched the register without looking and so the drawer clattered open and something inside dinged. The sound intermeshed with the bell outside.

“Morning.”

Catherine jammed the till shut. She tried t’smile. “Good morning.”

“Phew, you could broil a roast in here.” The butcher, still’n’is pink-stained apron, whistled as’e entered and revealed where a ham bone’d knocked out two teeth, which’d yetn’t regrown. “Good thing it’s not like this down the street or we’d have to be selling pre-cooked chicken—and what’d be the point of that?”

“Sorry,” she said. “Fans’re out.”

He looked up at’em as she turned and picked a chew can from the rack on the wall behind the counter. He placed a coin on the counter. “Well, you should have that fixed.” The screendoor bell rattled as’t opened, rattled again as’t slammed against the doorframe.

Even when the wind’d’ve died and she’d opened the door again, hot air hung languid and solid and she sighed and she watched through the screendoor as late-morning heatwaver rose from the street. She popped’er collar button as she turned toward the counter and’t must’ve seemed as’f steam puffed from round’er body. She snatched a strap from a display and pulled back’er hair and tied’t. Sweat trickled down’er neck and along’er back.

She turned. But’t must’ve been the wind that’d played the screendoor’s bell.

Officer Coreman pulled t'the curb on Beach Tree Street. He smoothed'is hair back as'e climbed out and slipped on'is cap and adjusted'is belt and the way'is holstered flashlight knocked against'is leg. Yards faintly twinkled where sprinklers must've just before been shutoff and the walk'd yetn't dried. He adjusted'is cap as'e rang the doorbell.

A short, grey-haired woman, mouth pulled into a thin line embroidered with wrinkles, opened the door and squinted out at'm.

"Well, I want to know what you're going to do about it."

"Yes, mam." Coreman blinked. "Do about what?"

"I'll show you what." She stepped aside and opened the door till't tapped a wall stop. And Coreman followed'er'n and removed'is cap and ran'is fingers back through'is hair.

"So what's the trouble, mam?"

"This way."

She led'm into the kitchen. A light breeze disturbed flower-print curtains t'one side of a stove. Coreman glanced out into sunshine and probably looked over an empty clothesline. "Lovely day, isn't it?"

"Fine," the woman said. "But what are you going to do about it?"

"You'll have to be more specific, mam."

"Don't get smartallacy with me, Joseph."

"Yes, m—" He shifted'is hat on'is fingers and cleared'is throat. "But I still don't understand what you want."

"Right here." She pointed t'the open window. "You're looking right at it."

Officer Coreman lightly shifted'is hat on'is fingers, glanced from the open window, along the counter, over scattered mixing bowls, at a dishrag that hung over the faucet. "I'm afraid I don't see."

She huffed, jabbed'er finger toward the sill. "There. Less than half

an hour ago there was a fresh-baked blue berry pie—just out of the oven. I set it on the sill to cool and I went out to see Mr Copperman as he brought the mail this morning, because I was expecting a letter from my sister, and when I came back, the pie was gone.”

“Uh, hmmmmmm.” Coreman stared at the empty ledge. “And you’re sure the wind just didn’t knock it off?”

“Of course I’m sure. What do you think I am? I’m not ready for Oak Street yet, young man, I’ll have you know. I looked outside. Everywhere. It’s just gone.”

“Hmmm.” After that, Coreman stood silent a few moments. “Maybe some birds came along and got at it.”

“The whole pie—and carried away the tin too?”

“No, I guess it’s not likely. What do you think happened to it?”

“That’s why I got *you* out here.”

“I don’t really see what I can do about it, mam.”

“Well, I think someone came and took it.”

“Why would someone do that?”

“How’m I supposed to know? All I know is it’s not here and now I’m going to have to start another from scratch and hope I can get it done in time for Mrs Walcott’s tea this afternoon. And I’ll just only make it if I start now. So why don’t you get out of here and do something?”

“Yes, mam,” Coreman said. “I’ll see what I can do. If there’s anything else—”

“Not unless you can speed up a pie. Which you can’t. So just get on off.”

“Well...” Cap’n-hand, he nodded. “Goodday then, mam.” And’e nodded again and walked back through the living room.

Outside, he tossed’is cap onto the passenger seat. Sitting behind the wheel, yetn’t having turned the motor over, he glanced through a dust-covered windshield, down the two rows of houses and chewed the inside of’is mouth. He reached for the radio. Black, tangled cord stretched across’is lap.

“Dispatch. This is Officer Coreman. I’ve just finished up at Beach Tree Street. Over.”

“Officer Coreman,” a tinny voice filtered through a speaker grate. “Be advised there’s a wreck reported on Backstreet. Over.”

“What’s going on? Over.”

“Delivery truck for Ferguson’s blew a tire and got rear-ended. You’d better get over there. Over.”

“Got that. On my way. Over.”

He dropped the mic on its fork and thumbbed the ignition button and flicked-on the siren.

A rust-colored plume fanned over the desert and at its apex Harold Thurber throttled up as ruins solidified against the sky. The wiener stand'd've cut into the wind much'n the way of the flying brick't'd've been, but'e kept't'n-line.

That far out, the road the truck routes'd've been only spotted by the astute, but they were more and more few and far between, too easily erased by wind and nonexistent on rockier ground.

Decayed geometric peaks loomed ahead. Buildings dried and burnt out under raw sun. He might've imagined intrepid ancient Martians donned scaffoldings of [bat]-esque wings and leaped t'ride the air from balcony-t'balcony.

Ahead, blue-tarp tents clustered on the city's edge. He slowed as'e drove onto the city plain, where constant traffic'd smoothed a wide area t'pea gravel. Someone must've seen the dust plume, because figures already clustered near a tent row and moved across open ground. Thurbor slowed, turned'n a wide semi-circle and dismounted. Men and women'n blue-plastic hardhats approached as'e pulled off'is gauntlets and shifted'is goggles up over'is leather helmet. But'e paid no attention t'the dust lines that'd've remained welded t'is skin between the edges of'is goggles and bandanna as'e stepped round and dislatched the wiener stand so the pole rose and a spring-loaded mechanism popped and a blue-white-striped parasol opened over'm and polished stainless steel dis-folded at'is touch t'reveal drawers and sub-drawers and warming racks stuffed with buns and a lazy-turning rotisserie with electric elements connected t'the motorcycle's alternator. And deep-fried onion exhaust'd've wafted out toward the tent camp.

He'd've long learned t'ignore the two or three that always remained on the tented periphery, as'f on guard, and instead grabbed'is apron. "What'll you have?"

“This’s just mean,” Helena said.

Li groaned.

“Anyway,” Kayla said. “What’s a wiener look like, yuns think?”

“That important?”

“I guessn’t.”

And'e must've thought t'mself how archaeologists must've been the most not-sociable bunch anywhen anywhere. Try t'get more than two words outa'em—outside the confines of a wiener order—and one outa three'd maybe grunt. Or maybe'e'd never thought anything of't as'e slathered ketchup and onions t'keep pace with the flow of blue-plastic hardhats that queued all the way past a section of blue-tarped mudbrick wall.

And after't'd've been all done'e'dn't've'd mind more than t'wipe'is forehead with'is bandanna and begin t'stow those few buns that'd've remained'n the warmer and t'seal relish and ketchup tins and t'check the maybe two or three wieners that'd've remained'n the rotisserie.

[“Sa va.”]

Thurbor turned. “How's that?”

Zilog'd've'd the same enormous bushy, black beard then as always.

“How many you want?”

[“Deu.”] Zilog raised two fingers.

Thurber nodded mechanically, pulled two buns from the warmer.

“What on them? Sorry, but I ain't got any ketchup left.”

[“Moutarde.”]

“Hm? D'you say mustard?”

[“Oui.”]

Thurbor looked over'is shoulder. Zilog nodded.

“A...alright.” He sawed into one bun then another and snatched up the mustard spreader'n the same motion with which'e re-sheaved'is knife. “A bill even.”

Zilog scratched'is beard. [“Un moment.”] And'e turned and called t'someone and an anonymous face beneath a blue-plastic hardhat

and matching coveralls with a half-finished wiener'n one hand fished into'is pocket with'is other and shoved a fist fulla bills toward Zilog. Thurbor stared at the wad as Zilog fumbled and peeled off one.

"I'll get your change."

Zilog shook'is head and stuffed the money into'is coverall's chest pocket and accepted a wiener'n each hand.

"Out of this?" Thurbor said. "You sure?"

Zilog nodded as'e chewed.

"T-thanks." Thurbor slipped the bill into'is pocket. And'e turned toward the cart and drug a rag off'is shoulder and wiped the cart's stainless-steel counter. He looked over'is shoulder once and Zilog stood at the same place, chewing, seeming t'stare at nothing'n particular. Thurbor turned back t'is cart and continued t'wipe. "So..." he said. "Dug up any Martian bones yet?"

["Quel?"]

"Uh..." Thurbor'dn't look round. "You know, Martian bodies and whatnot. There's gotta be quite a few of them in here, I'd imagine. Place this size. Down south, I once saw this gallery some doctor's got set up where you can see all these Martian masks for a penny. Never did see em, myself. But I once sold a wiener to a guy who couldn't stop goin' on about em. Don't know that I..." He looked over'is shoulder as someone shouted. Zilog looked back toward the tents.

["Merci, "] Zilog said right before'e stuffed the rest of a wiener'n'is mouth and started back.

Thurbor must've shaken'is head. It'd've been the only thing'e'd've done as'e battened everything down. And as'e fastened'is helmet's chinstrap and repositioned'is goggles, maybe'e'd've considered what being out too long under hot sun'd do t'a person. One more good reasonn't t've been born an archaeologist's son.

And'e stomped the starter and turned the wiener stand into the desert and as the wind lulled, greasy-black, onion-scented grime'd've wafted into the distance and temporarily smudged blue-tarp coverings strapped over mudbrick walls.

“Dang it!”

Catherine leaned against the ladder and looked up where a hole opened into a crawl space’n the ceiling. “Are you alright, Herb?”

“Let me work, will yuh.” His flashlight and toolbag clomped as’e moved on hands and knees between joists.

“Mrrrrr.” Odin looked up the ladder too.

“Don’t get any ideas.”

She’d opened the doors, but the wind’d’ve died somewhere past noon. And heat’d’ve wavered up from the street and might even’ve obscured the buildings opposite.

Clomp. “Ouch! Guuuuuuu.”

“Everything alright?”

But the screendoor bell ringled and she looked over’er shoulder.

“Phew, honey, how’re you not roasting in here?” Mrs Astercott withdrew the pin that held’er hat t’er hair and then removed’er hat. But Mrs Walcott only glanced over near piled items, arm bent so’er handbag strap cradled against the inside of’er elbow.

“Ouch! Grrrrrrrr.”

The three women looked up. “It’s being worked on,” Catherine said. And she stepped away from the ladder. “What can I do for you?”

“Oh,” Mrs Astercott said, “nothing really.”

Clomp. Clomp.

“We were just walking by and I thought I might check and see if you had any of that fertilizer yet.”

“What kind?”

“The kind I usually get. For my roses.”

Clomp. “Gahhhhhh!”

Catherine looked up at the hole'n the ceiling. "I don't know."

Clomp.

"I'll look."

"The fair will be coming up soon enough, you know," Mrs Astercott said.

"You know what they say," Mrs Walcott said. "Time can really get away from you."

Clomp. Clomp.

Catherine emerged from between aisles. "I've got one box in." She set't on the counter and stepped behind't. "More should come in early next week." And she plucked a small paperbag from beneath the counter and slipped the box into't and curled down the top and set't across the counter. "Anything else?"

Clomp. "Ouch!"

"I believe that sounds like Herbert up there, doesn't it?"

Clomp. "Gaaaaaaaah!"

"Yes." Mrs Walcott nodded.

"You should really've had Rupert come over, you know," Mrs Astercott said, and glanced toward the ceiling. "A father really should know when to retire and let the son take the bulk of the work, don't you think?"

"Well," Mrs Walcott said, "you know what they say."

Mrs Astercott nodded.

Clomp.

She glanced toward the ceiling. "Of course, I don't know what he'd do if he didn't have something to poke that blackened, half-melted screwdriver of his into, would he?"

"Is there anything else I can get you?"

"Well..." Mrs Astercott shook'er head. "I guess not." And she slipped on'er hat and transpierced't with the pin and so the bright red nob touched'er hat and must've made't seem as'f a berry'd sprouted there. "Better get home, you know. I just came downtown while waiting for a cake to cool. I still have to frost it." She grasped the paperbag and half-turned. Paused. Turned back. "You know," she said. "That's an idea." She smiled and glanced toward Mrs Walcott. "You should invite her to your little party this afternoon." And she looked at Catherine. "A little informal thing, you know. It's just a

kind of unofficial get-together to go over things about the graduation and such." She glanced at Mrs Walcott. "Don't you think, Evelyn? After all, she is the one who's had to order all these odds and ends we will be needing." A faint kind of smile. "Don't you think?"

"I'm sure—" —Clomp— "—I'm sure she has more important things to do."

Clomp. "Gaaah!"

Still, with a faint kind of smile, Mrs Astercott turned t'look at Catherine. "No, she should come. It would be fun."

Clomp.

"Besides, it would give you a chance to get out of here for the afternoon."

Clomp.

"Otherwise I'd be afraid you're going to end up a roast."

"Gaaaaaaaah!" Clomp. Thud. Thud. Thud.

Catherine looked toward the ceiling. "I really don't think I have the time right now."

"Oh, but where's your sense of civic duty?"

"We should go," Mrs Walcott said. "Otherwise we'll never get back in time to finish everything up. And you know what they say."

"Oh, well," Mrs Astercott said. "I guess we can't have everything, can we?" And she turned, along with Mrs Walcott, toward the door. But paused and held the screendoor open. "Just put this on my husband's bill."

"Of course."

Catherine sighed as the screendoor slammed. Sweat trickled down'er neck as she looked up at the ceiling. Silence. She moved from behind the counter. Odin stood on'is hind legs, forepaws on the first rung. "Herb?" Quietude settled on the store, broken only by the putter-putter of passing automobiles. "Herb, you alright up there?" She touched the ladder and looked up at the black darkness't led to. "Herb...?"

"OUCH! Guuuuuuuuuu."

Catherine sighed. "How's it coming?"

A muffled voice buried somewhere and everywhere amid the ceiling: "Almost there."

Catherine looked over'er shoulder at the clock on the wall behind

the counter. She drummed'er fingers on the ladder. "Mrrrr." Odin wandered that way and climbed onto the counter—clomp clomp—and watched the ceiling.

"Hey, Herb?" She looked at the ceiling. "Herb, can you hear me?"

"What do yuh want?"

"I'm going to go out for a bit, alright. Can you shut up the store when you leave?"

Clomp.

"Herb?"

"Yeah, yeah, I got it." Clomp. Shufflings and mutterings.

"Alright," Catherine said. "All you've got to do is close the front door. I'll turn the sign round when I leave. Okay?"

Shufflings and mutterings.

"Okay?"

"Yeah, yeah." Shufflings and mutterings.

Catherine looked round as'f she'd forgotten something. She moved toward the door, lifted'er hat from the hook. Afternoon heat sifted through the screendoor and struck'er face. The street must've appeared drowned beneath heatwaver. She looked back into the store. Overhead: shufflings and mutterings. And Odin cocked'is head as'e looked up, watching the ceiling, his ears realigning.

She sighed and stepped out.

They'd've opened all the windows. Fans'd've turned lazily overhead and probably'd've seemed t'stir the heat rather than dissipate't as Mrs Holtcraft added a few last cross-strokes t'the blackboard before she turned. "Okay, everyone." And she rubbed'er chalk-dry fingertips together. "That will be all for today." Electric potential balanced on knife-edge. "So if everybody would please stand." And she pointed t'one of the younger boys. "Oliver, why don't you lead us in the benediction."

"Yes, mam." Everyone bowed their heads. "Dear Lord. Thank you for what we got today. May it've been enough. Ahmen."

A few snickers, but everyone repeated, "Ahmen."

"Thank you, Oliver. That was..."

Giggles.

Mrs Holtcraft set'er eyes on the room.

Heated afternoon air faintly swished.

"Alright," she said. "Class dismissed—boys—don't run." But younger children'd already snatched their hats from the hooks'n the front of the building as they'd run and clattered down the steps and rounded the schoolhouse for their bicycles. Girls took more time with their hats and parasols.

"Where's your hat?"

Nathaniel shrugged. "I forgot it this morning." And a replay of their earlier conversation bout bicycles'd've followed as they rounded the schoolhouse. Nathaniel'd've squinted as'e walked. Ron'd've flanked'm as'e pushed'is bicycle alongside. And t'other elder boys'd've done likewise.

"I heard," someone said. "I heard they say there's still things living out there."

"What things?"

"Things."

"And who's *they*?"

"They."

Ahead, older girls stopped and looked back at'em. One said, "What's going on?"

Ron said, "What do you mean what's going on?" as they caught up.

"What's the use of bicycles if you just push them round?"

"Where's yours?" Regina called t'Nathaniel.

Ron said, "What's that to you?"

Giggles. "Maybe he's turning into a girl." Regina shot t'other girl a glance and t'other girl lowered'er head.

"Anyway," Regina said. "I was just wondering is all."

"Well, quit it," Ron said.

Beatrice said, "You quit it." And they glared at each other till she turned and walked ahead.

"We should go to the hardware store and get new batteries," a boy said.

Ron glanced at'm, scowled.

A girl said, "What for?"

"Haven't you heard," Regina said. "They're going *camping*."

Beatrice said, "I don't see—"

"You blind now?" Two or three boys snickered.

"I don't see why you all should get to go off and do who knows what. Why can't we go *camping*? or whatever."

"Because," a boy said. "You're *girls*."

"Well," Beatrice said. "I think that's a stupid reason. And you're a stupid little boy."

"Yeah—well, why don't you go drive a car," her brother said.

Beatrice shoved'm. "Obscene." And she rushed ahead so'er hat brim warped up, and she called, "Just wait till mother hears about this."

"Now—wait—" And'e ran after'er.

Ron glanced down, growled, stopped. And t'other boys paused with'm while'e knelt and fiddled with'is bike chain. "What's the matter?" one said. "Somethin' busted?"

Ron grumbled, looked up t'see that the girls'd gone. He stood.

"This's what I've been talking about," he said. "This's our last chance." Somewhere amid distant heatwaver, a train whistle sounded. "Before you know it, we're gonna be bringing down babies off the mountain with our wives."

They parted at an intersection and boys that'd taken the same turn as Nathaniel peddled ahead and'd've disappeared'n the distance. But'e'dn't look up t'notice.

"Where're you going?"

He squinted and glanced beside'm. "Don't you have to get home?"

Regina's hat brim'd've shadowed'er face as she turned t'look at'm. "Is there some rule that says I have to go straight home?"

"Guess not."

"What's wrong with you?" she said.

"Huh?"

"You're not going home either."

"I've got things to do."

"What?"

"None of your business."

"Nathaniel Walcott."

But'e'dn't reply. And they eventually passed onto Mainstreet. Only a few cars'd've trickled through by that time of day and more'd've been parked'n front of the drugstore than anywhere else. Visible through'ts front window, businessmen with dis-buttoned jackets'd've sat on stools and balanced with their black-polished shoes against the counter's chrome footbar as a young man'n a striped-blue uniform and blue-paper hat wiped the counter.

"Why don't we get an ice cream?" Regina said, and reached for Nathaniel's arm. But'e pulled away.

"Maybe some other time. I—I've got things to do."

"Things. Things. Things. All you have are things, Nathaniel Walcott. But you wouldn't know a good thing when you saw it." And she brushed by'm and shoved open the door.

Maybe for a moment or two, Nathaniel'd've watched through the window as she alighted on a stool and the clerk draped'is cloth over'is shoulder and drifted towards'er.

But, hands'n'is pockets, he turned and passed from awning shadow t'awning shadow. He shaded'is eyes with'is hand and glanced up

and down the street, jogged across. The screendoor bell still faintly ringled as'e leaned into darkened interior. "Mrs Stowe?"

"What yuns thin Mrs Brubaker looked'ike? I always thin she must've been a big woman."

"Why?"

"I'dn't know. If...if she went up the mountain seven times...and really'd carry'er husband the last time, she must've been strong."

"That'd b'made-up," Li said.

"I'dn't thin so," Genie said.

"I always wanna imagine Mrs Astercott as younger than Mrs Walcott. But they must've been bout the same age, mustn't've they?"

"Yah."

"Yuns ever hear the one bout how'is mother waited'n the car while'is father went up the mountain?"

"Yuns thin that's true?"

"It's funny."

"Yuns thin Mary-Celleste'd've been nervous bout gettin a telegram?"

"Course."

"How come there'ren't any telegrams anymore?"

"Stupid question."

"Well, I know *why*. I mean... Oh, never mind."

"Yuns thin god knew'er husband was gonna die so that's why Catherine and'm never got a telegram?"

"Who knows?"

“So,” Mrs Walcott said. “When’s the happy day?”

Mary-Celleste’s cheeks must’ve burned, but she still smiled. “Thursday,” she said. And for a moment’er face must’ve looked aglow. “Jeff says we’ll be leaving first thing in the morning. That way we’ll be there in plenty of time and won’t have to worry about it getting dark.”

“Take my advice,” Mrs Brubaker said. “Have your husband pack a flashlight anyway. You never can tell what may happen. These things are not always so timely. Especially first ones. They’re usually the longest. You don’t know how long it took me and my Elmer to get on the right path the first time round. It’s a wonder we’re still not up there.” She shook’er head. “Dear, don’t look so.” And she put’er arm round the younger woman’s shoulders. “Everyone makes it through in the end.”

“Some, at least,” Mrs Walcott said into’er tea.

“Old gossip,” Mrs Brubaker said. She motioned t’ the ladies near the refreshments table. “We’ve got a graduation to worry about and if we don’t get our heads together the whole thing’s liable to come down on top’a them.”

“Yes,” Mrs Johnscraft said. “Has anyone heard anything about the paper lanterns? We need red and white *and* blue.”

“Catherine was supposed to order them.”

“Of course,” Mrs Walcott said, “we wouldn’t want to get caught flatfooted, as they say, because of some small accounting error, or this or that.”

“Oh, I’m sure everything’s in order,” Mrs Astercott said. “After all, it’s all she does, so she should know how to do it well enough by

now.” And she tipped’er head t’look over someone’s shoulder and she smiled. “Looks like you’ll get the chance to ask.” She still smiled as she moved toward the kitchen door along with Mrs Walcott. “You really shouldn’t have,” she said t’Catherine.

“It wasn’t any trouble.”

“Oh, but it looks fantastic. You must’ve spent hours on it.”

Catherine placed a covered cake plate on the refreshments table.

“But why don’t we leave it under glass right now. We wouldn’t want the ladybugs getting to it, would we?” And she glanced toward Mrs Walcott and smiled. “Of course, we’re just getting started here, aren’t we, Evelyn.”

Officer Coreman waved as he passed and Nathaniel returned it in kind. But then he slipped his hand back into his pocket. He must've heard something, and if he'd heard something, he'd've turned. A sunwashed figure'd've raised a thin wavery arm. A hoarse voice: "Afternoon." Nathaniel'd've paused to allow Mr Tillman to catch up with him. "Say, you been near the hardware store recently?"

"Passed by," Nathaniel said.

"Can't for the life of me figure out what's going on." He held a bucket of rusted tools in one hand. "Everything's closed down. The middle of the day, too. You know what's going on?"

Nathaniel shook his head.

Mr Tillman sighed. "Here I am—so close I can feel it in my bones—it's right under our feet—and I haven't even got a decent trowel. How's a man supposed to do great things under these conditions? You tell me that."

"Have you found something, Mr Tillman?"

"Found something? Well—I'd have to be right near on top the whole thing. You see—I've laid it all out—if—" He paused and his eyes narrowed and he glanced round. And he bent close. "Can you keep a secret?"

"I guess."

"Good." Mr Tillman straightened. He glanced round and over his shoulder. "This way then."

"I don't know... I've... got things to do at home."

"Bah—that can wait. Here, take this. Give an old man's arm a rest. Call it a lesson in community service."

Small shovels and trowels rustily grated against each other'n the bucket as Nathaniel carried it.

"You really think you've found something?"

"Practically have to, don't I?"

"Is it far? It's kind of hot to go out into the desert, isn't it?"

"What in the whole wide sky would I want to go out in the middle of the desert for?"

"I thought that's where archaeologists worked."

"We work where the work takes us." And Mr Tillman jabbed's finger toward the sky. "That's what we do." He opened a white picket gate and they crossed the grass and Nathaniel'd've followed'm round the side of the house and into the back yard.

"What do you think? Not bad, huh?"

"I guess," would've been all Nathaniel'd've said⁴⁶¹ ⁴⁶². "To be honest, Mr Tillman, I don't know much about how archaeology works."

"Well then, let me show you round."

Mr Tillman flung out's arms as'f t'point t'everything. "The dig site." A small grassy pathway'd've remained from the concrete step at the back door, round the house and out along the fence. Knee-high stakes'd've been driven at the pit's corners and twine stretched between'em. "As you can see, I've excavated down three layers. The idea's to divide the strata, try to separate each era from others. You can tell what's older'll be lower. That way you can divine out if there were different cultures and which ones came before or after. Or if there was only a single one that persisted over the whole time. Or... It's all based on how dust settles, you see. It's my own theory."

"Have you found anything yet?"

"It doesn't work like that. Take a look at these samples." And'e kicked the lid off an apple crate.

"Are those artifacts? They look like rocks to me."

"Well...yes. But you've gotta think in terms of what it *could* be. Any one of these could be some prehistoric Martian stone tool. They

⁴⁶¹ Passages such as this are one of the reasons Professor Holmes argues against the utilization of contemporary quotation marks. (See *The Agony And The Empire*, 2017, p. 23.)

⁴⁶² In the Stanton version this passage reads: 'I guess'd've been all Nathaniel'd've said.'

wouldn't have regular metal ones right off, you know. That's another theory of mine. You see, look at this one. See how it fits in the hand just right. Lots of things you could do with that. So you see the difference."

"Not really."

"Because one has *intelligence*," Mr Tillman said. "It may look exactly like a weather-worn rock—it may even *be* a weather-worn rock—but if it was *used*, then it's something completely different." Mr Tillman re-lidded the apple crate and mounted a ladder and descended into the trenches. "It's all right here—the primitive history of this planet laid out under our feet." He motioned for Nathaniel t'hand down the bucket. "And we'll find it. Don't you doubt it. We'll find it."

"How come you don't excavate in the ruins? Wouldn't that be a better place?"

"WHY?" Mr Tillman looked up. "I'll tell you why—because those big wig ninnies don't think it's safe to go *poking round* till they're *shored up* and *stabilized*—bah—like those yahoos are all that special. Scaredy pants. All of 'em. Danger—bah. Archaeology's the search for truth—of course it's going to be a little dangerous." He crouched and sorted through 'is rusty trowels. "But we'll show 'em. The amateur archaeological society's not going to take this laying down. No, sir. And when we get out there—we'll show the world a thing or two that'll make their heads spin."

"But—"

Mr Tillman jerked straight, trowel'n-hand as f t'jab'ts rusty blade between someone's ribs. "Passion—that's what they all lack. PASSION. Those big wigs're all just in it for the—"

"What's going on out here?" Mrs Tillman opened the back door and stuck out'er head. "Are you talking to yourself again?"

"No, I'm not talking to myself. I'm attempting to correct the obvious deficiencies of our apparently floundering education system."

Mrs Tillman looked down the strip of yard that remained along-back the house. "Oh. Hello, Nathaniel."

"Afternoon, Mrs Tillman."

"Everything going alright?"

"Yes, mam."

"Good. Roy isn't trying to take your ears off, is he?"

"Of course not. I'm just trying to educate the boy."

"You'll have to forgive him," Mrs Tillman said. "Sometimes he gets carried away with his hobbies."

"HOBBY! I'm advancing the state of human knowledge here."

"And why does the advancement of human knowledge require me to go without a clothesline? How am I supposed to advance the state of the laundry?"

"Of course, some sacrifices must, necessarily, be made for the greater good."

"What use is your advanced human race without clean shirts?"

"Don't talk nonsense, woman. The things we discover here'll fill the textbook for years to come. They might even have to add a second volume. It'll be—"

"And I'm sure they've already enough to learn as is. Nathaniel, dear, it's hot out, can I get you a glass of water?"

"No, but thank you. I probably have to be getting home."

"Where's your hat, dear?"

"I...forgot it today."

"Forgot it?" Mrs Tillman shook'er head. "You'll burn up and blow away."

"Yes, mam."

"And what exactly," Mr Tillman said from the trench, "do they teach about history in school these days?"

"Oh, Roy." Mrs Tillman shook'er head. "The same things they've always taught."

"Just my point—fifty years since I been outa school and what do them big wigs come up with? Nothing. Do they ever talk about anything after the creation of the universe? After the primordial Rocket? Do they talk about the planet itself? The non-men? What do they say about the Martians and their society? What do they say about archaeology? Nothing."

"Roy." Mrs Tillman shook her head.

"Well," Nathaniel said, "Mr Flett's supposed to give a lecture on history tomorrow. Maybe he'll talk about the Martians, as well."

"Flett!" Mr Tillman stomped hard-packed ground. "Flett!" And'e clutched'is hat and jerked't up and held't high over'is head.

“Now, take it easy, Roy.”

“Flett!—no wonder the educational system’s in the state it is. The man should’ve been drummed out of the organization years ago. Why—we should’ve—we—I said it was fishy when he got in—they did something funny with the votes, I say—they—”

“Roy, calm down.”

“How am I supposed to calm down when that, that imbecile is poisoning the minds of our youth!?”

“Hush, Roy. Don’t exaggerate.”

“Exaggerate! Exaggerate!”

Mrs Tillman shook’er head. “Maybe you’d better go, Nathaniel. Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing to do with you. He just gets this way sometimes. This is what happens when you stay out in the sun too long. Come in, Roy, till it cools off.”

“I’ve got important work to do.”

“You can do it just as easy when the sun goes down, can’t you?”

“Well... I guess. But time wasted—”

“You can come inside and help me unfold this indoor clothes-drying contraption.” And she smiled and waved t’Nathaniel. “See you later, dear. Let your grandmother know I said hello.”

“I will.” Nathaniel eased back round the house. Behind’m, Mr Tillman broke into another tirade, followed by the kitchen screen-door’s muffled slam.

Officer Coreman pulled into the parking lot behind the town council building and reached t'get'is cap from the passenger seat as'e climbed out. He whistled as'e walked. Lazy typewriter staccato carried through the door as'e opened't.

The chief turned'is seat, looked up from'is desk. "I'll assume everything went okay at the crossing."

"Yes, sir." Coreman stood at attention. "All children present and accounted for, sir."

The chief returned'is attention t'the typewriter keyboard, poked keys with each index finger. "Flippancy is not to be tolerated in this office."

"Yes, sir."

Back at the radio, the dispatcher laughed, then turned away and lifted'er nail file as the chief looked up.

"Please, confine your jocularity to off-hours, Officer Coreman."

"Yes, sir." He crossed t'is desk, set'is hat on the blotter.

"Well," the dispatcher said as she passed between their desks and opened the closet. "Since everyone's here, I'm going to lunch." And she slipped on'er jacket and fiddled with'er hat. "Should I pick up anything while I'm out?"

"Want a ride?"

"No, thanks," she said. "There's shade all the way to the drug-store." She checked'erself'n the mirror on the back of the closet door. "Daddy? Anything?"

He shook'is head but'dn't turn as'e continued t'peck at the typewriter. No rhythm. And'e continued like that awhile after she'd left. "Anything else to report?"

"Mrs Lodge seems to think somebody walked off with one of her pies."

"One of her pies?"

"Yes, sir. That's what she thinks."

"Hysterical woman."

"She's not the only one."

The chief looked up from the typewriter.

"Ferguson's seems to be missing a box of tomatoes."

"When was this?"

"The pie or the tomatoes, sir?"

"Don't be flippant, Officer Coreman."

"The pie must've been sometime this morning. According to Mrs Lodge. The tomatoes were... Saturday last. Ralph said there were two boxes come off the truck. But when he came back from carrying the first in, the other was gone. So I figure whoever it was must've taken off with it while he was still inside."

"There's no need for wild speculation. With a bit of application, I'm sure you'll find someone merely miscounted or mislaid them somewhere. That's a much more reasonable answer."

"He said he looked everywhere for them."

"Obviously, he didn't look where they were, otherwise he would've found them."

"Yes, sir. And the pie?"

"Simply another case of something being mislaid. Nine times out of ten that's the case with women that age. You can't let your fancy run wild with these kinds of things."

"Yes, sir. But if you don't mind, I'd like to continue investigating."

"Why? I don't see the point." His fingers paused over the keyboard and he leaned forward to examine the paper extruded from the machine. "Besides, we're very busy. We've got to work out these traffic patterns for graduation day. Councilman Groveart is coming over later. And I have a meeting with the mayor. And you've got to get the patrol car cleaned up. The decorating committee will have a fit if they think we're going to put it out there looking like that." He expelled the page from the machine's grasp and held it in both hands as he looked it over. He crumpled it and tossed it onto his desk. "Since you're just standing around..." He closed the book that lay open on his blotter.

“Take this over to the council secretarial pool and have someone type up a copy of the police chief’s graduation speech so I can have one to take with me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Cacophony echoed from deeper within the house. His white t-shirt'd've been sweat-stained and dusted orange as'e stepped inside and under the ministrations of ceiling fans that'd've seemed t'circulate voices the same way they'd circulated air. And'e'd've just managed t'mount the stairs before the first woman bustled from the kitchen and down the hall. "Afternoon, Nathaniel." And they'd've smiled at'm as they paused and retook their hats and parasols from the rack. "You shouldn't exert yourself so on days such as this, young man. You need to conserve your strength." But none'd've said for what.

Face still hot, throat dry, he dismounted the stairs and walked toward the kitchen. Maybe'f'e'd paid attention'e'd've heard: "It was good to see you. You should get over to this side of the street more often." Or maybe'e'd just thought't'd been'is grandmother who'd pushed-open the kitchen swingdoor. He looked up. Boiled away. They almost tangled—and'd've'd'en't pressed'is back against a narrow table turned against the wall beneath the stairs and shook a flower vase on't so't'd've almost overturned and'f she'dn't done the same against a glass-fronted bookcase opposite. They paused. Just a little too close. "Nathaniel..." And'e'd've been nearnuf t'feel'er breath against'is boiling face.

"M—mam..." His voice'd've rattled as'f'e'd just learned t'speak.

"I guess...you came by the store this afternoon."

He nodded.

"You... You should come by tomorrow... Maybe... I... There're probably a few things...you can help me with."

"Nathaniel?" His grandmother's voice penetrated the kitchen swingdoor. "Is that you out there?"

He'dn't turn away from looking at'er. "I'll be there."

She nodded, slid by, broke away, rested'er hand on the banister and looked back. "Tomorrow." And she took'er hat and slipped through the front door out into a blast-furnace that'd t've been cooler than where she'd just been.

"Nathaniel?"

His grandmother pushed-open the kitchen door with'er elbow as she tied'er apron. "There you are." ... She touched the backs of her fingers to his cheek. "You're broiling." And she shook'er head. "Come sit down and have something to drink right this minute." She herded'm t'the kitchen table and stuck a glass beneath the faucet. "Here you go, dear. Drink it slowly—slowly, hear?"

His mother entered through the back door with a lemonade pitcher on a platter. A few lemon slices floated'n minimal liquid.

Nathaniel half-rose, glass'n-hand, as'f t'ease toward the hallway.

"No you don't, young man." His grandmother brandished a spoon. "You sit right down till you've finished that."

"Where have you been?" his mother said.

He explained bout Mr Tillman. "Mrs Tillman said to say hello."

His grandmother nodded. "You're a good boy."

"We've got everything worked out about the dance," his mother said.

His grandmother sank'er hands into soapy water. "That's nice."

"Yes," his mother said. "You should—"—and she glanced at Nathaniel—"—ask whoever you might want to take as soon as you can. You know what they say about the early bird."

"Sounds like a good idea," his grandmother said.

"Yes." His mother turned toward'm. "Did you have anyone in mind?"

He shook'is head.

"I was thinking," his mother said, "why don't you ask the Prescott's daughter?"

He looked up from'is glass.

"Her mother tells me she's a wonderful dancer. I'm sure you two would have fun." Then she said, "Unless you think you might want to go with someone else, that is."

He shook'is head.

"Good," his mother said. "So why don't you ask her the next chance you get. I'm sure that you'll be seeing her soon enough. And you know what they say."

He rose and set 'is empty glass on the counter by the sink.

"Better get changed," his grandmother said. "I'll wash that shirt before the stains set in."

"Yes, mam."

He'd've barely been able t' discern their voices as 'e went back into the hall and up the stairs and climbed the ladder into the cupola and let the trapdoor close behind'm. Ribbed sunlight'd've flared between shutter slats and banded'm as 'e dropped 'is shirt by 'is bed and dis-buttoned 'is jeans. Lazy heat circulated through the cupola. Afternoon sun twinkled off the brass bedframe. His erection'd've felt hotter than air. And 'e'd've'd t'grab 'is damp discarded t-shirt as 'e huffed and lay back and closed 'is eyes with 'is heated erection still'n-hand. His foot twitched...

"Nathaniel Walcott." A broom handle tap-tapped the kitchen ceiling. "Does it take all day to change a shirt?"

He buttoned'mself into 'is pants and grabbed a shirt from the clothes basket and trumbled downstairs.

"Well, good," she said when 'e entered the kitchen. "I thought we might have to send the fire department up after you."

"I fell asleep."

His grandmother eyed'm, touched 'is face with the backs of'er fingers. "You still look a little pea-kud," she said. "Are you sure you feel alright?" Nathaniel nodded. "Well," she said, "I guess it's alright. Sometimes I need an afternoon nap, myself."

"Yes, mam."

"Well, it's all set," his mother said as she pushed through the kitchen door. "They're—" She glanced at Nathaniel. His grandmother nodded. And she stepped toward the counter and lifted a galvanized pale covered'n red-white-checkered cloth.

"Nathaniel," she said. "I need you to take this down to Mrs Barkley. But don't be too long about it, alright."

He nodded and took ahold of the handle.

"Yes," his mother said. "We're eating promptly at six. And you know how your father doesn't like to wait."

“But,” his grandmother said. “Take it easy. We don’t want you keeling over, do we.”

Nathaniel nodded and opened the back door.

He pushed his bicycle from the garage, but watched the house across the street. But it'd've been impossible to tell anything of what went on inside as he peddled away.

She slipped into'er tub and rested the back of'er head against't. Wet hair clung t'er cheeks and neck.

A breeze puckered a small high bathroom window curtain.

She shifted. Faint light revealed undulation'n the water surface. Her motions produced an undercurrent that drifted along as breeze might through the hairs between'er legs. And'er breath caught, a small sound that'd've died before't'd reached the bathroom's walls.

She lay back. Eyes closed. Deep breaths.

When she'd opened'em again, she looked up at the ceiling, a darkened bare lightbulb'n a porcelain fixture. Her fingers brushed between'er legs, up'er stomach, over'er arms, her neck.

Rivulets broke over'er skin and dribbled into their source, splattered tile as she stepped out. She watched'erself'n a small medicine cabinet mirror as she brought a towel over'er shoulders. Dimness and dampness'd eradicated grey-white hair.

She'dn't dry't.

With the towel still over'er shoulders, she went into the hall. Two doors lay at'ts far end. One she'd only ever opened t'sweep or change sheets or replace laundry. But that must've been a long time before. Maybe she'd imagined a thick dust layer settled over everything. So thick yuh'd've sunk ankle-deep into coarse grey powder. Or maybe she thought nothing at all of't.

In'er bedroom, she dropped the towel from'er shoulders and onto the bedframe and sat on mattress edge, faced an always-curtained window where faint sunlight'd've pried'ts way through t'frame'ts edges'n dull yellow. And'f she'd've stood and'f she'd've opened'em and'f Nathaniel'd've been'n'is room and'f'is windows'd been opened and'f'e'd been looking down across the street right then...

She reached for the towel. But the comforter'd've already've been damped.

Genie breathed softly, must've slept by then. She mumbled.

In the dark, Helena chewed the last of'er fish.

"Really proved that old lady wrong when'e got back, didn't'e?"

Li said. "Surprises me'e'd've'd no feelin left'n that thin. Or that't wasn't chapped t'fudge." She laughed. "Or too chapped t'fudge."

"Yuh like agreein with yuhrself, don't yuh?"

"Yap." Li laughed again. "I know a few guys 'oo'd take some lessons."

"Who'dn't?"

"Yuh mean Tom? 'e'd never get't up half the time, nowise."

"I'dn't mean Tom."

"Who then?"

"None of yuhr business."

"Oooooooh, secrets."

"Seems like't's more and more a problem these days," Mara said.

"These days," Li said. "Soundin old."

Mara'dn't reply.

Nathaniel peddled down the long black asphalt run that spurred from town and stretched across vacant desert toward a distant grove where old-growth, black-barked, dark-leaved oaks clustered so thickly they'd've allowed nothing but a dark mouth where that road entered'em. Beyond, darkened shadow obliterated the arid landscape outside and must've made't seem t'never've existed. He coasted'n primordial dusk till'e'd reached the first streetlamp's blue-halo periphery. Passing from light pool t'light pool till'e'd reached Mrs Barkley's house, he braked and leaned'is bicycle against a wrought-iron fence. On the roof, a black-painted weather-[goose] perpetually pointed north. And the wrought-iron gate squealed as'e forced't back t'make'is way up a weed-dotted path. On the front door, a brass knocker bared'ts teeth t'hold a ring. He tapped't against the strikeplate.

A blue-smocked woman opened the door. "Hello, Nathaniel. What brings you out this way?"

He lifted the pale. "Grandmother asked me to bring this."

"How nice." She motioned for'm t'enter. "Mrs Barkley." And she led'm into the parlor, where two glowlamps sat concealed on opposite tables beneath thick shades. "A young man's come to visit, Mrs Barkley."

The shawl-enshrouded figure propped'n a rocking chair'n a corner'dn't move.

"Why don't I just take this to the kitchen," the nurse said. And she disappeared behind a drapery.

That old woman, silent, started t'rock.

Nathaniel's eyes slowly adjusted t'the dimness. But even'f the

light'd been better, age-darkened wall pictures hung with nothing discernible behind their glass.

That old woman rocked back and forth with'er shawl wrapped at'er shoulders and'er papery-crinkled skin winked'n-and-outa lamplight.

"Were you born here?"

Nathaniel stared into that shadowed corner from which'er raspy, arid voice'd emerged.

"Were you born here?"

He nodded, finally said, "Yes. I guess so."

That old woman rocked back and forth. She heaved, a dry rattle. "Bet you don't even know how to use it." She pointed with a long finger that must've looked as'f parchment'd been pulled over sticks and marbles.

"Um. Huh?"

"Bet you can't even—" —her voice must've rolled as wind can over sand—" —get it hard." She heaved, that same dry rattle.

"Know how old I am, boy?"

Nathaniel shook'is head.

"Bet you can't even get it hard."

She rocked back and forth.

"CAN'T EVEN GET IT HARD."

Her shout made'm step back. He tripped over a stool. She rocked back and forth.

The nurse burst through the curtain.

"Can't... Can't... Can't..."

Nathaniel picked'mself up.

"Mrs Barkley," the nurse said as she moved towards that old woman. "Calm yourself."

"Can't... Can't..."

The nurse glanced over'er shoulder. "Maybe you should leave, Nathaniel. It's alright. It's just one of her spells. They've been getting worse lately, I'm afraid." She motioned toward the door. "It's nothing. No need to worry," she said. And she opened the front door and pushed'm through. "Be sure to tell your grandmother thank you."

"I..."

The nurse closed the front door and the knocker'd've just barely stopped short of'is nose.

This's just me. But I thought there's some things yuh'd know. Some of this came from a book I found laying'n⁹³³ an alley. It looks t'b'a journal. I think so, anyway. But the seventh person, whoever's supposed t'b'writing't's (wrote?) never named and I can't discern who't'd've been. Maybe they're'n't even round anymore. A few pages've been torn out here and there and't looks t've been kicked round a bit. Alotta't's still here though, I think. But the next few nights' worth of entries seem t'b'missing. It starts again with the narrator probably sitting at a window looking at a square painful with noonish sun and writing what happened the night before while everyone else's still asleep. K——'d kept wanting t'sleep higher the farther they'd gotten from the third. Even'f they'dn't met anyone else out there yet. L——'d said, "She's gonna've us sleepin on the freakin roofs by the time we get there." H—— yawned, woke, went out probably t'urinate on the stairs since they'dn't reached a fountain yet. "Definitely tomorrow," L——'d said. "Day after at most." And H—— shook'er sleepy head as she came'n and noticed our journaler at the window. But I think I've enough of an idea t'write what happened on those few days prior.

Crouched amid azaleas, poked and prodded by fresh-trimmed branches and coarse leaves, assaulted by wilting pink blossoms and putrefaction, trynan't slip on the congealing brown mass of dead and fallen petals, Zeb watched the father descend the front steps and produce a watch from 'is vest pocket. "We should be going if we're not going to be late."

The screendoor opened. The wife touch the pin that anchored a white hat off-center on'er head, then worked'er hand into'er other white glove. "No use to rush, dear. A lady has to take her time."

"I'm sure the Walcotts will appreciate that sentiment if dinner is cold."

"Oswald, no one makes a dinner appointment for *exactly* six o'clock."

"Oh?"

"No. Of course not. That's just not how things work."

"I'm sorry. I thought the clock was the same the world over."

His wife brushed a gloved hand over'er dress as she descended the steps. "You would think that everything was run like that precious bank. And it's not like you're even where you should be in that."

"Harriette, let's not get into this now."

"I'm not getting into anything. I'm just saying."

"Just—"

"I'm ready." The daughter came through the door and stopped at the top of the steps. Her end-curved hair fell around'er shoulders and framed'er pink-white dress with lace front piece.

The mother turned, went up two steps, adjusted the daughter's collar. "Beautiful. Don't you think, Oswald?"

"Prettiest girl I ever saw."

"Well," his wife said. "Thank you very much."

"And just in time." He snapped-shut his watch and returned to his pocket. "Alright. Everybody in the car."

"Just a minute," his wife said. "Regina, will you go get my pocketbook, please. I think I left it on top of my dresser."

The daughter nodded and disappeared into the house.

The wife descended the steps again, adjusted one of her gloves as she said, "I just want to make sure we're on the same page about this, Oswald."

"Not again, Harriette. Please."

"And I don't want you saying anything tonight. It could be a very important night for your daughter."

"What would I say?"

"You haven't been very enthusiastic about this from the start."

"All I said was I've never seen the Walcott boy as having had any real interest in our daughter."

"Pish. Why wouldn't he be interested in her?"

The husband shook his head.

"Well, we don't need you saying anything about that. You'll see about him. Besides, it's perfect."

"If you say."

The wife shook her head. "It's about time this family had something of prominence."

"I always felt the bank was rather prominent."

"But how much of that do you *see*? Just look around you. Even your own house. If it's here, it's built by the Walcotts. *That's* real. You can *see* that. How can you *see* figures in a book in some drawer in some cabinet. What does anyone say about the bank? They grumble about repaying their loans." She touched her hatpin.

The screendoor opened. The wife glanced over her shoulder. "Regina, dear, would you also get my fan, if you don't mind. I think it's upstairs in my dresser. Try the top drawer."

"I just," the husband said as the screendoor closed again, "don't want anything rushed into, is all."

"Do you want your daughter ending up with some farmer or grocery store clerk, Oswald? Is that what you want?"

"I never said that either."

"Or maybe you'd like to see her never married at all, so she can live under our roof and end up living alone like you know who."

"I don't think that's fair."

"And how do you know? What do you know of it?"

"Her hardware store's right across from the bank, for one. And she does business with us. Like everyone else, remember?"

"How could I forget? Maybe in the future, Oswald, you should be more selective of who you interact with."

"Harriette, we can't run a bank based on who is and isn't in your social club."

"I don't see why not. I don't see why banks always have to deny the way the world works."

"The same as with bank time, I guess."

But before the wife'd reply, the daughter pushed-open the screen-door again and stepped out with a fan and black clutch'n-hand. "This one, mother? It's the only one I could find."

"That'll be fine, dear." She cut a glance toward'er husband as she took't and rummaged inside and snapped't shut. "Well," she said. "We're ready. Are you?"

"Yes, mam. Sorry I keep holding you up."

"And, Regina," the wife said as they climbed into the car. "Dear, roll up the window on your side. We don't want your hair messed up by the wind."

Through the bushes, Zeb'd've been able t'watch their car reverse down the driveway and'e'd've listened as't moved down the street. Slimy, half-decomposed blossoms stuck t'is bare legs as'e shifted. He'd've still'd t've waited there till dark.

“Amazin,” Li said, “’ow’e’s jus where yuh need’m t’be.”

“What’re yuh talkin bout?” Genie said.

Mara’dn’t reply. But Ambeth shrugged. “It’sn’t completely implausible. He was round. He’d’ve heard somethin like that.”

“If yuh leave’t out,” Helena said, “how do yuh connect’t up with what happens later?”

“Obviously,” Li said, “’e was *somewhere*, so’t might aswell’ve been there.” And she rolled’er eyes and groaned.

“Nathaniel? Is that you?” Faintly’is grandmother’s voice carried through the kitchen screendoor and into the garage as’e stored’is bicycle. “Good,” she said when’e rounded the corner. “Go upstairs and get washed up. And put on a shirt and tie. We’ve got guests coming over tonight.”

“Who?”

“Never you mind that. Just get along, now. Scoot.”

Upstairs, quick raps against the bathroom door preceded’is mother’s voice. “Don’t spend all evening in there, Nathaniel.” And’er heels dully pattered down carpeted stairs.

Her husband sat’n the den.

“What do you think?”

He looked up. “Marvelous.”

“Thank you,” she said. “And what’re you working so diligently on at this hour?”

“Just keeping an eye on things,” he said. “It all doesn’t end at graduation.”

“And the more immediate concerns, dear? You know what they say.”

He re-capped’is pen, stood. “I’m all yours for the night.” And’e turned and replaced a book onto a shelf.

“Good to know, dear. Have you spoken with Nathaniel yet?”

“No. I figured there’s a little time. It’s only a quarter after.”

“You shouldn’t put it off.”

“I won’t.”

“We have to keep the ball rolling, you know, as they say.”

He rounded the desk. “Of course, dear.”

"You're not against this, I hope."

"Now, how could I be against my boy being happy?"

"Oh," she said, "I didn't mean otherwise." She smiled and nodded.

"Now, I should really go see how grandmother's getting along."

"Right on schedule," she called from the kitchen.

"I guess that answers that," Mr Walcott said.

They turned as Nathaniel descended the stairs. "Well," his mother said, "I guess I'll leave you two alone." And she stepped into the hall and disappeared into the dining room.

His father motioned for'm. "Smartly done. But let me work on your tie a moment." ... "There we go."

"Sorry."

"Nothing to apologize for." He glanced over's shoulder at a wall clock. "Come in a minute or two. There's something I want to discuss." And'e slid the den doors together after'm.

"You know, son, it's a very important time coming up. I mean, I know you know all the major points. What boy your age doesn't. But..." He motioned for Nathaniel t'sit. "You see, son, as The Book says, Man is a whole being. But in addition there are women and..." He shook's head. Cleared's throat. Looked round the room. Finally, he slipped's hands into's pockets. "Nathaniel, the universe is a great system. And every piece of that system has a function ordained by God. So when someone gets your age it's only natural their thoughts turn toward marriage. But I also know these can be...it's natural to be nervous about these sorts of things. So I just want you to know, anytime you need to talk to me, no matter about what, feel free. Understand?"

"I think so."

His father nodded. "Good."

Nathaniel inhaled. "I—"

Brass chimes.

Muffled footsteps carried over the hall carpet and's father moved t'open the den doors.

"Harriette. Oswald. So glad you could make it. And Regina." His mother smiled. And's father slipped by and gripped Mr Prescott's hand.

"I must say, something certainly smells good."

Here, H——'d've groaned and L——'d've snickered.

“Oswald,” Mrs Prescott said. “Always thinking with his stomach.”

And they filtered into the living room, adults into high-backed chairs, leaving Nathaniel and Regina t’ the love seat. The elder Walcotts and Prescotts smiled faintly.

“Well,” Mrs Walcott said. “Regina, I know you’re excited about the graduation.”

“Oh, I am.”

“Yes,” Mrs Prescott said. “We’re still stuck, I’m afraid, on her dress. Willman’s has had some particularly fine things of late.” Then t’ Mrs Walcott: “Have you been by to see them?”

“I haven’t.”

“You must.”

“Personally,” Mr Prescott said. “I’ve never seen what all the hoopra is about. Whatever they wear is going to be under those robes anyway. Always seemed like kind of a waste.”

“Not one for the finer things, eh, Ozz?” said Mr Walcott.

“Oh, don’t let him fool you,” Mrs Prescott said. “Oswald wouldn’t even leave the house if there was so much as the tiniest spot on the back of his tie.”

“Well, I guess,” Mr Walcott said, “that’s why we get married, isn’t it? To make sure the little things get taken care of.”

Everyone managed a chuckle.

“And what about you, Nathaniel?” Mrs Prescott said. “Are you excited about the graduation?”

“I guess so.”

"Probably too busy thinking about that test," Mr Prescott said.

"Oh," Mrs Walcott said, and waved'er hand. "That's nothing to worry about. In fact, I don't even see why they bother with it at all."

"Everything," Mr Walcott said, "has it's season and reason."

"Exactly." Mr Prescott nodded. "We have to turn the sheep through before the goats."

"Now, Oswald."

Mr Prescott showed'is hands. "As of now, the Oswald Prescott repeating service is off the air."

Mrs Prescott shook'er head. "Really, Oswald." She glanced across at Mrs Walcott. "Sometimes with him you would think the reverend's program is the same as going to church."

"Yes, it can be quite fascinating, can't it? We always, as they say, 'tune-in', don't we, Harold." And Mrs Walcott nodded t'er husband.

"Oh, yes."

"You'd think Oswald had been born in a ministerial family, sometimes," Mrs Prescott said.

"Oh, I am merely an amateur, I confess."

Mrs Walcott said, "How fascinating."

"It's nothing, really. A pastime. You know, something to relax after work."

"I wish Harold would learn from you."

"Oh," Mrs Prescott said. "Don't say that."

"No, really. It might be interesting for you, Harold."

"Well..."

"Just don't let them know down at the lodge," Mr Prescott said. "The annual potluck's coming up, you know. And that means they'll be on the lookout for speakers."

"Harold looked very auspicious in those robes when he spoke a couple of years ago."

"Well," Mr Prescott said, with a glanced toward Mr Walcott. "We have to let the wives in once a year at least, don't we?"

Mrs Prescott cleared'er throat and then looked over toward the loveseat and smiled.

Her husband nodded t'mself. "You see where the town council's paying custodians overtime to get the bandstand and streets cleaned up for the graduation? Wonder who's paying for that?"

Mr Walcott shook his head. "We all know where it's eventually coming from."

"Now," Mrs Walcott said, "that's enough of that. No more 'shop talk', as they say, tonight." She turned toward the love seat. "Regina, I really love what you've done with your hair."

Regina smiled, touched her curls.

"Yes," Mrs Walcott said. "It is wonderful. Don't you think so, Nathaniel?"

Nathaniel turned his head and nodded.

"Well, say something." Mrs Walcott laughed.

"Yes, it looks very nice tonight."

"Thank you, Nathaniel." She touched her curls. "I'm glad you noticed."

Mr Prescott leaned over and put the back of his hand aside his mouth. "Of course," he said in a muffled voice to Mr Walcott, "weren't we all horribly shy at that age."

Mr Walcott nodded.

Mrs Prescott glanced toward them. "What are you two conniving about?"

"Nothing," her husband said. "Just reminiscing."

"And what about?"

"Why, our wedding day, of course."

"I don't believe that for a second."

"I wouldn't doubt it," Mrs Walcott said. "They say a memory can strike at the oddest times, you know. Harold often talks about how he remembers that day. Isn't that so, Harold?" And she nodded.

"Yes. Yes, of course. It was quite a remarkable day. Actually, I can't say there might have been any more remarkable a day in my life."

"You know, Harry, I'm the same way." Mr Prescott took his wife's hand. "It really is the pinnacle of life."

Mrs Walcott smiled and turned to look at the loveseat, where she'd've caught Nathaniel's fleeting but distant gaze. "Did you have something to say, dear?"

"Yes," Mrs Prescott said. "Don't let us drown you out."

Nathaniel shook his head. "I was...just thinking."

"About what dear?"

"Yes," Regina said. "About what?"

“I was just wondering...”

“Go on, son.”

I've heard longer versions of this, but I don't want this t'sound as'f't was copied from a Midnight book, so I'll put the dinner bell here, I don't think M——'d've let't drag too long, anyway, the way some storytellers can do when they wanna express the oppressive tedium and seeming infinitude that night must've been steeped'n.

They rose. "Nathaniel," his mother said. "Why don't you show Regina the way." And she took'er husband's arm. And Mrs Prescott nodded and'd the same. And Regina followed'er mother and intertwined'er arm with Nathaniel's.

Grandmother stood by the table'n a puffed-sleeved dress. And then after the men'd pulled out their wive's chairs, Mr Walcott pulled out'ers and she smiled at Nathaniel as'e'd the same for Regina.

"Everything looks wonderful. Evelyn, you've outdone yourself."

"Oh, it was nothing. Just something thrown together."

"In any regards," Mr Walcott said. "Let us be thankful our friends could be here. And let us hope for many happy things to come."

"Well said, dear."

And the adults glanced round with faint smiles at the two young people.

The Prescott's taillights faded t'cobalt pinpoints and disappeared beyond a distant intersection. Nathaniel turned away as'is father closed the front door. A hand rested on'is shoulder. "You handled yourself well tonight, son."

Nathaniel nodded.

"Tired?"

"Yeah."

"It has been a big night. Better go up and get some sleep."

"I think... I think I'll get some water first."

His father patted'is shoulder, nodded and wandered toward the living room. Nathaniel slipped'is hands into'is pockets and pushed-open the kitchen swingdoor with'is elbow. A roasting pan emerged at an angle between soap-bubble peaks afloat on brown-red liquid. His grandmother looked over'er shoulder, smiled. "Didn't you just look the dapper young man tonight." She turned toward the sink, reached for a scrub brush. "It wouldn't surprise me if you're all Regina Prescott can talk about right now."

"I doubt it." Nathaniel glanced blankly over a plate of leftovers destined for the icebox.

"Now, don't go eating too late. You'll get a sour stomach before bed. Which is where you should be, young man."

"I'm not tired."

"Too much excitement," she said, and reached for a dish rag. "You're not sick at your stomach, are you? I'll make you some peach tree tea." She glanced over'er shoulder.

He shook'is head.

"Too much excitement," she said. "And what makes you think she doesn't like you? Balderdash."

"Maybe."

"You'll see," she said. "Everything will look new tomorrow. You want a sip of water before you go up?"

"No."

Another night?

He opened the back door and mechanically reached for the light switch and laid 'is cap on the table and walked toward the icebox. And as usual, the top rack sat empty but for a plate and sandwich and pop bottle. He set both on the counter by the sink. The pop bottle cap 'e twisted off and placed on the counter as 'f 'e'd moved a checker piece. Sipping fizz, he adjusted the curtain. By then, a hundred or so mostly-green-but-sometimes-rendered-iridescent-gold-with-kitchen-light insects crawled and flitted along window glass. Tiny grey-winged salt-and-pepper moths alighted, rested, slowly hinged their wings as they seemed t'try and reason on the sudden appearance of a brighter star. And't'd've been late enough'n the year that lightening bugs'd've lept from grass blades t'momentarily flash cerulean and bright cobalt. He bit into 'is sandwich. Nothing beyond the glass regarded 'is movements. He sipped pop. Then—fwap—as 'f a rock'd hit the window. It bounced, floundered between darkness and light, hit glass, rebounded. Then nothing. It'd probably been tantalized by some other light, maybe at some other kitchen window as someone climbed outa bed for a late drink of water. It sometimes happened.

Coreman set the empty pop bottle on the counter and stepped toward the light switch. A soft pat kissed glass. And when 'e turned, tufted, golden-furred antennae wriggled as 'f t'say hi. Great powdery wings slowly hinged.

He stood there several moments with 'is finger on the light switch as 'e watched't. Finally, he flicked't. And 'is little collection slowly scattered into night.

Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaang.

He turned and went into the darkened living room. Who'd've known a cat'd been up a tree that time of night?

Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaang.

He waded through darkness, lost'is bearings.

Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaang.

His fingertips brushed a lampshade and'e reached beneath't.

"Hello."

"Yes. What—"

"Okay. Yeah. Say that again."

"You sure?"

"Uh... Yeah. Okay, I'll be right there."

"Yeah. I'm leaving right now."

"I will."

He put the phone down and absently ran'is fingers through'is hair.

"What was that?" Maureen yawned, stepped from the hallway while she double-knotted'er robe belt. "It's the middle of the night, Joe."

"Yeah," he said. "Sorry. It's..."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Don't worry about it. Go back to bed."

"But what's going on?"

"I've got to go out a little while. Police business." Already'e'd half-crossed the living room.

"But it's the middle of the night. What can there possibly be to do in the middle of the night?" She followed'm into the kitchen, where'e snatched'is cap off the table.

"No time." He opened the back door. "Go back to bed. Don't worry about it."

"But when will you be back?"

"I...can't say. Don't wait up. I...may not be back till morning."

"Joe—"

But the screendoor'd've already slammed behind'm. Headlights flared against the neighboring houses. And moths gathered on the screen.

Even from the hallway, the grandfather clock's timbre'd've drowned the mantle clock's soft clicks between which there'd been the soft drum-thump of Mrs Walcott piercing a piece of fabric held'n a cross-stitch hoop and gentle rustlings as Mr Walcott shifted'is newspaper.

Swift knocks on the front door carried down the hall and even overcame the grandfather clock's throbic ticks. They looked up. Another two or three knocks followed'n rapid succession. Grandmother Walcott appeared'n the hall outside the living room doorway, rubbed'er hands against'er apron. "Now, what do you think that is all about?"

Mr Walcott set'is paper aside. "I don't know. But I'll go see." And as'e passed, Mrs Walcott stowed'er cross-stitch'n a basket beneath a nearby table. Knocks tumbled over'emselfs as'e reached the door. And when'e opened't, the man almost fell forward as'is knuckles rapped air.

"Harold." Their neighbor adjusted'mself. "Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"So you haven't. It's over at the Prescott place. The biggest thing going on you ever saw...they say."

"Did I hear someone mention the Prescotts?" Mrs Walcott came up behind'er husband.

The man nodded. "Officer Coreman's already there. And the chief too. And the fire department's turned out—"

"What in the world for?" Mrs Walcott said. "There hasn't been a fire?"

"Oh, no. But—that's just it—the derndest thing—somebody

smashed the back door in on their house. Smashed right through the kitchen door—smashed it all to pieces, from what I hear.”

“Where did you hear this?”

“Henry came across the street. His nephew’s a volunteer, you know. Said everybody and their brother’s over there trying to see what the blazes is going on.”

Warm night breeze carried engine noise through their open door. And overhead, headlights strobed between cupola shutter slats. Nathaniel pulled up’is pajama bottoms, rolled outa bed and folded one back. Headlights carved light wedges’n the night, illuminated the back of successive cars all the way t’the next intersection. Up and down the street, moths orbited porch and garage lights.

Nathaniel yanked’is robe off a bedpost, clamored through the trapdoor before’e’d a chance t’get’is arms proper through’ts sleeves and fought’t as’e dismounted the ladder, wrangled’ts belt round’is waist as’e came t’the top of the stairs.

Down at their front door, Mrs Walcott touched’er husband’s shoulder and said, “Harold, maybe we should go and see if everything is alright.”

Nathaniel eased down t’the first landing. “What’s going on?” His father glanced round and up, but’dn’t reply. He turned t’their neighbor.

“Me and the misses were just going over to see what it’s all about. Thought you’d want to know if you didn’t already.” And’e turned and went down the Walcott’s front steps and waved t’is wife, who stood by their car.

The Walcotts stood’n their own doorway, watched the parade dwindle till almost every garage’d emptied.

Mrs Walcott squeezed’er husband’s arm. He nodded and closed their front door, turned t’is family. “I guess we should go and...do whatever we can.”

“I’ll be ready in a moment.” And Mrs Walcott mounted the stairs and passed Nathaniel.

“You just give me a call,” Grandmother Walcott said. “And I’ll have sandwiches and coffee made up to send over.”

“I hardly think that’s necessary just yet.”

“Of course it is. All those people running around in the middle of

the night. Takes it out of a person. And after all, this sounds like a real emergency,” she said as she moved toward the kitchen.

“Can I come?” Nathaniel said, from the stairs.

His father looked up at’m. “It’s late, son.”

“Please...”

After a moment, his father finally nodded. “Okay. But hurry up. Get decent.”

Nathaniel threw’mself upstairs and up the cupola ladder without bother t’close the trapdoor or shutters as’e mucked’n darkness for’is shirt and pants, didn’t even bother t’hunt socks, just jammed’is feet into’is sneakers and’d made’t back downstairs before’is mother’d emerged from’er room. Mr Walcott’d already produced’is jacket from the closet and grabbed’is hat. “Ready?” he said as Mrs Walcott descended. She nodded.

Grandmother Walcott waved from beneath porchlight as they backed into a quiet-again street. She called, “You be sure to let me know what you need.”

Porchlights and streetlamps drifted past as warm night air circulated through half-down windows. Mrs Walcott’d’ve adjusted’er hat’n the sunvisor mirror. Nearnuf, ahead, taillights appeared as’f they’d been cat eyes amid night and Mr Walcott slowed the car as they approached a gridlocked intersection. Only a brakelight field lay ahead.

“What’s going on, dear?”

“There must be too many cars,” her husband said.

Nathaniel shifted across the back seat and poked’is head out. “Yeah, it’s all jammed up.”

“Harold, maybe you should get us out of here.”

He dropped into reverse, but headlights flashed over’em from behind even before’e’d glanced’n a mirror. Horns blared.

His wife turned t’follow’is gaze. “What’re we going to do?”

He turned t’look down at the gearshift and dropped the car into park. “I guess we’ll just have to get out and go it afoot.”

And that must’ve been what everyone else’d resorted t’aswell, because a man and woman walked arm and arm between their car and the next. “Evening, Mr Walcott, Mrs Walcott.”

Mr Walcott nodded’n return. He turned t’is wife. “There’s not much else to do for it.”

"All this trouble," she said as she opened and closed'er pocketbook, "and it's likely not for anything at all."

"Let's hope so."

Nathaniel climbed out and looked over silent streetlamp-lit cars'n a street-turned-parking-lot. His father called, and'e followed'em toward the sidewalk, where they'd've dodged round cars that'd pulled over the curb and Mr Walcott'd've'd t'take'is wife's arm as'er heels sank into someone's lawn and she'd've tottered till they returned t'concrete. "The nerve of some people," she said. "Flaunting laws. You know what they say."

"Can I run ahead?"

"I don't think so, son. We best stay together for the moment."

Headlights'd've lit a distant house and yard with a daylight's worth of illumination twice over. A car sat empty'n the driveway. People collected between socked'n cars and trucks, some even with only robes over their bedclothes as they stood'n their doorways opposite and younger children projected heads and shoulders through their bedroom windows, still'n their pajamas.

Someone put a hand on Mr Walcott's shoulder. "Evening, Harry." And Mr Walcott turned. "Nasty business."

"What's going on?" Nathaniel said.

"Don't really know yet. The police have been up there awhile now. Want everybody to stay back." The patrol car sat parked by the curb'n front of the house. "Hey—" The man pointed. "There's Joe now."

Mr Walcott turned t'is wife. "Maybe you should wait here." And'e dis-intwined'is arm from'ers and moved through the crowd. And before she'd notice, Nathaniel followed'm, but kept back, hid behind a jalopy that'd pulled onto the curb.

Officer Coreman crossed the Prescott's front lawn. He flipped'is black notebook closed and slipped't and'is pencil into'is front shirt pocket and buttoned't. Then'e raised'is arms. "If everyone can please just settle down."

"What's going on, Joe?"

"Please, everybody, just settle down. There's been a bit of an accident tonight—"

"Tell us what's going on."

"All I can say right now is that the Prescotts have suffered a bit of

property damage, but nothing serious. Now, everyone, please return to your homes. There is nothing to be gained by standing around here in the middle of the night."

"But how'd it happen?"

"Yeah, what did it?" Nods and murmurs transmitted through that crowd.

Officer Coreman raised his arms again. "Alright—everybody needs to disassemble now. You're currently hampering a police matter."

"We wanna know what's going on."

"Chief," someone called as the man stepped out the front door. "What's going on?"

The chief made his way down to the curb. "Very likely nothing," he said. "If I had to say, some deer or the like got a little overzealous and tore up a door a little bit—"

"A deer?"

"Or," the chief said, "perhaps some other piece of livestock. Obviously, this would not be the first case where something has gotten loose and wandered through. It being night and everyone being off the street only makes it more likely. And since the only things touched were a few food items, I'm sure you all can see how that makes perfect sense." And that crowd's murmurs'd've seemed to ebb at that explanation. "Now, I think we can all go home and just put tonight out of our minds. If everyone will be patient, Officer Coreman will presently begin directing traffic so we can all get back to our homes safely."

Over a resurgent murmur, the chief raised his hands. "Tomorrow Officer Coreman and I will get in touch with the local farmers and the wildlife office and we'll find out if any livestock have gone missing in the last few weeks. And we'll get the wildlife officer down here to identify any tracks we—"

"It left tracks?"

The chief nodded. "Obviously, it would have. As I said, this was obviously, simply an accident. And what we all need to do right now is go home. So if you could all return to your cars."

A murmur still moved through that crowd, but crumpled beneath its own weight. Those with longcoats wrapped over their bedclothes turned toward their houses, called at those children that didn't

ducked back through their bedroom windows quick enough. And slowly the rest filtered along the street and sidewalks and toward their cars.

Coreman turned. "Chief—"

"Not now, Officer Coreman. I think you have a job to do."

"B—"

"Now, Officer Coreman."

Coreman nodded. He moved along the street.

"Chief." Mr Walcott motioned. "Can I have a moment?" But Nathaniel'd've been too far away t'hear what they'd said, so'e turned and looked back over all those parked cars. Headlights strobed houses and treetops'n the distance and blue-eyed brakelights blinked as gridlock started t'dissolve under Coreman's ministrations. Figures still moved between cars and along the walks, but distance and blue streetlamps'd've made't impossible t'discern individual faces. But

and we're really getting into Midnight territory here

he must've registered something from the corner of 'is eye, because'e jerked'is head so fast't'd've probably made'is neck sore for days. Maybe'e'd've thought t'wave. But she'dn't've been looking'is way. Instead, he'd've threaded between idling cars and onto the opposite sidewalk.

"Evening, Mrs Stowe."

She cut'er eyes toward'm as'f she'd been hit. "Oh. What are you doing out this late?"

"I've almost graduated," he said. "Why shouldn't I be?"

She shook'er head. "Do they know what's going on?"

Nathaniel half-shrugged, half-shook'is head. "They're saying some deer tore up some stuff."

"A deer?"

"That's what they said."

Silent a while, she looked at the Prescott's still headlight-illuminated house. Nathaniel followed'er gaze, he'd've shifted as'f'e'dn't known quite what t'do. And finally—he might've said something—said "Say, how did you get over here? Did you ride with someone?"

"No. Just walked."

"You should get someone to drive you around."

"I prefer to walk."

But at least'e'dn't say'e'd offer t'drive'er round'f she needed't when'e'd gotten a car. Though't'd've been only slightly less ridiculous than'f'e said, "Can I walk you home?"

She shook'er head. "I appreciate the offer, but I don't think your parents would like that."

By then, Mr Walcott'd've left the chief and found'is wife. He waved for Nathaniel.

"Isn't that Mrs Stowe?" his wife said as they walked.

"Mrs Stowe walked here," Nathaniel called. "Would it be alright if I walked her home?"

"I don't—" Mr Walcott started, but must've considered'tn't a conversation t've at a distance. They threaded between idling cars and onto the opposite sidewalk. "Catherine," Mr Walcott said, "if you need a ride, we'd be happy to give you a lift."

"Thanks," she said. "But I prefer to walk."

"Oh," Mrs Walcott said. "We really don't mind at all. If we can be of help, that is."

But Catherine shook'er head. "No, it's fine. I prefer the night air."

"Well then," Mr Walcott said. "I guess we better be getting home." He glanced down the street. "We don't want to hold up traffic."

"Me too," Mrs Stowe said. "Good night, everyone."

"Would it," Nathaniel said, "be alright if I walked home with Mrs Stowe?"

"Nathaniel," his mother said, "I'm sure she doesn't want to be bothered."

"I don't think she'll mind." He turned t'er. "Will you?" But she'dn't reply.

"Nath—"

"If Mrs Stowe doesn't object," Mr Walcott said. Then, when'is wife cut'er eyes toward'm, he added, "Traffic's still so backed up I don't know how long it's going to be before we get out. He can probably be home on foot before we can."

"Well then, I'll just walk along, too," Mrs Walcott said.

"Dear, you know you don't like to walk far in those shoes."

"Where did you hear that?"

"About every other day," he said. "Besides, who's going to keep me company? No, let them go. He can get home and be in bed before too late." He turned t'Mrs Stowe. "If that's alright with you, that is."

Catherine nodded.

"Well, see you at home, son."

"Yes," Mrs Walcott said. "And make *sure* you go straight to bed." But she'd no chance t'say more before Mr Walcott added, "We'd better

get going. We don't want to block anybody in," and led'er back into the street and across the way and down the opposite sidewalk.

"Well," Catherine said, after a while. "I guess we'd better get back."

None sitting'n all those idling cars'd've seemed t'notice'em as they passed beneath the streetlamps, from blue-haloed patch of sidewalk t'blue-haloed patch of sidewalk. At the intersection, Coreman motioned with 'is flashlight t'indicate who'd move and where. He motioned and Catherine and Nathaniel crossed.

“Yuns thin they’d’ve’d’t then?”

“No,” Ambeth said.

“How come?”

“They’dn’t’ve’d any time. There’d’ve been cars movin all over the place.”

“Besides,” Kayla said, “I prefer’t t’happen later. It’s nicer that way.”

Our journaller seems t've scribbled a comment here, but I can't decipher't. It might say something bout the previous conversation. But I just can't decipher't.

“More coffee, dear?”

“Hmm.” Mr Walcott returned his cup to its saucer. But he didn’t look up from that morning’s paper.

“What is it, dear?”

“You know Tolley.”

“Well, what does he say?”

“He’s telling everybody they should go and buy latches to put on the insides of their doors and windows so they can lock them at night.”

“For heaven’s sakes, what for?”

He flipped back through the paper. “It’s in this article here. Apparently—or so Tolley claims—here, let me read it, ‘Events earlier this week remain just the latest in a long chain of mysterious occurrences.’ Then he goes on about pies being stolen. And crates going missing down at the grocers. Things like that. And he ends with, ‘As these events continue to increase in frequency and severity, what, this editor must ask, can happen next?’” He didn’t look away from the paper. “What do you think of that?”

“You don’t believe him, do you?”

“Doesn’t really matter, does it? Still...” He folded the paper and laid it beside his plate. “The problem is it seems so silly.” He shook his head. “Leave it to Tolley.”

“Dear?”

“Hm?” He looked up. “Sorry.” He removed his napkin. “Well, I had better be off.”

“Have a good day, dear.” She added as he reached the doorway, “Oh, and don’t forget to talk to the reverend.” He paused and looked at her. “You know,” she said. “About Nathaniel.”

He nodded absently. “Right. I’ll speak to him the next chance I get.”

“Thank you, dear. Have a good day.”

She'd've still sat there when Nathaniel'd've entered. And'is grandmother must've heard'm overhead. She emerged from the kitchen, plate'n-hand. "There you go," she said. "Kept it in the oven so it would be nice and warm." But when'e thanked'er, she motioned for'm t'sit. "Eat," she said. "After that long night last night, you have to keep your strength up."

"And speaking of long night," his mother said. "Did Mrs Stowe get home alright?"

He glanced up, didn't speak because of'is egg-full mouth, but nodded.

"What's this?" his grandmother said as she gathered Mr Walcott's plate and utensils.²²

"Mrs Stowe was out at the Prescott's last night," Mrs Walcott said. "Nathaniel was kind enough to walk her home." Her eyes never left'm. "Don't eat so fast, dear. You know what they say, it's bad for your digestion."

His grandmother faintly smiled. "Well, that was nice of you." She turned, dirty plates'n-hand. "Sometimes I feel so sad for the poor woman."

"Yes," Mrs Walcott said. She lifted'er coffee cup'n both hands. "So did anything interesting happen last night?"

Nathaniel shrugged as'e chewed.

"You know," his grandmother said when she'd emerged from the kitchen again, "it's a shame we can't find someone to drive her around. I'm sure she could use the help."

²² Roll back the ridiculously heavy ownership bias that the Lockes and Keyes Foundation trolls have edited into this section.

“What do you think, Nathaniel?”

He shrugged.

“Don’t eat with your mouth so full,” his grandmother said.
“You’ll get choked.”

“Listen to your grandmother, Nathaniel.” Mrs Walcott set’er cup into’ts saucer. “So what did you two do on the way home last night?”

“...talked...”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full, dear. So what did you two talk about?”

He shrugged, chewed. Beyond the dining room, the grandfather clock intoned the hour. And Nathaniel pushed back’is chair and half-stood, grabbed’is milk glass and drained’t without a breath.

“Watch it—” his grandmother said. “You’ll get air in your stomach that way.”

Nathaniel wiped the back of’is hand over’is mouth. “Bye,” he said. And’e kissed’is grandmother’s cheek. “Goodbye, mother.” And’e jogged into the front hall. The front door slammed, opened again because’e must’ve forgotten’is hat, then closed softly.

His grandmother shook’er head. “Youngins.”

Mrs Walcott lifted’er coffee cup again.

“You alright, dear?”

Mrs Walcott set’er cup into’ts saucer and pushed both away. “I think I’ll go out this morning. There are a few things I want to do in town.”

Grandmother Walcott nodded. “I’ll call the grocers later and have them run a few things over.” She busied’erself with dirtied dishes. “I was thinking of making a few tea cakes,” she said. “I thought maybe we should invite Mrs Prescott and her daughter over this afternoon. Help take their mind off everything that’s happened, you know?”

Mrs Walcott nodded absently. “Yes, I think...Yes, I think we should.” She nodded again.

“What time do you think you’ll be back?”

Mrs Walcott shook’er head. “Just a few errands,” she said. “I shouldn’t be long.”

“Okay, class—Oh, Nathaniel. You’re just in time.” All eyes turned on’em as’e walked down the aisle. “Well, take your seat. Take your seat,” Mrs Holtcraft said. “Now, class, I want you to pay special attention today. That goes for all you younger students as well.

“This is, as I’m sure you know, Mr Flett of the Amateur Archaeological Society. And he’s going to share with us some very interesting things about pre-history. And I’m sure we’re all going to find it all equally fascinating.

“Mr Flett.” She smiled and motioned t’the man who’d taken a seat by’er desk.

Thumbs’n’is waistcoat’s pockets, he rose, smiled from beneath’is grey mustache. “Good morning, everyone. I sometimes have trouble beginning, so it’s best, I think, to start at the beginning.” He chuckled. “Does anyone know what came before the planets?”

A five year old put up’is hand. “Stars.”

“Right. And what was before stars?”

“Dust.”

“Correct. I can see this class is really on the ball.” He half-turned and smiled toward Mrs Holtcraft. “Now, what came before dust?” He waited. “Anyone?”

“Surely,” said Mrs Holtcraft, “someone knows this one. Speak up, class.”

Finally, someone raised a hand. “Void.”

“Yes. Though, sometimes we call it *vacuum*, though it means the same thing, essentially. Though, some people are prone to squabble over that semantic tidbit and—anyway. Now we come to the interesting part.”

“Mr Flett. What did the Martians look like?”

Mrs Holtcraft snapped straight. "Jeremy, don't interrupt."

But Mr Flett motioned t'er with 'is hand. "Perfectly alright." He cleared 'is throat. "You may or may not know that of late certain of my fellows in the society have been taken by a certain vogue as to the history of the Martian creatures. And while I am in some ways sympathetic to their inquisitiveness, I can't help but see it as a somewhat...vacuous—not to mention shortsighted—affair. Instead, what I concentrate on, and what the society is founded upon, is the search for the landing site of the primordial Rocket. Does anyone happen to recall what The Book says on the matter? No—I wouldn't expect you to. A minor detail to the everyday lives of the laymen. Yet how many are the details in the Lord's eyes. Mrs Holtcraft, may I..." He glanced toward 'er desk.

Mrs Holtcraft blanked. "Oh...I'm sorry. It..."

"Mr Endercott took it, mam," one of the five year olds said. "Don't you remember?"

Her brow furrowed. But Mr Flett raised 'is hand. "Not to worry." And 'e produced a compact volume from 'is pocket. "I'm never without a copy, myself." And 'e opened 't along a bookmark. Mrs Holtcraft managed a stale smile.

"And," he said, "the appointed time came and when the family of Hepsune disembarked from the ship God had created and they first made unto themselves a camp in its shadow, the Lord said unto Japheth *For this ground upon which I have placed the Rocket and which man hath first walked upon is made hallowed and sacred.* And they made unto themselves a camp in a nearby valley named Kalesh." And with a deep breath, he closed 'is copy of The Book and held 't at 'is side.

"Mr Flett," a ten year old waved 'is hand 'n great loops over 'is head. "Could it have been named by the Martians?"

"No," Mr Flett said. He stroked the corners of 'is mustache again. "No, I'm afraid that is impossible. You see, archaeology tells us quite clearly that those creatures—however intriguing they may be—emerged after the creation of the First Man and after his family was housed in the primordial Rocket, so they were destroyed in the Great Purge, when the Lord destroyed and remade creation in fire—"

"That's why it's red."

“Jeremy—”

Mr Flett raised a hand, nodded. “That is one of many old men’s tales. But like everything, there may be a certain grain of truth to it. But as you can realize, as the Lord did not allow the primordial Rocket to touch ground until the land had been purified for man, the descendants of Hepsune couldn’t possibly have met any of the previous inhabiting creatures. And reason should tell you that if they couldn’t have met them, they therefore couldn’t have told them any names. Not to mention there is every evidence to indicate the Martians had no ability to employ language. That, of course, is of divine origin. Remember the first words.”

“And the Lord said.”

Mr Flett nodded. “It is language—speech—that is first to come into pre-existence and create the void.”

“But why,” one of the older boys asked. “Why did they need to exist at all? Why didn’t God just create those aboard the Rocket?”

Mr Flett cleared his throat. “Well, obviously, understandably, there was some purpose in it. The Lord would not have done so otherwise. Perhaps they were necessary to prepare for the arrival of man in some way. And once that was done, their time was passed. Y—”

“Ha!”

Heads turned. Mr Tillman, puffed veins marked between his knees and sock-tops, stood poised with his arm raised as if to throw a spear.

“Ha!”

“Um...” Mr Holtcraft moved from behind his desk. “Excuse me... But—”

Mr Flett raised a hand to calm his. “Mr Tillman,” he said. “Good of you to join us today. To what do we owe the honor?”

“Honor!” The old man’s voice rose into a strangled cry. “What do you know of honor?”

“Really, Tillman.” Mr Flett shook his head. “I hardly think this is the place for your shenanigans.”

“Shenanigans! Bah. I’m here as a touchstone of truth—”

“Really, Tillman.”

“It’s time they heard the truth!”

“Are you intimating, Tillman, I would dare come here only to inculcate these young persons with some sort of fantasy?”

Tillman paused, pursed his lips. "Ha!"

Mr Flett smiled, absently stroked the corners of his mustache. "Really, Tillman. Why don't you sit down. You might learn something."

"I will not listen to you degrade the Martian peoples!"

"The Martian *peoples*. Tillman, surely you have lost what little sense you had. Only men are people, Tillman." He smiled and glanced round the schoolroom. "As any of these children can tell you."

"And you—look around—" Tillman gesticulated. "Do you think those massive ruins on the horizon are the signs of lesser beings? When could we ever do *that*?"

"My good man, just because our engineering has never attained such vaulted heights merely indicates a lack of decadence on our part. Obviously, as creatures, they were not restrained by such. So it's no wonder they achieved such excesses."

"Ha! When have you ever been to the ruins to know?"

"When have you?"

"That's beside the point."

"And in any regard," Mr Flett said, "As they were all destroyed in the Great Purge, I fail to see what it matters—"

"They don't have to have been destroyed in the purge. They could've all been dead before then."

"And what, Tillman, could possibly have caused that, pray tell?"

"It could have been any number of reasons."

Mrs Holtcraft: "Mr Tillman—"

"They could've died out naturally. A...maybe. There's a lot of things—"

"Lord, Tillman, don't tell me you are an extinctionist[†] on top of it all."

"It's entirely plausible." Tillman gesticulated again. "It's proven mathematically that a species can die and not regenerate."

"Come now, my good man. If you even bothered to read the newsletter, let alone any decent publication, you would know that much, admittedly quite beautiful math, is proven not to describe the real world. And your own work bears it out. Have you ever, in any of your so-called diggings, ever once found any creature proven not to now still exist?"

“Yes!” Tillman’s fist shot into the air. “A Martian.”

Mr Flett grimaced. “Really, Tillman, have you dug up a Martian now?”

Tillman’s wrinkled face grew more so and’e seemed t’tighten’n on’mself. “They have to be there. You admit it yourself. Who’s the extinctionist now!”

“Really, my good man.” Mr Flett shook’is head. “If you can’t be bothered to understand the fundamentals, well, it’s no wonder your membership is in the state it is. And after this, I’m afraid—”

“Ha!”

“Really, Tillman, why don’t you go back to grubbing around in the dirt like some unwashed toddler with his pale and bucket and allow us to get back to some real work.”

Mr Tillman’s long legs’d’ve carried’m toward Mrs Holtcraft’s desk’n two steps. Mrs Holtcraft jumped. “Gentlemen!” And she ran round’er desk. “Gentlemen—stop!”

Mr Tillman flailed backwards from a hit t’is jaw—but’e managed t’snatch Mr Flett’s jacket. And both men hit the floor. The first two girls rows screamed, flung’emselves from their seats and against a wall.

“Mr Flett! Mr Tillman! Please!”

Mr Tillman straddled Mr Flett, their hands at t’other’s throat.

“Stop!”

But their holds ebbed as their gurglings faded. Mr Flett relaxed against the floorboards, drooled onto’is lapel. And Mr Tillman sank down beside’m and’d’ve probably lain there as’f’e were a broken-down scarecrow.

“Oh! Mr Tillman! Mr Flett! Wake up, Mr Flett. Wake up, Mr Tillman.” Mrs Holtcraft tittered over their prostrate figures. “Somebody—run and get the doctor. Hurry.” Two boys burst from their seats. “Mr Flett? Mr Tillman?” Then, as’f she’d only just then realized anyone else remained, she turned and snapped’er fingers. “Everyone, school is dismissed for the day. Everyone go home.”

Younger boys must’ve been torn between wide-eyed stares and running for their bicycles.

“Mrs Holtcraft...”

Their teacher looked round, blinked, still tapped both men with’er shoe. “What is it, Regina?”

“Are we still—”

One of the men groaned. And Mrs Holtcraft waved'er hand. “Regina, look in the desk. There's a small brown bottle. Bring it to me.” And when Regina'd done so, Mrs Holtcraft shook two pills into'er hand and popped'em into'er mouth and chewed. “Thank you, dear.” She massaged'er temple. “Alright, everyone out—” She hammered the bottle against'er desk. “Out.”

“But Mrs H—”

“Out. Everybody out now. Please... Go home...”

“That was almost as good as the other night.”

Younger boys yelled as they peddled ahead.

“Hey, Nathaniel. We’re going down to the water towers. You coming?”

He pulled himself astride his bicycle. “I’ve got things to do.”

“What things?”

“Things.”

Ron silently watched him.

Someone said, “You sure aren’t any fun anymore.”

“That,” Regina said, “just means he’s mature.”

“Well, I say foey to being mature.”

“You would.”

“Foo to you too—” And before she’d reply, two or three boys peddled hard. Ron glanced over his shoulder, but peddled on.

“Children,” Regina said. “Don’t you think, Nathaniel?” ... Regina raised her hand. “Wait—” But he’d already disappeared round a bend.

She touched the fan switch and overhead they faintly buzzed and slowly turned. "Well, at least we have that much going for us today."

"Mrrrr." Odin strolled between Catherine's legs and disappeared into the store's depths. Silently, she looked out the back screendoor at the loading dock and glanced down at a clipboard.

The front bell rang.

"Anyone in?"

She turned and stepped between piled boxes. "Mr Prescott." She moved behind the counter. "Good to see you. I'm sorry about what happened."

"Thank you." He removed his hat and nodded. "I've got a few things to pick up."

"Of course. What do you need?"

"Window putty. A pane of glass."

"Sure—"

"Actually." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I think I'll probably just call a handyman and let him handle everything. I..." He cleared his throat. "What I was wondering about was...if you had any of those...little brass sliding locks. You know what I mean? The kind...the kind of thing you might put on things to keep them closed?"

She nodded. "I think I have a few." And she stepped between aisles. "You planning on a hen house?" She laughed.

He mumbled something...said, "Give me about four of them. Five if you have them."

She leaned out from between aisles. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. "Yes."

She carried out a handful of small cardboard boxes. "Is something going on?"

"Nothing," he said. "You can put this on my bill."

"Sure thing. And if there's anything else I can do."

He nodded absently. "On second thought..." He fumbled'n's pocket. "I'll pay you right now. How much is it?" But before she'd say, he placed a bill on the counter. "This should cover it."

"Look," she said as she glanced at't. "I know it's none of my business, but are you sure you're alright?"

"Fine," he said. "J—"

The front bell rang. Size fourteen shoes plodded inside. "I want to get me some latches."

"Okay..." Catherine said. "How many?"

"About eight of em," he said.

"What kind? For a toolbox? Or a suitcase? Or—"

"Something that works."

"I'll...have to see what I've got." And as she moved between aisles, the front bell rang. She glanced over'er shoulder. "I'll be with you in just a minute."

The man removed's hat. "I'm looking for something that'll keep a door closed, or a window, too, if you've got something."

The bell rang.

"Morning," the man said, first t'Catherine, then t't'other men.

"I'll be with you in a minute," Catherine said. "You'll just have to wait. I'm sorry."

He nodded. "I'm just looking for something to keep a door closed, when you got time."

Catherine stepped between aisles.

The bell rang.

And't rang till the patrol car siren blared down Mainstreet.

Out where the city's emptier, fewer birds fly home at dusk.

"Why yuns thin that's?" Genie said.

Li glanced up, where three or four short-tails mechanically snapped their wings'n-out as they dipped and soared. "No'uman food fer the little thieves," she said.

Ambeth craned'er neck and followed their flight as she walked. "Headed toward the third't looks like."

Li said, "Everybody round'ere gets'omesick asa kitten."

"I'm just statin a fact."

"Too bad we'dn't brin a net. Jus rats on wins."

"That's mean," Kayla said. And she poked'er finger into'er satchel and opened't enough t'see inside.

"Jus keep that thin away from me," Li said.

"Don't worry. Nobody's gettin near yuh."

They laughed.

Evening. They rested on a stair and passed a waterbag.

"Should get t'a fountain tomorrow," Li said.

None replied.

Helena wiped'er mouth. "What do yuns think the reverend was doin while all the fightin and traffic jams and all that was goin on?"

"Probably'oled-up'n'is office jerkin'ne out," Li said.

"Yuh'd think that."

"And I also thin'e'd've'd some old newspaper photo of'er, maybe standin'n front of the'ardware store, all old and curled and yellowed so yuh'd barely b'able t'make out 'oo'd been'n't, and all wrinkled from as many times as'e'd cum on't."

"Eww," Genie said. "Yuh're disgustin."

"It's easy with yuh," Li said.

"Yuh know," Ambeth said, "if yuh'ere like yuh pretend t'be, well..."

"Well what?"

"Just well."

"Well," Li said as she looked over. "At least I'mn't a compulsive scribbler."

"No, justa compulsive liar."

Mara rose. "Time t'go."

Odin batted his forepaws as she stroked his back, but didn't wake. And when the bell rang, she looked toward the closed front door. Hesitantly, she moved toward it, brushed aside the curtain and squinted into late-morning sun. She turned the knob. "Nathaniel." She glanced over her shoulder, eyes probably too bright-shocked to discern the wall clock behind the counter. "What're you doing here now?"

"Mrs Holtcraft let school out early today."

"Oh," she said. "Okay." And she motioned him.

He said, "Why the sign in the window?"

She shook her head. "It's a long story." She paused after she'd closed the door. "Tell you what," she said. "There's some crates piled out on the loading dock. You can help bring them in if you want. Alright?"

He nodded. "Whatever you need done."

Odin still lay asleep as they passed through the store and went out back. "We can start with these. The handtruck's over there."

But he'd already lifted one. "Where do you want it?"

She shook her head, pointed.

When he emerged again, he squatted and lifted the next crate. Her face heated and she must've caught herself staring. She looked away. And when he'd disappeared inside, she'd've shaken herself. She turned away and fiddled with the handtruck as he emerged from inside.

"Is everything alright?"

"Hm? Oh, fine," she said. "That's the last one." She watched from the corners of her eyes. Then she followed him.

"Where does it go?"

"Just set it over there." She stepped out a way and reached for a nail bar. Odin rolled and looked at them as wood cracked and staples squealed. "You can bring these two and put them in that aisle,"

she said, and went ahead of'm. Nathaniel squeezed into the aisle behind'er. "That'll be fine," she said. "Just set them on the floor." And she began t'arrange the shelf. But'n the aisle's packed confines, barricaded and baffled from the fans' circulations, their bodies, their breaths, warmed that confined space till sweat beaded and trickled beneath their clothes. She looked back at'm. "You don't have to stand there if you don't want to."

"I'm fine."

She looked at'm. "Do you feel alright?"

"Fine."

She shifted and touched the backs of'er fingers t'is forehead. And'er knuckles traced a sweat trail down'is face and along'is neck. "Are you sure you're alright?" With'er other hand, she touched'is cheek. Her hands drifted onto'is shoulders, rested on'is chest. And—

The bell rang.

"Catherine. Hello. Are you in? Catherine?"

The front door opened.

"Catherine?"

Catherine whispered, "Wait here." And she squeezed by'm, caught'er breath at aisle's end, faintly brushed'er hair with'er fingertips.

"Catherine, is that you?"

She tried t'smile as she emerged. "Evelyn." Absently, she brushed the front of'er dress. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh," Mrs Walcott said as she checked the fit of'er white gloves, "I was just downtown for a minute and I thought I would stop in and see how you were doing. I hope you got home alright last night." She curtly laughed. "I—" But she glanced toward movement within a darkened aisle. "Nathaniel?" He emerged from the aisle, empty boxes piled t'is chin. "What are you doing here?"

Catherine glanced over'er shoulder as she neared the counter. "They let school out early and he dropped by and offered to help me get some things on the shelves."

"That's...nice." Mrs Walcott tugged at'er gloves. And as she watched'm, he stumbled and empty boxes tumbled.

"Be more careful, Nathaniel," his mother said. "You wouldn't want to...damage anything."

Catherine nodded toward the back door. "You can leave them on the loading dock, Nathaniel. Thank you." She turned toward Mrs Walcott. "So what can I do for you, Evelyn?"

"Oh...nothing." She smiled. "Just browsing, really, I guess."

"Of course, I'll try to help. But you know, officially, we're closed right now."

"Really?"

"Yes. There's a sign right in the window."

"I must have not noticed." She turned and managed a smile as Nathaniel returned. "Good thing I didn't, too. Nathaniel, since you've got free time, I'd like you to go home and mow the yard before it gets too hot. I want everything to look good."

He nodded.

"And go right now, please. I don't want you out in the afternoon heat. You wouldn't want to overdo it, like you did yesterday, would you."

"No, mam."

"I'm sure Mrs Stowe can spare you."

"Of course," Catherine said. "Thank you for your help, Nathaniel."

"No problem." And he nodded and passed his mother, paused and looked back.

"Well," his mother said. "Go on."

The bell rang as the door opened and when it closed.

"He's a good boy," Mrs Walcott said. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"I would say so, yes."

"A little confused, sometimes, I think. Of course you know he's likely going to ask Regina Prescott to marry."

"No," Catherine said. "I...hadn't heard."

"Well, it's not official yet, of course. You know what they say, you have to let nature take its course. But it's as good as done. Everybody agrees it would be a good idea. Don't you?"

"I—wouldn't really say I would be in a position to judge."

"No," Mrs Walcott said, and adjusted her glove. "Maybe not. Of course, I hope he doesn't stay confused too long. It seems like everything's on such a tight schedule these days, you know, one thing after another, graduations, weddings."

“That’s life.”

“Maybe.” Mrs Walcott tugged’er other glove and examined how’t snugged between’er fingers. “Well, I just wanted to catch up, you know. Busy busy busy. So many things to get ready for, thought I’d take a quick break. Anyway, good to see you.”

“Evelyn—”

“Oh, and I guess you won’t mind too much if Nathaniel doesn’t have time to come around the store much. He’s going to have quite a lot to do, you know. I wouldn’t be surprised if he didn’t have any time left at all. You know what they say. But I’m sure you can manage. After all, you have this long, haven’t you?”

Catherine nodded. “Thank you, Evelyn. And since you don’t need anything—and if you don’t mind—I need to get back to... managing.”

“Oh, of course. Don’t let me hold you up. That would be the last thing I would want to do.” She adjusted’er glove. “Well, see you later.” She walked toward the door. “Have a nice day.”

Sometimes I get the feeling everything I do's already been done'n
a Midnight novel, somewhere. But I just can't remember which.

“Don’t drink so fast,” his grandmother said. “It’s not good to drink so fast. And that didn’t come out of the icebox, did it?” His grandmother always kept a water pitcher’n the icebox during summer. He shook’is head. “Good. Don’t wanna drink cold water after working outside this time of year. Too cold for your body. It’ll make you sick. Mr Peabody, if you’ll remember, was painting the inside of that meatlocker and they didn’t have it hooked up yet and he got the sweats and had himself a glass of ice water and went right on to have pains in his chest just a bit after.”

“Couldn’t it just have been he worked too hard and got hot and that did it?” He set the empty glass by the sink.

“Don’t talk back. It’s a bad habit,” she said as she rifled through a drawer. “Now, you go get cleaned up. We’ve got company coming.”

“Who?”

She rose t’ tiptoe and opened a cabinet. “Be a dear and get the pitcher down for me, will you.” ... “No, the pink one. Thank you, dear.” She set that pitcher on the counter and turned around looking for something. “Oh, I hope that delivery boy shows up soon. Nathaniel, maybe you—” Someone rapped on the back door.

“Delivery, mam.”

“Oh, thank heaven.” And she opened the door and took a brown paper bag from a delivery boy’s arms. “Nathaniel, put this on the counter.”

Already, the delivery boy’d shot off and’d no doubt already been peddling down their driveway.

“Who’s coming?” Nathaniel said.

“Mrs Prescott and her daughter.”

“Well, since the yard’s mowed, I think I’ll—”

“You’ll do no such thing, whatever it is. After the time they’ve had, it’s the least we can do to try and entertain them a little while.”

“But how am I going to help do that?”

“You’ll think of something. Besides, I’m sure Regina would like to have someone around that’s her own age. Now, scoot. Get cleaned up.” And she called after’m as’e’d gotten halfway upstairs, “And make sure you take a bath after being out there working.”

Already the tension’e must’ve thought’e’d sweated out’d’ve tightened’n’is groin as’e closed the bathroom door.

“And when’e shot,” Li said. “It’ent all the way’ver the tub and splattered gainst t’wall.” And she laughed.

Evening light filtered between the cupola's shutters. And as'e lay across'is bed, sharp taps against the kitchen ceiling carried upward along with, "Dinner." He sat up and dressed.

"Cutting it fine, aren't we?" his father said as Nathaniel sat.

"Sorry, sir."

"I'm afraid this is getting to be a bad habit. What were you doing up there so long?"

"Don't be so hard on him," his grandmother said. "I'm sure he's been studying hard for the big examination, isn't that right?"

Nathaniel nodded.

"Still... Let's not make it a habit, shall we." Mr Walcott spooned carrots onto'is plate. "But seeing as you're so thoroughly prepared, I'm sure you'll be glad to know Mrs Holtcraft called while you were up. They've decided to go ahead with the test as scheduled."

"Disgraceful," grandmother Walcott said. "Two grown men. In the school of all places. I don't know what got into the both of them."

"Shameful, of course," Mrs Walcott said. "Maybe the reverend will have something to say about it this coming Sunday. Do you think, Harold?"

"Maybe." Mr Walcott passed the carrots and glanced at'is son. "By the way, I saw the reverend this afternoon and told him you would mow the church lawn on Saturday."

Nathaniel nodded.

"And if the reverend has anything particular to tell you," his grandmother said, "you should listen very carefully."

Mrs Walcott cleared'er throat.

Her husband moved'is carrots with'is fork. "How was Harriette?"

“To tell you the truth, dear, not so well.”

“Nerves,” grandmother Walcott said.

He nodded as he chewed. “Nathaniel, I want you to give me a hand with something after dinner. So when you’re done here, I want you to go bring the toolbox from the garage.”

“For heaven sakes, Harold. You know what happened the last time you decided to try your hand at carpentry. What are you up to? Do we need to call a handyman?”

“Just a small project.”

Kayla leaned against a window sill and peered at the darkness-clad square below while t'others lashed their hammocks t'baroque cornice works and crown moldings. "I think I see a light," she said.

"Where?" Ambeth looked over'er shoulder.

"Oh, it's gone."

"Probably only a reflection."

The chamber'd've flickered as Helena hung their oiljar overhead for safekeeping.

Kayla sat with'er back against a window ledge. "Yuh'ren't..." And put'er bag between'er legs. "Yuh'ren't gonna tell that part, are yuh?"

"What part?"

"Yuh know... The one..."

"She's talkin bout the rat," Li said. "When Odin kills that big fat'ne and drops't'n the floor'n front of the'ardware store counter and Catherine gives't t'some kid that's'n there gettin somethin or t'other fer'is father, t'bury."

Quetzalcoatl poked'is nose from under Kayla's satchel flap. He sniffed.

"Don't b'mean," Genie said.

Helena said, "I'dn't'ven know why yuh came out'ere."

"Then," Li said, "yuh'd only've six. And'ccordin t'the expert'ere that'sn't a lucky number."

"I'll skip't," Mara said.

"Yah," Li said, "bend t'the will of the minority."

"Well," Helena said, "I say skip't, too. And that makes't the majority."

"Democracy's jus authoritarian crap'n disguise, nowise."

"Oh, jeeeeeeesh."

Someone laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Everythin."

"Tell..." Genie said. "Tell somethin bout the policeman tonight."

"What's wrong with you, Officer Coreman?" Joe'd just stepped inside police headquarters and closed the door. The chief stood acenter that room, arms behind's back. "Do you have even an ounce of professionalism?"

"Sir?"

"Don't patronize me. Mrs Prescott telephoned. Why were you over there this afternoon?"

"I...wanted to follow up about the incident."

"The incident—that's over—over and done with. What did you possibly think to get out of harassing and worrying good people?"

Coreman straightened. His grip tightened on's cap. "Because it doesn't make sense, sir."

"What are you blabbering about?"

"The break-ins. The thefts, sir. They—"

"Officer, you're going to have to learn to dampen your overzealous imagination. It's—"

"It's not my imagination that put shoe prints in the Prescotts' hedges."

"What?"

"Shoe prints. Someone obviously waited for the Prescotts to leave and concealed themselves in the bushes until they were gone."

"Ridiculous. Those...shoe prints, or whatever they are, were probably left by some kids. And who knows when."

"A kid with a shoe size at least as big as mine."

The chief shook's head. "Obviously some children can grow fast." The chief shook's head. "And besides, why would anyone want to do any of that? Tell me, why would someone want to tear up a house? And smash a window?"

"I can't say."

“Because—”

“Y—”

“Because it makes no sense. And while you were out worrying Mrs Prescott, did you think about anything else? Did you think somebody would try to raise you on the dispatch? You show up to the scene of a fight—in the school nonetheless, and everybody’s already gone home. You’re only lucky there was no major traffic to direct.”

“I couldn’t have been away from the car more than five minutes.”

“You weren’t where you were supposed to be.”

“And where am I supposed to be?”

“Where I say.”

Each silently stared at t’other.

“So,” Coreman said. “You don’t think it could possibly be anything else. A rowdy deer on the loose—that’s it.”

“Logically,” the chief said, “it doesn’t *have* to be a deer. But logically, it’s very likely some kind of wildlife or—”

“Then explain this.” Coreman stepped aside’s desk, jerked open a drawer and set a brick onto the blotter. “How does a dear *throw* that through a window? Throw it from the inside out. And bust the window inside out first. Glass was laying under it on the walk.”

“You’re misinterpreting facts.”

“Misinterpreting facts?”

“Obviously,” the chief said. “It’s a matter of timelines. The deer pawed around the garden and displaced the stone before it smashed into the door—”

“And the fact the window was broken from the *inside out*?”

“Obviously, it got panicked and maybe kicked the door closed or who knows what. You just have to get the sequence of events in the correct order.”

“And the crates of tomatoes at Ferguson’s. The pie? Ricky Barne’s lunchbox down at the garage? A very diversified deer. It might go down to the soda fountain next.”

“You’re conflating completely separate events and circumstances. Of course they seem connected if you consider them connected from the get-go.”

Coreman ran his fingers through his hair.

“Look,” the chief said, after a moment. “I don’t know what’s

wrong. Maybe it's the stress of the graduation coming up or something. Maybe it's just because things have been a little hectic lately. Whatever it is..." He turned and walked back to his desk, sat down. "Look, I want you to take some time off."

"Chief—"

"Consider it an...early holiday, or something. Get some rest. You can come back in Saturday. We'll get through the graduation, and hopefully things should quiet down by then. And with school over tomorrow, there shouldn't be too much need to worry about the crossings. And if there's an issue...I'll handle it."

"Chief—"

"Go on. That's an order."

"But what about—"

"Officer Coreman, this is not your station yet. Do you understand?"

Coreman nodded.

Absently, the chief looked down at his desk, rustled a few papers. "Now, go home and get some rest."

Coreman paused, breathed, turned.

"But remember," the chief said. "First thing Saturday morning. We, after all, can't let down the public trust."

"Yeah. Sure thing, dad."

"Officer Coreman, professionalism."

"Yes, sir."

Genie giggled.

Overhead, then as now, one moon chased t'other.

Coreman walked Mainstreet. Streetlamp-blue-lit shopfronts lensed round'm. A sound. He stopped, tried t'see down the alleyway beside Ferguson's Grocery. He pulled'is flashlight from'ts holster. Something scuttled. "Alright, whoever you are. Come out." He stepped into the alley. Movement. Coreman lunged, ran down the alley and into the grocery's loading area. "Come out." Crates crackled and crashed. He spun, dived. He pulled'mself off'is stomach, ran. And swept'is light down each sidewalk. But nothing.

Only the moons overhead. One a'chase of t'other.

Mrs Holtcraft clutched stacked papers against'er chest. "Please, everyone, make sure your pencils are ready."

Morning light through living room windows illuminated pin-stripe wallpaper. Maureen wandered outa'er room and down the hall. Barefoot and n'er nightclothes, she yawned—jumped. "Joe?" She rubbed'er palm into'er closed eye. "You scared me. What are you doing here?"

"I took some time off."

She blinked. And after a moment, she glanced down at'er pajamas and ran toward'er bedroom. And when she'd emerged again she'd wrapped'erself n'er robe and tugged the belt tight at'er waist. "Why?"

"Just decided to," he said. "Is there anything for breakfast?"

"Well... I guess. I was just going to start a cup of coffee."

"I'll have some too, then."

He pulled'mself off the couch and followed'er into the kitchen. And she glanced over'er shoulder, perhaps at'is sleep-wrinkled uniform. "It's a one-serving pot," she said.

"Really?" He stretched'is shoulders as'e surveyed everything. "I guess... You make yours, then." He pulled out a chair and sat at the table. "Then I'll make mine."

After a moment or two, she turned t'a cabinet and reached for that pot, ran a little water into't and set't on a burner. Warming-smell diffused through the kitchen. And as'f trynan't look over'er shoulder, she leaned against the sink and looked out the window.

"What do you usually have for breakfast?" he said.

"Oh," she said, and turned as'f she'd just then remembered something and she reached into a cabinet for a loaf of bread. "A piece of toast."

"With what?"

"Coffee." And she dropped a slice into the toaster.

"But what else?"

"That's it. Coffee and toast. Why?"

"Just coffee and toast? How do you last until lunch time on that?"

"Well, I usually put some butter on the toast."

He paused. "What else do we have around here to eat?" He glanced toward the shelves. "Any eggs?"

"A few," she said. "But... I'll need those for a cake."

"A cake?"

"Yes," she said. "I usually go to Mrs Thawcraft's on Wednesdays for tea and... Sometimes I take a little cake."

"We could use what we've got and I could go out and get you some more after breakfast."

"But... They have to be cold. I—"

"Have we got anything to eat around here?"

"Well... I could... make you a sandwich."

He stood, walked back into the living room and disappeared.

"Joe?"

His utility belt lay coiled on the bedspread. He dis-fastened's watch and set't on the dresser. In the closet, three blue uniforms hung prominent. And beside'em a suit. He squatted, lifted out a cardboard box and put't on the bed. Automatically, he dis-buttoned's shirt. In a moment, he stood'n only white boxers, white undershirt and black socks held up by garters that anchored round's calves. He pried apart interleaved box flaps.

Maureen'd just set'er coffee and toast on the table when'e returned. For a moment, it must've seemed all she'd manage was t'blink. "Joe ...are you alright?"

He stood there'n khaki slacks and matching shirt. But'e'd dis-buttoned's collar, as'f't were too tight. "Fine. Why?"

"It's just... those clothes. I haven't seen you in those since... before graduation."

He shrugged, slipped's hands into khaki pockets. "Am I supposed to wear my uniform all the time?"

She blinked. "Joe... Why in the world would you take a day off? What's going on?"

"Why shouldn't I?" He walked over and put a hand on'er shoulder.

"Tell you what, have a nice day. I'll see you later." And'e passed'er on'is way toward the kitchen door before she'd seemingly find anything t'say. Hands'n'is pockets, he walked down the driveway. He'd've gone some ways along the sidewalk before'e'd've realized'is hand fit too well. He paused, shook'is head, started back. "Forgot my wallet," he said as'e entered the kitchen.

Maureen, who'd just've set'er cup, saucer and plate'n the sink, whirled. "Joe, I really think you ought to—" But'e disappeared through the den. And when'e emerged again, "Joe, I really think you ought to—"

"You got anything else to do today?" he said as'e slipped'is billfold into'is pocket. "I mean, besides going to Mrs Thawcraft's for tea. What time was that, anyway?"

"I... What in the world has gotten into you, Joe?"

"I've just realized I have no idea what you do in the daytime, is all, and I was just curious."

"Well..." she said, seemingly half t'erself. "Well, first I usually get dressed...and...since it's...I usually check this week's coupons...and go to the store...and... Joe, did you really take the day off?"

"Yes. Why do you keep asking?"

"Are you sure we don't...need to call the doctor or something?"

"What for?"

"Because... Well, because..."

"Tell you what," he said. "What time is that tea this afternoon?"

"... Two."

"And what time do you usually go down to the store?"

"I don't know... Later. Maybe ten or so. Why?"

"How about I go get something to eat, come back, and I'll take you downtown."

"Joe—"

"But, I mean, if you have other plans, I can work around them. I was just thinking we might do something together today."

"But... why?"

"Just because," he said. "Why not? I mean, we've been married all these years, Maureen—and I didn't even know what you ate for breakfast."

"Why would you need to?"

“Because...” He scratched the side of his neck as he paused. “I’ll just run and get something to eat. Be back in plenty of time.” He opened the kitchen door again. “See you later,” he said.

Sweat glued'is shirt t'is skin. Without'is patrol car, on foot, he'd resorted t'reading street signs at intersections t'reconstruct what'e'd done automatically every day for so many years. The sign over the diner said 'Diner' and'e'd watched't grow as'e'd approached. Had'e ever noticed't before? But as soon as'e pushed through'ts door, cutlery clink-tink and breakfast gossip enveloped'm. Everyone turned. Silence.

"Joe?" An old man turned on'is booth seat and poked'is cane toward'm as'f t'test'e'd been real. "That you?"

"Who's it supposed to be?"

Someone said through an egg-full mouth: "Pinch me, but... I think I'm having one of those dreams where I'm back in school."

"Me too."

"Ignore them," Rosie said as she came up behind the counter with a coffee pot and fresh mug. But still, she glanced'm up then down as she filled't.

The man next t'him said, "What's the deal, Joe?"

"Haven't you ever seen somebody take a day off?"

"Yeah. Somebody. But not you."

"Well, you've seen it now."

The man laughed and climbed off'is stool. "Alright." And'e clapped Coreman's shoulder. "Just don't be too long or who knows what might happen to this town."

"Yeah. Now everybody knows you took a day off, lawless jaywalkers are gonna come outa the woodwork. Won't be able to move down Mainstreet."

“You boys keep going like that,” Rosie said. “Just wait and see if your trucks aren’t the last out next time there’s a traffic jam.”

They laughed and went out. Coreman turned on his stool and watched them through the diner’s large front windows, still laughing as they climbed into their trucks.

“Ignore them, hon.”

Coreman turned round. “They’re just having fun.”

“Usual will be up in a minute.”

“Y—you know what, Rose, hand me a menu if you don’t mind. I’m sorta wondering today what I’ve not been eating all these years.”

She cocked one of her eyebrows, but she reached under the counter.

“Does your wife know you’re making off with her cookware?”

Gathered round an old dining room table, they looked down at a shoe-box-covered baking tray. “If there’s going to be some big reveal,” Doctor Falstaff said, “I wish you’d just get on with it.” The basement’d’ve been cool, but with four or five men squeezed among tables and boxes and glass-jar-stacked bookcases, the air’d’ve quickly grown stuffy.

“Agreed,” the reverend said.

Mr Flett nodded.

Silently, this basement’s owner raised the shoebox.

“You herded us all down here for...this?” Mr Flett said. “It’s a dead animal. I fail to see the point.”

“As do I,” Falstaff said.

“This, gentlemen,” the basement’s owner said, “is something completely unknown.”

The reverend, who’d found’mself staring at bottled fetal pigs, turned, again, toward the old dining room table.

“I mean,” the basement’s owner said, “there is no record of any creature like this anywhere.”

“Obviously it has to be something,” Mr Flett said. “And it looks to me to be nothing more than a squirrel some cat’s chewed on.”

“Examine the limbs,” the basement’s owner said. “The teeth. Shape of the snout. The tail—look at the tail.”

Mr Flett grumbled. “And the point of all this?”

“I’m saying there’s no such animal.” And the basement’s owner reached for a magnifier. “Look at the—”

“I think we’ve seen plenty,” Mr Flett said. “If you’re done—”

“My point is—whatever this animal is—it’s not in the guidebooks. And it’s not even in *The Book*.”

“Come now—”

“And that’s why I wanted the reverend here. And the rest of you. I’ve been over the manifest in part thirty-seven I don’t know how many times and I’ve gone through the name and description of every single beast that disembarked and that the Lord gave Ezakia. But there’s nothing there.”

The reverend cleared his throat. “You have to be mistaken. Y—”

“Then you show me where it’s at.” He grabbed a volume from a nearby shelf and its cracked binding fell open to a spot that didn’t need a bookmark for a long time. “The only thing I can think is—maybe—it’s something that was here *before* anyone got here.”

Mr Flett tenderly fingered the bruised area along his jaw. “Impossible.”

The reverend nodded. “And the land was scoured so that man may walk upon it. And no living thing which creepeth upon the face of the land, nor buries itself below the land, nor that which inhabits the waters, nor that which inhabits the air, remained.”

“Then how do you explain it?”

“I don’t,” Mr Flett said. “Obviously, the notion isn’t worthy of reply.”

“I think,” the reverend said. He paused. “I would hope you haven’t been talking to anyone else about this.”

Falstaff nodded. “The last thing we need is salacious gossip going around right before the graduation.”

“That’s why I wanted to speak to you all first.”

“You’d been better just to give it to the cat,” Falstaff said.

“I can keep it in the bottom of the ice chest. The wife’ll never know.”

“Good Lord.” And Mr Flett looked up at the floor’s undersides.⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰⁹ This section has been re-corrected. Ownership bias is more correct here than not, regardless of what those who harbor a pathological level of prejudice against the Lockes and Keyes Foundation may think.

Mr and Mrs Coreman walked Mainstreet arm'n-arm. She carried'er purse'n'er other hand. He carried their shopping bag'n'is.

"You sure this is all we need," Coreman said.

Maureen nodded absently. She'd been so flustered all morning she'd've forgotten almost everything she'd've needed and'f she'd've thought t'make a list she'd instead spent the morning on the phone t'the doctor's, but'e'd've been called away and'is wife'dn't've said when she'd expected'm back. "We..." she said. "We should really be getting home. I need...enough time to start the cake."

"What about lunch?"

"You go get something. I usually don't have that much anyway."

"Well... How about we go up to the b—we still have some bread at home, don't we?" He waited for'er t'nod. "Then let's go up and get some salami and we can take it home and have a couple of sandwiches. How about that? And I can shoot across to the drugstore and get a couple bottles of pop."

They stopped beneath a shop awning and she glanced across Mainstreet. "If you want," she said.

"I'm asking what you want."

"Oh, don't worry about me. I'm fine either way."

"Settled then."

Fresh sawdust tickled'is nose as they stepped inside. The butcher glanced over'is shoulder. "Joe? What's going on? It's past [April Fools], you know." But by then, Coreman's response'd've become near automatic. And outside, again, he left Maureen and dodged across the street and into the drugstore. And with a couple pop bottles added t'their shopping bag

“Long with some *nice and thick* salami and cheese,” Li said.
Helena’dn’t’ve bothered t’groan. But’er stomach’d’ve gurgled.
“Yuh’dn’t’ve know what salami looks like.”
“Neither’d yuh.”

[I]t finally'd a good heft.

"Going to be a hot one," he said as they started back. But she'dn't reply. "You know...wasn't there something that needed fixing around the house?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. It just seems like there was something..."

"I don't—"

"The back door."

"What?" she said.

"The back door. It's been squeaking every night I've come in for ...I don't know how long."

"I can call the repair m—"

"Why?" he said. "You know, while we're out, let's stop by the hardware store and I'll pick up some oil and fix that up this afternoon."

"You don't need..." But she just shook'er head. "The man usually comes around once a week and does odd jobs like that."

"Well, I'll just save him the trouble."

Coreman paused'n front of the hardware store. She stopped a few steps past. "Wanna go in?" She shook'er head. "Alright," he said. "I'll just be a minute."

The bell rang. Catherine looked up, seemingly startled, but collected'erself. "Joe?" She shook'er head. "What's going on?"

"Just a day off. I need a small can of oil. Something like you'd put on door hinges." He paused. Then'e must've realized everything'e'd by way of tools were'n the patrol car's trunk. "And I guess...give me a small oiler too."

He produced'is wallet. "Guess I'd better hurry up. Maureen might get nervous if I stand around in here too long."

“You’re out with Maureen?” And such a question must’ve seemed worse than’t’d’ve.

“Shouldn’t I be?”

“I...” She shook’er head. “I’m sorry. Don’t mind me. I’ve kind of ...been somewhere else most of the day.” She folded down the top of a brown paper bag and pushed’t across the counter. “Anything else?”

Coreman shook’is head. “I know how that goes,” he said. “Thanks.”

He paused at the front door, looked over’is shoulder. “You wouldn’t have happened to have anything go missing lately, would you?”

“No. Why?”

Coreman shook’is head. “It’s nothing. Thanks.”

"Yes," he said as he opened the kitchen door for Maureen. "I can't believe I didn't fix this thing sooner." He set the grocery bag on the table.

"Joe..." Maureen said. "I really have to be getting ready."

"Fine." He laid out cold cuts and cheese. "Tell you what, while you're getting your stuff ready, I'll fix us lunch."

"Joe...you can't cook."

"It's just slices of cheese, salami and bread." He set the pop bottles out and glanced over his shoulder. "What do you usually do with the bag?" Maureen pointed to a bin. "Besides," he said, "we never starved when we went camping as kids." He stepped back toward the table, paused, snorted. "Come to think of it, my mother always made the sandwiches and we just packed them up." He shook his head. "But I can manage."

"Joe..."

"You just go on with your stuff and I'll be done in a minute or two."

She watched him fuss over the table. But finally she'd've'd to do something or risk being late or arriving empty handed. So she went through and put her pocketbook in her bedroom and emerged into the kitchen to double-wrap apron strings round her waist then opened the icebox to grab the egg tray. Neatly, she poured a resultant mixture into two small round pans. And by the time she'd washed her hands, Joe'd've finished and'd've set a plate on each side of the table with a salami-cheese sandwich and an open pop bottle.

"Lunch's ready."

"That's nice, Joe," she said as she towed her hands. "You go ahead."

"I can wait."

“No. No, you just go ahead. I’ll...be ready in a minute.”

But she flitted up-and-down the counter t’stow this-and-that back into the cabinets and then washed bowls and utensils and stowed’em. And Joe sat at the table and watched as she dried’er hands on’er apron and dis-tied’t and hung’t back on’ts peg and went out through the living room. The vacuum started down the hall. She pulled’t round the living room. She cut’t off and hauled’t back down the hall. She wiped’er hands on’er apron, brushed’er hair behind’er ear as she returned t’the kitchen and clicked-on the stove light and bent and looked inside. The timer went off. She opened the oven and tugged a rag from’ts handle and lifted cake trays onto the counter. She reached up for a toothpick box. She turned off the oven. She went out. When she returned, she’d’ve fixed’er hair. She took the frosting bowl and cake pans from the icebox and pulled a cake carrier from beneath the cabinet. She frosted’t on the tray and went out. When she returned, she’d’ve changed’er clothes.

“I thought you said you didn’t have to go until two.”

“Well,” she said as she snapped the lid down round the cake. “I have to get there and...I might be able to help set things up, you know.” She left and returned with’er handbag over’er shoulder and she lifted the cake container’n both hands. “You go on and have your lunch. I’ll see you later, okay.”

“Here. Let me get the door.”

He watched’er walk down the driveway. And when she’d’ve passed outa sight, he sat at the table. Their two bottles of pop’d’ve probably gone flat by then.

The Thawcraft's back yard'dn't exist and where one'd've been, instead, a glass-and-frame conservatory looked out on open desert because, somehow, all those lots that'd've formed another street behind'em were never earmarked by the Walcotts for development. There, white adirondacks[†] squeezed between potted plants. And as always, a gold-brass-framed, glass-shelved trolley'd've been wheeled acenter the room and held a tea service and cakes and cookies.

Tea cups and saucers and napkins populated broad adirondack arms.

"It must be so nice to be able to get away a little while," someone said.

Mrs Coreman smiled. "Well, it is a very slow time of day, anyway," she said. "But Sarah's coming along quite nicely."

"Any telegrams yet?"

"Oh, no. But they're still young yet."

"You know what they say about telegrams and people in public service," Mrs Walcott said.

A few nodded as they sipped their tea.

Conversation'd mainly centered on the impending graduation. And as Mrs Prescott'd been present, social propriety'd've demanded the scope of discussion of recent events b'curtailed. So'n a way, maybe that'd helped Maureen. She held'er saucer and teacup'n each hand but'dn't sip as she looked across at Mrs Coreman. "I just don't understand the whole thing." She rose and moved toward'er tea service and added three or four or five sugar cubes t'er cup.

"Is this about your husband?" Mrs Thawcraft said.

"I just don't understand it." Maureen looked over at'er mother'n-law as she sat. "Did your husband say anything to you about why Joe took the day off?"

"Heavens no." Mrs Coreman set'er tea cup and saucer on'er adirondack. "Of course, he's a busy man. Though, I expect we'll catch up the next time he makes a call."

"So he just took off?" Mrs Falstaff said. "And he's been around all day?"

"My husband used to do that years ago," Mrs Grovecraft said. "Do you know what it's like to go all morning with someone looking over your shoulder? I almost didn't think I was going to be able not to scream. Finally, I just had to force myself to ignore him altogether."

Mrs Thawcraft rose and moved toward'er tea service and placed a small confection on a napkin. "Henry—back when he took that fall at the post office years ago, was off his feet for two weeks."

"I remember that."

Mrs Thawcraft returned t'er adirondack. "When the doctor finally let him out of bed, he was hopping through the house on a pair of crutches. All day long he'd go thumping through the house, calling, 'Marilyn', from the other room. I thought it would be the death of me."

"A body," Mrs Walcott said, "or so they say, does need a certain amount of separateness. Though, I admit perhaps Harold and I tolerate each other's company more than most. But I can't imagine if he were around all day."

"And what in the world do you say to them?"

"Sometimes," Mrs Thawcraft said, "we just have to grit our teeth and bear it. Life has many little challenges. I'm sure Joe'll be back at work soon enough. And glad of it. Just wait and see."

"Can you imagine," Mrs Falstaff said. "Imagine having someone underfoot like that all the time. It would be worse than a young child."

Maureen rose for another couple or three sugars. "I don't know that I'm ever going to have to worry about that at the rate I'm going."

"Nonsense," Mrs Coreman said.

"You know what they say about public servants and telegrams."

"I wonder why that is?" Mrs Falstaff said.

"Everything is ordered in its own way," Mrs Connelly said.

"Of course. I'm not saying—Nevermind." Mrs Falstaff sipped'er tea. "By the way, has anyone else heard? The Nelsons—George and Margrette—you know they were scheduled for a delivery and they got a telegram last night saying it had been canceled. The poor dear is heartbroken."

"Such terrible news," Mrs Connelly said. "I think I'll go see her this evening. She shouldn't be alone after something like this."

"It won't last long. They always send again."

Mrs Thawcraft nodded. "An unfortunate thing, losing a child. People shouldn't have to endure it. But you are right. They always send again."

"Time," Mrs Walcott said, "as they say, heals all wounds."

"Indeed."

Silently, t'other women nodded as they sipped their tea.

Now, we'd b'back up t'our journaller sitting and watching the hot, sun-washed square below while everyone else still slept. Sleepers shifted, rolled over. Rolled over again. Sat up. A——'d've yawned and risen again. Rubbing'er face, she'd've walked over. She'd've stretched'er shoulders. "What're yuh doin?" She'd've yawned. She'd've said, "Yuh'd better get some sleep."

But somebody stepped on this part and't's hard t'read. I think 'Nathaniel' appears at least two or three times on different parts of the page. But I can't discern anything else. But on the next page our journaller writes bout A—— yawning again and returning t'er hammock.

“Hey,” someone said. “Hey—I think I see him coming.”

Ron stood, brushed the back of his pants. Dust bloomed in the distance and afternoon light glinted from chromed fenders. The car slowed. Ron’s father waved. “Afternoon, boys.”

Ron approached the car as dust settled. “Did you get them, dad?”

His father handed a brown paper bag through the window. “Mrs Stowe sends her luck.” Nearby, Nathaniel glanced over his shoulder, but if there’d been anything in his face, sunlight and hat-shadow’d’ve⁹⁰⁶ obliterated any sign. “Remember, nothing dangerous.”

“We won’t.”

His father u-turned off that old dirt road, waved as he passed. A few coughed. All of them lifted their bicycles. Ron stowed their new tent-stakes in⁹⁰⁷ the pack he’d lashed between his handlebars.

Someone looked back. “You alright?”

Ron glanced over his shoulder. “What’s the trouble?”

Nathaniel shook his head.

“Come on,” Ron said. “We’d better get going. No use turning back now.”

“Ya...” Nathaniel said, after a moment. And he climbed onto his bicycle.

Lazily, overhead fans turned. She turned, looked up at that dark ovoid frame. Odin stretched where'e lay on a shelf and curled'is tongue. Absently, she stroked'm.

He opened and closed the kitchen door one last time. And wiping's hands on a rag, he set the oil can beside the back stoop.

He went inside. One plate set by the sink, along with the two emptied pop bottles. And the second sandwich'd've waited'n the icebox for supper. He looked at the kitchen. Hands'n's pockets, he walked through the living room and down the hallway. He glanced through Maureen's open bedroom door, but only for a moment, then turned and ambled back through the living room into the kitchen.

Something moved along the bottom of the screendoor, paused. "Rerrrrr."

Coreman dropped down onto's haunches and looked through the meshwire. "Hello, Eris."

"Rerrrrr."

"Bet you'd like some lunch too, huh?" He stood and went t'the icebox and produced a milk bottle and pulled a saucer down from a cabinet. Carefully—"—Probably should've filled this after I set it down—"—he carried't across the room and gently eased outside. "There." And as'e watched'er lap at't'e'd've realized'e'd blocked'mself out and shook's head and sat on the stoop beside'er. He stared at a hedge opposite. After a while'e said, "Let me ask you something." Eris still lapped at the milk, not-interrupted. "Your kind's always getting around all over the place without anybody noticing. So let's say there's somebody trying to move around town in secret. Why? It has to be because they can't do it in the open—obviously." He glanced sideways at'er, looked back at the hedges. "But why?" He shook's head. "Let's think. What are they taking? Food. Okay, so they need to eat. Obviously. But for some reason they can't go to the store or the diner. That's one thing. Whatever it is. And if they can't

do those things, they probably don't have a house here either. Make sense?" Eris just continued t'lap milk. "Okay. So that's two things. Someone was hungry. And they're from out of town. But they didn't walk across the desert. They would've had to come in on the train—of course—" He bolted up. But'e'd've'd t'stand there and fidget till Eris'd finished, had glanced up at'm, had dropped off the stoop and started down the driveway. He reached for the door handle, then, hand still on't, he knelt and grabbed the saucer and dropped't on the table on the way t'the living room. He lifted the phone.

"Hello."

"Y...Sarah?"

"Where's mother?"

"Oh."

"Get me the train station, will you?"

"I'm not going anywhere. I just need to talk to Bill."

"It's none of your business."

"I'm sorry. Can you, please, just get them before it's too late."

"I want to make sure the train hasn't left."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Sarah."

"Yes, I know I'm supposed—"

"Yes. Alright. Fine. Just—"

"G... Just..."

"No, I was not going to swear."

"No, never mind. I'll find out myself."

"Yes."

"No."

"Goodbye, Sarah. You can tell mother I called."

He slammed down the phone. He patted'is pockets and peered round the living room, dodged down the hall into'is room and rummaged for a hat. He'd've glanced at'is uniform that'd been left tumbled across the bedspread, but'd've'd no time for't, and'e jogged through the kitchen and shoved through the screendoor so't'dn't've slammed till'e'd reached the sidewalk. He paused, shielded'is wrist-watch with'is other hand. Even'f'e'd've been able t'run the whole way'e'dn't've been able t'get t'the depot before the next train'd've probably departed.

Mara lay quiet.

“But’ow’d’e get t’the station?” Genie said.

“I’ve n’t figured that out yet,” Mara said. “I’ve never heard another version where they mention’t.”

“But’e’s gotta make’t there,” Genie said.

“I’m open t’ideas.”

“Well, he must’ve thought of somethin.”

“But what?” Ambeth said.

“What’f...” Helena swung side-t’side¹⁷³ as she looked up at stars. “What’f’e’d remembered’e’d seen’a bunch of boys piled on a truck earlier that mornin, headed off...somewhere, t’do somethin, since school’d’ve been out after the test.”

“Too convenient,” Li said.

“What’s that matter?”

Li just shook’er head.

“And then,” Kayla said. “And then what’f a neighbor’d come out on’er porch t’water some plants.”

Helena said, “What’s that matter?”

“Well, then’e’d’ve called, ‘Afternoon, Mary.’ And she’d’ve called, ‘Afternoon, Joe. Nice day, isn’t’t. Heard yuh were off.’ And’e’d’ve said, ‘Yah. But listen, Mary, when Ralph left this mornin, I thought I noticed’e’dn’t taken’is bike with’m. That right?’ She’d’ve said, ‘I suppose. Since school’s out they’ere all gonna go down t—’”

“It’s just... wh—bit of a department thing. You know, we want to make sure all road vehicles are outfitted properly and not a danger to the operator.”

“Is there something wrong with Ralph’s bike?”

“No. No, I doubt it. I just wanted to get it checked off, you know.”

She paused before moving t’the next planter. “Well, I guess. Sure. Go ahead. Whatever you need, Joe.”

He nodded and jogged up that neighbor’s driveway t’where a bicycle’d been leaned against their house. The seat’d’ve been set too low and’d’ve made’is knees almost hit’m’n the chest but’e’dn’t’ve taken the time t’adjust’t before’e coasted down the driveway. He waved, almost fell. “Thanks, Mary. I’ll get it back as soon as I can.”

“Or maybe,” Ambeth said, “he’d’ve made-up somethin bout how that bike’s license was up for renewal, but’t’dn’t’ve really been a lie because the chief’d once suggest some idea t’the town clerk bout inspections when issuin new licenses and that technically there’d’ve been some law or t’other bout bicycle maintenance.”

“Too convoluted,” Li said. “Keep’t simple.”

“Somethin yuh’d know alot bout.”

“No, I think I’ve heard somethin like that before.”

“Joe Coreman—” the woman called as’e coasted into[†] the street and started t’peddle. “Joe Coreman—you’re a grown man. What do you think you’re doing?”

[†] In the Stanton Edition this passage reads: ‘the woman called as’e coasted’nt’the street and started t’peddle’.

Genie giggled.

The radio station's antenna'd've made't seem as'f a metal tree'd sprouted on'ts roof. Narrow stairs led up from street level. And the reverend looked up as clatter fell toward'm and'e pressed'is back t'the wall.

"Sorry, Reverend." The electrician tromped downstairs, blackened screwdriver'n one hand, wire cutters'n t'other. A door slammed'n the back.

In the room above, radio gear pressed wall-t'wall'n a long narrow room. The technician sat before an instrument panel and leaned forward outa'is chair t'adjust a dial and pressed'is fingertips against'is headphones. "Ahhhhh..." And'e tore'em off and lobbed'em at the control board. He sat there and rubbed the bridge of'is nose. He looked up. "Sorry, Reverend." He glanced at a wall-mounted electric clock. "Early, aren't you?"

"I thought I'd bring a few notes by for later."

"Alright." The technician glanced over'is shoulder toward the sound booth at the opposite end of that room. "You can go ahead and lay it in the booth if you want." And'e cut'is eyes toward the control board. "Not like anyone's going to be needing it for a while."

"That—"

The electrician's bark carried through an open window. "How 'bout that?"

The operator flicked a switch and pressed'is headphones t'the side of'is head. "NOTHING—"

"Trouble?" the reverend said.

"And how," the technician said as'e dropped'is headphones. "Nothing but all day. If—"

"TRY IT NOW."

...

"NOTHING." The technician sighed. "See what I mean?"

A door slammed below.

"Do you think it will be back up by tonight?"

"We can only hope," the technician said. "Any possibility of some heavenly intervention?"

"All things are purposeful. All is part of the plan."

"Doesn't exactly help me much."

"TRY IT NOW."

...

"DEAD AS A HAMMER."

The electrician tromped upstairs. He scratched his head with his cutters. "You sure you're not getting nothing up here?"

"You tell me."

The electrician grumbled. "Excuse me, Reverend." He traced green insulated wire u-nailed across the walls. And when he'd reached the control panel, he shoved a chair aside and wedged himself on hands and knees between wall and machine. His gnarled, spotted hand shoved up through tangled technology. "Somebody hand me my light." The technician glanced toward the open toolbag amidst the floor. And he knelt by it, reached into it, jerked his hand out, sucked the tip of his thumb. "Haven't got all day," the electrician said. Finally, the technician slapped a light on his hand.

The technician pulled his finger from his mouth. "Reverend, I guess we'll have to give you a call later if there's still a problem. You going to be at home?"

"Most likely."

The operator nodded. "Well—"

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah." Thump. And the electrician's empty hand burst upwards and flailed and he fell backwards tangled in wiring and kicked where cords'd wrapped his ankles. "Did you see it? Did you see it?"

"What're you talking about?" Both men bent toward him.

The electrician gesticulated, jerked wires taut. "Something f— there it goes!"

Black fuzz shot from beneath the control panel so fast the technician jumped back, stumbled, flailed his arms as he struck the floor.

"Did you see it?" the electrician said. He kicked loose wires from round his ankles.

The technician cradled his elbow as he stumbled up. "Where'd it go?" He glanced at the reverend. "You get a look at it?"

"Not as such," the reverend said. "Probably...a baby squirrel or something."

"Found it," the electrician said. He stood and held out his clenched fist to offer a bouquet of exposed copper ends. "Chewed. Chewed to bits. Chewed through. Chewed up." He shook his fist. "Useless. Plain useless. Gonna have to rewire the whole thing."

"Well, I'll tell you..." The technician winced as he massaged his elbow. "I'll tell you..." He mumbled and shook his head. "Ooooh."

"BAH—" The electrician grabbed his bag, pushed between them and burrowed his way beneath the control panel again. Muffled hammer blows carried from behind.

The technician glanced toward the reverend. "I'll give you a call if we—"

"Whole lotta crap balled up back here, you know," the electrician called, his voice as muffled as all those hammer blows. "All kinds of bits of fluff piled in a corner. Fire hazard, you know."

"Well, take it out then."

"Not my job." Muffled hammer blows reverberated through the room.

The technician winced and tried to stopper his ears, grimaced as he moved his elbow. He glanced at the reverend, motioned toward the door. Muffled hammer blows followed them downstairs. "Maybe you should have the doctor take a look at that arm," the reverend said.

The technician shook his head. "Nah. I'll just go down the street and get a lemon phosphate. Lemon phosphates cure anything."

"Really?" the reverend said. "I thought being all-powerful was left to the Lord."

"Why do you think he made lemon phosphates?"

"Ah. Perhaps."

"Come on then. My treat."

"No... Thank you." The reverend glanced down Mainstreet. "I have... business, at the moment. Let me know how things turn out."

"Will do."

And the technician still held his elbow as he started down the sidewalk.

Only the foot of the hardware store's front door'd've been visible beneath the awning from the highest bank windows opposite. But't'd've been enough t'reason she'd slammed't'n'is face. It'd've run right against the tips of'is shoes, so'ts glass must've come within a smidge of breaking the reverend's nose. Mr Prescott stood with'is arms behind'is back, as'e always must've seemed t'do, and looked down. The reverend ambled from beneath the awning, glanced back, turned and started down Mainstreet. Later, when the setting sun lit darkened windows pink, Catherine emerged, closed the door behind'erself and turned the opposite way.

He watched till she'd passed beyond'is window. Dusk settled. Street-lamps flickered on. He turned away from the window.

The Coremans'd've'd a swing on their front porch and Joe rocked back and forth, which'd've sloshed orange pop against the inside of the bottle'e'd've held rested on'is knee. "Evening," he called.

Maureen looked up from the driveway. "Oh. Good...evening." She paused. "Did you...have a nice day?"

"Fine."

She nodded. "That's nice." And she nodded again and continued up the driveway. Coreman sipped orange pop. After a while, street-lamps lit. When'e went'n, Maureen sat on the couch, a magazine open between'er hands. She'dn't look up as'e crossed t'the kitchen. After'e set'is pop bottle by the sink, he stopped'n the doorway on'is way back and leaned against't. "I thought you might come outside."

"Oh." She lowered'er magazine. "I'm sorry...dear."

"I'm not—never mind. I was just curious...what do you normally do in the evening...before I'm home?"

Her eyebrows knitted. "You know," she said. "Just...the normal things."

"What're the normal things?"

"You know... Maybe I'll...dust a little. Vacuum. Then maybe I'll...read some." She motioned with'er magazine. "Oh, and I'll make dinner for you." She paused. "Are you hungry? Should I make you something?"

"No," he said. "I'm fine. What about you?"

"What about me what?"

"What do you have for dinner?"

"Oh, I don't generally need anything more than a glass of milk,

or something. I always come back from Mrs Thawcraft's so stuffed I don't think I could force another thing down even if I wanted to."

He stood silent a moment or two while she looked at'm absently, her magazine open on'er lap. "Did it go well at Mrs Thawcraft's today?"

"Yes," she said. And she slipped'er magazine back onto the coffee table. "It's pretty...late," she said. "I think I'll go to bed. D—"

Rnnnnnnng. They both looked at the phone. Maureen reached for't.

"Hello."

"Yes. Yes, he's here. One moment."

She held't toward'm. "It's for you."

And she stepped clear as'e accepted't. "Hello."

"Yes."

"Alright. I'll be there in the morning."

"No. I can get there fine."

"Yes. Goodbye. Yes, sir."

After'e hung up, he stood there a moment, silent.

"What was that about?"

He slipped'is hands into'is pockets. "That was the chief," he said. "He wants me to come back in tomorrow."

"Well, that's nice. I'm sure you're good and rested...after your day off. And ready to go back." She added, "Aren't you?"

"Hmm? Oh, of course. Of course I am. Just thinking about what I have to get ready for tomorrow."

"Well," she said. "I'll even have something special ready when you get home tomorrow night. How does that sound?"

"What?"

"No, don't spoil the surprise. I'll leave it in the icebox." She glided across the living room. "Good night."

"Good night," he said.

None of 'em'd've driven well after dark. The truck's headlights'd've created shadow-pool cliffs indistinguishable from true chasms and outcroppings'd've jutted from darkness along that service road's periphery. So they'd've stopped for the night. In the distance, the town'd've deformed into a blue smear.

"How come," someone said, "the stars are brighter out here?"

"Because they are."

Ron lifted his flashlight onto the truck bed. Others tossed sleeping bags over the sides and climbed fenders or up wheel wells.

"What if they," someone said, "know where we're going?"

"They don't know," Ron said.

"Then why were the police at the train station looking around?"

"Because of whatever."

"Yeah," someone else said. "Did you see what he was wearing?"

A few laughed.

Later, after Ron'd clicked-off his flashlight, someone said, "What do you think will be there?"

Ronald shifted, rolled'n his sleeping bag. "That's the whole point of going, to find out."

"What do you think," someone said, "makes the stars so bright out here?"

But none replied this time.

Later still: "Feel any different?"

"Than what?"

"Than after the test. Shouldn't you feel different?"

"That's not until after you graduate," Ron said.

"Oh."

Somebody else said, "You think we'll change that much after we graduate?"

"Everything," Ron said.

Silence.

"What's it like...being married, do you think?"

"It'll be like...like..."

"You've watched your parents," Ron said.

"That don't mean much. They're parents."

"And what'll you think you'll be?"

Silence.

"Is that going to happen right away?"

"You act like a first grader. People are usually married a couple years before they have a baby."

"What girl do you think about getting married to?"

"Don't really," Trent said.

"You ever have...funny things happen when you think about getting married?"

"What kind of funny things?"

"Just...things."

"That," someone said, "means you're thinking bad thoughts."

"But how can thinking about being married be bad?"

"You're probably thinking about something else too and don't know it."

"But—"

"Alright," Ron said. "Hold it down. Everyone get some sleep. We'll have to be up early in the morning."

But quietude only seemed able to sustain itself so long.

"You remember a couple years ago?" Frank said. "When we were on that field trip out to that farm?"

"What of it?"

"You remember?"

"Yeah. So?"

"So, while we were out there some of us snuck off."

"When? Where were we?"

"You were all up at the front of the line with Mr. Pruitt, watching 'em milk a cow or somesuch."

"Well, what about it?"

“He showed me out back where they keep the bulls. And this bull, he was standing up on the back of this cow.”

“Standing on it?”

“Half. It had its front legs on the cow’s back and was standing up on its back legs.”

“Why was it doing that?”

“It was shoving his...thing inside the cow.”

“That don’t make sense.”

“He said that’s how they get a baby cow. The bull’s thing gets big and it puts it inside the cow and a calf starts growing inside the cow and then it comes out.”

“Bleh.”

“And what,” Ron said, “got you onto this?”

“Don’t know. Talking about babies and marriage, I guess.”

“That’s animals,” Ron said. “Humans aren’t animals.” He rolled over. “And before anymore ridiculous stories get started, everybody go to sleep.”

Nathaniel rolled over as well.

“Ron,” Trent whispered. “I heard you’re going to marry my sister. That true?” But Ron remained still and quiet. “Ron.”

“He’s asleep,” someone said. “Like you oughta be.”

Eventually, they'd've all slept.

Streetlamp light'd've rendered Coreman's uniform black. But by the time'e'd walked t'the town council building and climbed into the patrol car, the horizon'd've glowed. He dug a slip of paper from'is pocket and laid't on the dash.

Cutlery clink and kitchen sounds burst round'm as'e sat'n the diner. "Just as if I'd never been away," he said as'e sipped'is coffee.

"What was that, hon?"

Coreman shook'is head. "Nothing." He dropped the money on the counter. "See you later, Rosie."

When Coreman parked at the train station'e removed the paper slip from the dash, checked't, checked'is watch, then slipped the paper into'is pocket. He stepped out and ran'is fingers back through'is hair before'e put on'is cap. The station manager moved across the platform. He looked down at'is clipboard till Coreman called, "Morning," as'e climbed the platform stairs. "Train on time?"

"Should be." The station manager pulled'is watch from'is vest. Smoke and dust and steam appeared out where tracks seemed t'converge t'a point.

"Nothing strange going on, is there?" Coreman said. "Anyone hanging around the tracks?"

"Not since the last time you asked." The station manager eyed that distant smoke. "Personally—"—he re-pocketed'is watch—"—don't see what the trouble's about."

An engine passed'em, continued t'slow, would've drowned out anything they'd or'd've been said beneath mechanism-noise and steam-hiss. Coreman looked down a line of open flatcars where men descended from truck cabs and released mooring straps while the station manager waved'is clipboard and one-by-one trucks'd've bumped over where the edge of the flatcars'd've overlapped the platform and turned down the ramp onto the street.

Many cars down, someone waved. Coreman cocked'is head, leaned back with'is hands'n'is pockets. Someone waved again. So Coreman walked down the platform. He nodded, smiled. "Morning."

The wiener vendor smiled as well.

"Thought you might've forgotten about us up here," Coreman said.

“Never,” Thurbor said. “Bad business to forget a customer and worse to ignore a potential one. What’re you doing here so early this morning?”

“Standard checks. You know.”

“Or smelled em all the way down the line, huh?” Thurbor pumped the cart’s ignition and guided’t onto the platform while’t gently putt-putt-putted. He braked and pushed’tis goggles up’tis forehead. “How ’bout it? First one of the day.”

“Don’t tempt me.” Coreman patted’tis stomach. “Just ate breakfast.”

“Clear the platform.” Farther down, the station manager waved’tis clipboard.

“Better listen to the boss,” Thurbor said, and pulled down’tis goggles. “Be back through about lunch. See you then.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

Thurbor gave’m a gauntleted thumbs up and putt-putt-putted along the platform and down the ramp and throttled up as’e hit the street.

The station manager passed Coreman, tapped’tis clipboard against’tis thigh as’e looked over empty cars, lifted’tis whistle from round’tis throat and blew and waved’tis clipboard at the engine. Mechanisms hissed. Interconnects clacked and tightened and that train built speed onward t’where tracks seemed t’meet, again, at a point.

“Nice thing about flatcars,” Coreman said, “you don’t have to try hard to know if there’s any stowaways.”

The station manager glanced up from’tis clipboard. “How’s that?”

“Nothing.”

He checked his watch: yetn't noon. He'd've parked near the curb, sat with the windows down. Framed'n's rearview mirror, a group of women approached down the sidewalk. "Bet you a quarter," he said aloud t'mself, "if I reach for the radio it'll go off before I touch it." And't'd: "Officer Coreman. This is dispatch. Pick up. Over."

"Dispatch, this is Coreman. You got any idea why so many ladies are out and about today? Over."

"Officer Coreman, the ladies' decorating committee is having a meeting today. Please, return to Mainstreet for traffic duty. Over."

"Roger. Over and out."

The town sat quiet amidst afternoon. Coreman passed from awning-t'awning, pulled off'is cap and ran'is fingers back through'is hair. The street remained quiet and still, except for one person ahead who appeared amid smudged vaporous afternoon light before stepping inside. "Nice to hear something," he said.

Catherine looked at'm through the hardware store's screendoor. "What's that?" She leaned on'er broom.

"Sweeping," Coreman said. "Everything's so quiet I think I could almost hear it halfway down the street."

"It sounds like you had better come in out of the sun."

He shook'is head, slipped off'is cap, ran'is fingers back through'is hair. "How come you're not at the meeting?"

"Wasn't invited."

He rubbed the back of'is neck. "Oh."

Li yawned as she lay'n'er hammock. "Yuns know," she said, "the part that comes next's always been screwy."

"Yuh'd say that just t'say't."

"Blah blah," Li said.

"How so?" Helena said.

"It's either always..." Li said. "It's always got somebody comin back'nto town and tellin the police that somebody's'd a wreck out on the old mountain road. Why'd anyone else b'out there? And then why... It jus'dn't make no sense."

"It doesn't've t'make sense," Kayla said. "It just's t'get us t'the good part."

"Blah blah blah."

"Besides, thins that happen'dn't always make sense."

"What'f..." Ambeth said. "What'f't was the wiener stand?"

"The wiener stand?"

"What'f the wiener stand came back'nto town on that road. Then'e'd've seen'em."

"'ey, yah," Genie said. "Nobody else'd've ridden on't with'm, right? So the only thin'e'd've done'd b't'go fer'elp."

"But that'dn't explain why'e'd b'on that road."

"It does," Mara said, "if an old service road connected into the old mountain road and'e took that way back t'town."

"But then that'd'n't make sense cause'e already got off the train at a different place once t'get out t'those ruins."

"Maybe they'ere different ruins," Genie said.

"Blah blah blah."

"It'd depend on the train schedule," Helena said. "Besides, just

because she only ever said'e gets off at that one place, that doesn't mean there mightn't've been 'nother way of'm gettin back t'town."

"In fact," Ambeth said, "there'd probably'd've'd t'be. Otherwise'e'd've t'go all the way back and wait for a train'n the middle of nowhere and't'd b'easier t'do that'n a town."

Li groaned. "Okay. I'll concede the *possibility*. But only the possibility."

"Besides," Kayla said, "what's't matter? so long's we get t'the good parts."

On the ruins' perimeter, broken rock shaped by wind and sand'd've been indistinguishable from those shaped by ancient...whatevers as they climbed down from the truck cab and crossed open ground.

"We made it," Jimmy said.

Ron glanced over's shoulder. "Why are you whispering?"

"I... I don't know. It just seemed like the...the thing to do."

The rest laughed.

"How are we going to avoid the archaeologists?"

"Just take it easy," Ron said. "Don't get jumpy. There can't be that many. And as big as this place is... I don't think there's any in this part anyway. And you don't believe in ghosts, do you?" He waited a moment, as'f for a reply, but none came. "Alright," he said. "Let's go."

"What about the truck?"

"It'll be fine where it's at." Ron reached into the truck bed and pulled out's rucksack and t'others'd likewise. Dust welled against stone walls, fine powdery stuff that left only a narrow path for their single-file footprints. They ran their hands over wind-polished stone. The passage opened into a square and amidst't perhaps there'd been a building much like the baths, except with four sets of square stairs on each side instead of the bath's circular, bowl-shaped ones, and the building at center below might've been walled instead of open columned.

"Let's go," Ron said.

"It'll be dark in there...won't it?"

Ron dropped's rucksack and dug out's flashlight. And two or three'd likewise. But Jimmy'dn't. "Didn't you bring yours?"

He shook his head. "I forgot."

"Well," Ron said. "Stay close then."

At bottom, a single darkened doorway'd've opened into nothingness. They clicked-on their flashlights. But with high sun t' their backs, only blackness'd've remained beyond.

"I...don't know about this."

Ron glanced back, then across at Nathaniel. He nodded. Nathaniel'd've too. Faced with being left behind, t'others followed as that light-framed door receded behind'em till't'd've been blottable by a thumb, but't'd've been a long while before they'd've discerned much beyond the hazy, amber glow-spots their flashlights'd've cast along the walls and ceiling and floor, over bas-reliefs where barely perceptible paint flecks seemed still extant'n deep-carved grooves.

“How old do you think these are?”

“Ancient.”

“What’s that?” Ahead, blue tarps’d been pulled over something on one side of the corridor and forced’em t’walk single file by’t. “What do you th—”

"Shh." Ron raised his hand. The rest almost stopped breathing. Muffled voices ahead. A rrrssshhhhhh sound. "Cut your lights." They waited, breaths hot'n darkness. A distant corner glowed. "Go along the wall. Quickly—and be quiet."

They went single file, hands skimming lukewarm stone t'keep their balance as they stayed low. Voices became louder, but remained indistinct. Framed against the glow ahead, Ron motioned'em t'slow. Imitating'm and Nathaniel, they crept forward. Then'e motioned for'em t'stop again. Nathaniel and Ron eased forward t'the corner, peeked round, faces illuminated. Without looking back, Ron motioned for the rest.

Square worklights stood on mini tripods and flooded a large chamber with daylight-glow. An engine roared. Hoses spiraled across dusty floor t'where a blue-overalled, blue hardhatted figure'n full-facemask sandblasted a mural. A smaller motor puckered as a similarly dressed figure spray painted a section of bas-relief.

"What're they doing?" someone whispered. But t'd've been difficult t'hear over engine sound.

"Repairing it," someone said. "I would guess. They're probably cleaning off the old paint and restoring it to what it was originally."

Nathaniel tapped Ron's shoulder. "We'd better move back."

Round then, the sandblaster mabye'd've cut'is equipment and propped'ts barrel against a wall, brushed off and walked across that chamber.

Ron'd've nodded and motioned for'em t'retreat. T'others scurried back down the corridor.

The sandblaster's voice resounded dully through a heavy mask. "How long before that dries?"

T'other turned. "Couple hours."

"Alright. I'm going topside for a while. I'll come back and finish after lunch."

"Just make sure it dries first," t'other called. "I don't want another mess like last time when you got in a hurry."

"Yeah. Yeah. I'll make sure it wears off nice and pretty."

Ron tapped Nathaniel's shoulder. And Nathaniel glanced at'm and nodded. Together, they retreated down the passageway. The rest'd've been already atop the stairs when they emerged. "So much," Nathaniel said, "for them all being on the far side."

Ron shrugged as they climbed stairs. "Nothing ain't worth anything without *some* risk."

Nathaniel glanced at'm.

The rest motioned'em on. "Come on," someone said. "Let's see what else we can find."

The old mountain road'd've sometimes narrowed where wind'd carved a gash into'ts shoulder or a blown dune'd settled round and grown over rocks. Coreman'd long since cut'is siren. And only engine noise and gravel-crunch remained between'em and must've seemed almost hypnotic, maybe almost as much as walking into the desert alone. Maybe Maureen drifted through Coreman's mind, considerations of'er swept aside at jarring intervals by ruts and dunes as'e struggled t'keep the steering wheel'n-line. But sitting'n the passenger seat, Catherine'd've'd no such rest as'er thoughts, whatever they may've been, must've turned and turned...she shook'er head.

"You alright?" Coreman glanced at'er.

She nodded. "Fine," she said. "Worried."

"We've gotta be getting close."

Both stared through the patrol car's dust-impregnated windshield. "Joe—is that..." She pointed t'a black speck ahead. Something, a trunk handle, maybe, glinted. Coreman slowed.

"JEFF—" He shoved open the driver side door with the patrol car still running, would've thought better of't, and'e reached'n and flicked-off'ts ignition switch. Catherine climbed out too, slipped-on'er hat and squinted overtop the patrol car. "Stay here a minute," Coreman said. And'e crossed the road and sidestepped down an embankment through ankle-deep, shifting sands.

Blood stained a steering wheel and instrument panel. And Coreman reached past't and touched the driver's clammy skin and dried blood flecked onto'is pants.

"...is...he...dead?" Mary-Celleste looked at'm from where she lay curled'n the passenger seat. A pop bottle lay broken'n the floor

and half-evaporated sticky stuff coated a seat. Dirt clung t'er cheeks, bifurcated by white salt trails.

"No," he said. But'e removed'is hand. "Let's get you out."

But first'e'd've'd t'work round t'er side. He yelled t'Catherine t'get the shovel from the trunk because sand'd jammed the door shut.

"He's dead—isn't he—" Mary-Celleste's eyes glinted hot sun as Catherine tried t'help'er out. "He's—dead. He's. Dead." She sniffled and seemed almost t'choke. "He's—"

"He's going to be fine," Coreman said.

"But he—"

"We just can't move him now is all. I want to wait for the doctor. Okay?"

She sniffled. Weakly, she nodded.

"Now, let's get you up," Coreman said. And with Catherine's help, they climbed the embankment. Catherine opened a rear door and they eased'er down into the patrol car.

"Just lay back."

"Jeff..."

"Hush," Catherine said. "Everything's going to be fine. Don't worry." She looked up as Coreman stopped rooting'n the trunk and made'is way back down the embankment with a blanket over'is shoulder. She looked down at Mary-Celleste. "Just rest," she said. "Does anything feel broken?"

The young woman moved'er head'n circles. Catherine touched'er forehead. "Joe," she called, and she stuck'er head overtop the patrol car. "Where do you keep the water?"

"Trunk."

She bent low over Mary-Celleste and touched'er arm. "I'll be back in just a minute."

Coreman'd left the trunk open and she bent into'ts shade and rooted among emergency equipment till she vaguely spotted something canteenish and got'er fingers on't and grunted and pulled't free. Its contents sloshed and she dis-screwed't and sniffed. She eased Mary-Celleste up. "Here. Drink. Slowly—slowly—okay, just sips. That's it. Easy." Mary-Celleste leaned back against a headrest and Catherine re-capped the canteen. She put the backs of'er fingers against Mary-Celleste's forehead. "I'll be back in just a minute, hear?"

Mary-Celleste nodded vaguely. "Just sit and rest," Catherine said. She set the canteen between seats.

A car horn blared and she jumped. Down the road, a dust plume rose behind a delivery truck as't struck through ruts and holes and swayed side-t'side and roared t'a stop. The doctor climbed down from the passenger side of'ts cab, reached inside for'is bag and hat.

"Over here," Catherine called. And she moved t'allow'm t'bend over Mary-Celleste and grasp'er wrist.

"Follow my finger."

Another honk. Gregor'd've jerked Doctor Falstaff's jalopy off the road and round the front of the delivery truck and the truck driver'd've leaned through'is open window and yelled. But Gregor'd've ignored'm, climbed out and jogged towards the patrol car. "What do you need?"

His father motioned. "Looks like dehydration. Keep her drinking," he said. "But just sips." He said t'is son, "Bring some salt-sugar tablets and more water." And Gregor ran towards their car.

Catherine put a hand on the doctor's shoulder and whispered t'him. He nodded, grabbed'is bag and moved across the road. Moments later'e yelled, "GET A COUPLE MEN DOWN HERE. AND PULL A BOARD OFF THAT TRUCK." Four men worked their way up shifting embankment t'get Jeff laid out on the road. "You two, get a blanket and pull us over some shade." The doctor bent over'm. "Get me an intravenous solution," he said to Gregor. He pulled back Jeff's eyelids and clicked-on'is penlight. "Have the stretcher ready," he called to Gregor.

Mary-Celleste craned'er neck and watched through an open door. "Jeff..."

Catherine brushed sweat-drenched hair from Mary-Celleste's forehead. "Don't worry." Already, they'd lifted'm on the stretcher and slid't across the back seat of Falstaff's car.

Catherine released Mary-Celleste's hand and stood, motioned t'Coreman and met'm behind the patrol car.

"What's the matter?"

She spoke'n a low voice. "Joe, how far are we out from the mountain?"

"Maybe....several hours. Why?"

“There’s a baby due, remember?”

He chewed the inside of his mouth. “I don’t suppose there’s any way to postpone it.”

Catherine shook her head.

“Well, Jeff’s shot out. Ideas?”

“One,” she said. “Mary-Celleste’s okay. She’s shaken up, but she’s okay. The only thing we can do is take her out there and deliver her baby.”

Absently, Coreman touched his cap brim. He nodded. He went and talked to the doctor. Falstaff glanced at Catherine, looked back at Coreman, nodded. Coreman nodded and rounded the patrol car. “We could still wait for more help to arrive,” he said. “But the longer we wait the sooner it’ll be dark.”

“Then we’d better get going,” she said.

“I’m not exactly an expert at this sort of...situation, you know.”

“And I am?”

The doctor approached them. “He should be stable,” Falstaff said. “We’ll get him back to town.” Bag’n-hand, he walked round the patrol car and Catherine followed. He bent and said something to Mary-Celleste. She sniffled and nodded. And when he moved, Catherine dropped and took her hand. “You just rest,” she said. “We’re going to go deliver your baby.”

Mary-Celleste wiped her nose, nodded. Catherine turned and glanced toward the doctor and Coreman as they walked back to Falstaff’s car.

Dust floated across the road and into the wider landscape as vehicles turned and started towards town. And Coreman turned and walked towards the patrol car.

Penetrating deeper, they might've come into a vast column-dotted square. Weather and time'd've seemingly toppled several, but'd kept paving stones sand-free. If noon'd passed, shadows'd've appeared and turned columns t'sundials. Rucksacks and shoes lay heaped against a toppled column base. Barefoot, they jumped from shadow-cooled stone t'shadow-cooled stone. Nathaniel and Ron nursed still half-filled pop bottles and watched from atop a toppled column.

Ron sipped and swished carbonation round'is mouth. "When we get back," he said, "I'm going to ask Beatrice to marry me." Another sip. "What about you?"

"What about me what?"

"I keep hearing about you and Regina Prescott."

"Where?"

Ron sipped. "Everywhere. Mom and dad were talking about it at dinner one night. Just everybody. I guess it's not like she's that bad or anything. Not my taste, I guess."

"Taste?"

"Yeah, you know. I never liked her much. Of course, they say that isn't necessarily important to a marriage."

"You sound like my mother."

"Huh?"

"They say." Nathaniel rolled'is pop bottle so the liquid undulated up one side and thinned from ruby t'pale pink, then darkened as't re-formed at bottom. He sipped. "I mean...taste," he said. "Suppose they—girls—are like...pop—different flavors. How do you know the right one?"

"I don't follow."

"How do you know what you're supposed to like if you can only pick one off the shelf and you're stuck with it."

"That's not how it works," Ron said.

"And what if you liked a flavor they didn't make?"

"If they didn't make it," Ron said, "how could you ever try it?"

"Okay, what if it was a flavor they didn't make anymore?"

"Why would they do that?"

"I'm just saying suppose."

Ron sipped. "You overthink things."

Both sat in silence and looked at ruins in the distance as shadows imperceptibly lengthened. Ron checked his watch. "We'll have to start back before long." He stood, looked round, leaned and swung and his bottle glinted and turned end-over-end and shattered somewhere beyond sight. "Then there's a whole new life."

"You ever wonder," Nathaniel said, "if you'll be happy at the gasoline company?"

Ron looked down. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"All that [corn]," Nathaniel said. "It's almost like being a farmer."

"Farmer's grow it. They don't brew it," Ron said. "Besides, we're distributors."

"Whatever."

Ron said, "What's the matter with you anymore?"

"You're the one," Nathaniel said, "who keeps saying things are gonna change."

"Yeah, but..." Ron shook his head. "We can still be friends. Adults have friends, you know. Me and Beatrice, we'll have you and Regina over for dinner one night a week and you two'll do the same."

"Why—why are you so sure I'm going to ask her to marry me?"

Ron shrugged. "Just makes the most sense, I guess. Who else you gonna ask?" But Nathaniel remained silent. "It's all part of the plan," Ron said as he looked over the city. "You just have to let it happen."

"What if I don't?"

Ron laughed. "What's the parable about the horse?" His voice went low, the best impression he'd manage of their old Sunday school teacher. "And the horse said, 'I'm staying right here and you can't make me move.' So Zedakia replied, 'That's what I want you to do.'"

So the horse said, 'Well, then I'll get up.' And Zedakia replied, 'Good, that's what I wanted you to do.'" And Ron Laughed.

Nathaniel sucked down the last of his pop, but something stronger might've tinged the back of his throat. "You should've been a reverend's son."

"Ha—can you imagine me the son of Reverend Connelly?"

"Sometimes."

Ron laughed. "Then I'd be stuck up in seminary college like poor Archie. No, I'd rather be right here." He walked out along the column toward its shattered cap. "Come on. There's still plenty to do. Let's not waste time hashing over what'll happen next week."

Nathaniel threw his bottle. It shattered on a columned and the pieces tinked against stone and sparkled where they lay. He slid off the column. "Wh—"

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAah.

They turned. That'dn't been the wind through the ruins. Or joyous shouts. That'd been a scream of a different character.

He took the patrol car up till the road narrowed t'a walking trail and pulled the handbrake after'e'd parked. He turned and looked toward the back seat.

Catherine nodded. Mary-Celleste still lay asleep with'er head on Catherine's shoulder. "What's the time?"

Coreman picked'is watch from the passenger seat, where'e'd thrown't when'ts metal band'd gotten too hot. "Almost a quarter after."

She nodded and touched Mary-Celleste. "Wake up." Mary-Celleste's reddened eyes opened. "We have a baby to deliver, remember?" Mary-Celleste nodded and worked'er tongue round'er mouth. "Here." Catherine dis-screwed the canteen.

Mary-Celleste nodded. "Thank you. I feel better now."

"You think you're ready?"

Mary-Celleste nodded.

"Joe, what about those canteens?"

He climbed out and went and opened the trunk and rummaged back there and things'd've shifted and knocked and clanked till't must've seemed as'f'e might've fallen'n and was tryna bash'is way out.

"Here's your hat," Catherine said, and lifted't from the floorboard. "Wait here. I'm going to go see what needs to be gotten ready." She climbed out and slipped on'er hat and adjusted'ts brim t'counter late-afternoon sun. Coreman'd created two piles on each side of the trunk as'e'd sorted downwards.

He said, "It can't be buried that deep." He leaned forward, belly against hot metal. "Got em."

After a few moments, Catherine said, "What are you still hunting for?"

"I figured there might be something..." He pulled-free a rucksack and dis-fastened a strap and looked inside. "Sleeping bag."

"I don't think we're planning on staying the night," Catherine said. Absently, she touched'er forearm, looked over'er shoulder, up the mountain. "You wouldn't happen to have something to eat stuffed in there?"

"Just the water."

"We'll just have to make do."

"I think if I empty this," he said of the rucksack, "it'll fit a couple flashlights and the water and a few other things we might need."

"Joe, you need to stay here," she said.

"Huh?"

"I want you to stay here, Joe."

Still bent over into the trunk, he stopped and looked up at'er.

"I want you to stay with the car," she said.

"That's crazy—"

"I'll take a flashlight and each of us a canteen."

"But what are you... what're you going to do if you get lost?"

"From what everybody says, the path's plain. Besides, you know as much about this as either of us."

"I—"

"Joe," she said. "If we argue we just waste time. Mary-Celleste is a strong young woman and can make it up just fine. Probably better than you. She doesn't sit in a car all day... Sorry. But you know what I mean. This is our best option. It's not great, but... Well, there it is. Now, are you going to agree with me, or are we going to waste more daylight and risk us having to hike in the dark?"

He pulled'mself from the trunk, straightened. "I'll have to go up this mountain one day, too, you know."

"But it can't be today," she said. "You're the only one that can drive back. And you need to try and get some sleep while you can."

Eventually, he nodded. "I still think I should go."

"We're wasting time, Joe."

He stood a moment, worked'is shoulders, looked at the sky. "On one condition," he said. "You both take a flashlight."

Catherine nodded. "I'll get Mary-Celleste."

But Mary-Celleste'd already gotten out and stood looking at the mountain. "You feeling alright?" Catherine said. Mary-Celleste turned. Catherine nodded, said t'Coreman, "Where are the flashlights?"

Coreman dug'em from under a blanket and looked'em over, flicked the switches on and off, shaded'em'n'is hands t'discern their bulbs against daylight. "I hope these batteries are good enough."

"When did you buy them?"

"You'd know better than me," Coreman said.

Catherine pulled a canteen strap over'er shoulder, took one of the flashlights. "Take this," she said t'Mary-Celleste. Catherine reached for t'other canteen. "And this." Mary-Celleste'd've glanced nervously at the flashlights. "It's just a precaution," Catherine said. She looked at Coreman. "We should be back before dark."

He nodded.

"Okay," Catherine said. "Let's go." She took Mary-Celleste's hand. Absently, Mary-Celleste looked back at Coreman. Silently, she turned and looked up that path.

That trail'd've led over worn-smooth rock. Circuitously, they rounded faces and clefts, dipped beneath outcroppings, but always rising. Then onto a series of switchbacks. Below, the plain'd've seemed sparse, flat. And sun'd've already tinged the world's edge. Finally, Mary-Celleste touched Catherine's shoulder and asked t'rest. Catherine nodded and they sat on a stone chunk that'd've looked as'f't must've tumbled from somewhere above. Mary-Celleste dis-screwed'er canteen and sipped. "Careful," Catherine said. "It's too hot to drink very much at once."

Mary-Celleste glanced at'er, pulled'er canteen from'er lips, looked at't a moment, then re-screwed't. She adjusted'er hat against low sun. "How long do you think we've been climbing?"

"Maybe an hour," Catherine said. But there's no way she'd've known.

Knowing what exactly an hour or minute means'sn't necessary. Just keep'n mind that a minute's something less than an hour. An hour's something less than a day. And yuh've so many hours'n a day and minutes'n an hour and so on.

“You... You really never have been up here before?”

Catherine shook'er head. “First time.” And before Mary-Celleste'd study on that, Catherine touched the back of Mary-Celleste's hand and rose and adjusted the canteen strap over'er shoulder. “We'd better keep moving.”

“I... I don't know if I can. I'm already tired.”

Catherine bent and took the young woman's hand and helped'er up. “Just try to relax,” she said. “Breathe. Take it one step at a time.” And holding'er hand, they climbed again, turned and passed into a deep ravine that slashed down into blackness where evening-tainted-red rock looked too much like an open wound'n the landscape. Formations took shape upslope, large stones balanced on worn-away mounds.

“Do you think they'll fall over?” Mary-Celleste said.

Catherine paused and removed'er hat, rearranged'er sweat-damp hair. “They've probably been that way for a long time.” She took Mary-Celleste's hand again. “Let's go.”

The horizon line turned from pink t'red and cast dirt and rocks'n blood and umber. A darkened crevice forced'em through single file.

“Catherine...” Mary-Celleste said from behind. “I'm...” Her breath'd become ragged.

She'dn't've able t'turn, but Catherine reached back and touched the young woman's arm'n that dark, close space. “Just take it easy. Breathe. In and out. Full breaths. Slow. Like this.” She took'er hand. “That's it. Just like that. Just keep breathing. Slow and steady. We're almost out. I can see the end.” Crimson poured down a vertical slit. The trail continued round a cliff-edge that overlooked

the plain. Beyond't, sun'd melted t'a red line. And'n semidarkness, they'd've climb high enough that the whole plain'd've appeared as one indifferentiated smear.

"You rest a minute," Catherine said. She helped Mary-Celleste t'sit. "Just breathe." And she set'er flashlight down and reached for'er canteen. As always, the more't's needed, the less there's t'carry. And she'd've taken a small sip and tried t'b'content with that. Their town'dn't've been visible so far away. But'n the distance, perhaps the ruins'd've been dark fingers against bloodsky[†].

"How much farther, do you think?"

"Not much," Catherine said. Mary-Celleste'd t've known Catherine'dn't've known either, but she'dn't reply. She picked'er self up. And they followed the trail round the edge till't turned back on itself and curved up steeply and cut through an outcropping. They'd probably been afraid't'd opened into another chasm, but instead't opened t'a slab wall, maybe, footholds, or steep steps, leading up.

"I'm afraid it's going to be a bit of a climb," Catherine said. She looked up, but dimness'd've rendered't impossible t'discern anything above. "Doing alright?"

Mary-Celleste nodded. Sweat trickled from behind'er ear and along'er jaw. "Just keep breathing."

"That's right," Catherine said. "Just keep breathing." Catherine looked up. "I'll go first."

Carefully, she made'er way up those steep-carved steps. At top, she knelt and reached over. "Give me your hand." And she huffed and helped Mary-Celleste up. And they sat there. It might've seemed difficult for Catherine t'catch'er breath. And across from'er, Mary-Celleste'd've been little better.

The horizon'd've almost vanished by then and only a faint glow'd've remained at world's edge.

Catherine forced'er self up, reached out. "Come on," she said. "Almost there."

Mary-Celleste half-stumbled up, pulled away, her face masked'n twilight. "How do you know?" And as soon as she'd've said such, tears'd've dribbled over'er cheeks and intermingled with sweat. Catherine put'er arm round Mary-Celleste. Together, they followed the trail up. They—

Catherine paused, held Mary-Celleste, who started t'say—
“Quiet,” Catherine said. Only their hard breathing remained.
“Do you hear that?”

Mary-Celleste listened, and maybe the wind shifted and carried sound better, because'er fingers'd've pressed into Catherine's forearm and she'd've nodded. “Yes,” she said, in barely a whisper.

“Just ahead.”

They skirted a cliff edge and turned between boulders into a flat clearing. A plaintive cry cut the air so that instinct, rather than will, might've carried'em across't. A column rose at'ts center, carved something like a birdbath, maybe. And as they'd approached, movement'd've been apparent even'n minimal light.

Mary-Celleste stepped up t'the pedestal, held'er breath. She covered'er mouth. Catherine touched'er arm. “Go on,” she said. And Mary-Celleste'd've looked over'er shoulder as'f t'ensure't'd really been alright. Then, after she'd knelt t'set down'er flashlight and slipped'er canteen from'er shoulder and handed't t'Catherine, she brought'er plaintive child t'er chest. She folded back swaddling that'dn't've, in the dimness, been recognizable as pink.

But even still she said, “Isn't she... beautiful.”

Catherine nodded. She touched Mary-Celleste's shoulder. “We have to go,” she said. She knelt and lifted their other light. “We have to get back.”

Sometime, without notice, daylight's afterglow'd failed. The child still cried as Mary-Celleste held'er and spoke softly t'er as they turned back.

And Catherine clicked-on a flashlight.

“What happened?” Breathless, Nathaniel and Ron ran t’where t’other boys gathered round. Jim lay on the ground. One of’is shoes lay t’the side. He’d shoved’is bare foot away from’m, leg straight, as’f t’try and throw’t off. His toes twitched and’e moaned and tears broke over’is cheek. “What happened?”

“Don’t know,” someone said. “He was putting on his shoe when—”

“Look!”

Multi-legged, bristling, a thing scuttled from Jim’s shoe and across paving stones. They jumped. And Jim moaned and pushed’mself away.

“What’s that?”

“Who cares,” Jim said. He croaked. “Kill it.”

Nathaniel struck, planted’is foot—but the thing side-jumped and scurried away.

“Get it!”

The ground must’ve seemed t’shudder under their combined efforts, but’t’dn’t, and all they’d’ve gotten for’t’d’ve been tingly feet and momentary limps. And as’f’t’d’d enough of a game, the thing scurried into the shadows and disappeared.

“Ow.” Jim groaned. “It hurts.”

“Just hold still,” Ron said, and squatted by Jim’s thrust-out foot. He glanced up. “What’re you doing?”

A boy stomped Jim’s sneaker once more. “I wanted to make sure there wasn’t another one.”

Ron shook’is head and Nathaniel squatted opposite’m. Already, purpling flesh’d’ve radiated from Jim’s swollen toe and along’is fore-foot. Jim tried t’prop’mself on’is elbows, but’is foot twitched and’e choked on a sob. “Just stay still,” Ron said.

"I'm...trying...but..."

"And be quiet." Ron said. He glanced at Nathaniel. "What do you think?"

But Nathaniel'd only shake his head. "It's like it bit him—but not like anything I ever heard of before."

"Me either," Ron said. "How much does it hurt, Jim?"

By then, he lay on his back and sobbed. "Real bad," he said through his teeth. "...bad..." He screamed. "It...my foot's on—fire..."

Ron motioned. "Give me one of the bottles—no—one that's got something—give me a canteen." He grabbed it from someone's hand. "And somebody stand over here. Give us some shade. No, over there. Shade his foot." He dis-screwed the cap and dribbled the water over Jim's toe. And Jim screamed and thrashed and Nathaniel grabbed him.

"Stop—stop—" He sucked air. "It hurts—stop—"

"What're we gonna do?" The other boys tittered and milled.

Nathaniel pulled away as Jim settled, looked at him then, likely, bloated foot.

"We've got to get him back to town," one of the boys said.

"Even flat out," Ron said, "it'd take a while."

Jim whimpered.

"So what're we gonna do?"

Nathaniel looked at Ron. "They have to be working close by, right? There might be a doctor with them."

Ron nodded. "They never come into town. And it's too far away from anywhere else. Unless they never get hurt."

"They *have* to have one."

"But," one of the boys said. "Everybody'll find out where we've been and—"

"You got a better idea?" Ron said, and glared.

The others shook their heads.

"Alright," Ron said. "We'll do it by twos. Just the way we used to do it in scouts. Me and Nathaniel'll lead off. Hear that, Jim?" But Jim just lay there with his head turned to the side, eyes closed. "Jim?"

Nathaniel put a hand to Jim's sweat-damp forehead. His lips'd've gone blueish. "We'd better hurry."

Ron nodded and shifted into place. "Alright, you two, range

ahead and see if you can spot anyone—but don't get out of sight, we don't want to get separated." Then t'Nathaniel: "Ready?" Nathaniel nodded. They both interlocked their arms, lifted Jim between'em. "Which direction?"

"I hear something that way."

"Go—everyone move."

They'd. Those behind carried their own and Jim's and Ron's and Nathaniel's rucksacks and Jim's other shoe.

"Try to keep to the shadows," Nathaniel said. "He's getting hot." Ron nodded, steered with'm along a wall and down an open corridor.

"Up ahead," Trent called as'e jumped and waved. "It's louder this way." But after some time, and breathing hard, they'd t'stop'n the shade and set'm down, motioned for the two t'return and trade off.

"Toss me a canteen." Ron caught't and'e and Nathaniel ran and sweat spots grew on their t-shirts. "What do you think?" Ron offered'is canteen, but Nathaniel shook'is head, so Ron took a swig. "Gotta be close."

"There." Nathaniel pointed.

"What?"

"It looked like...a tarp or something. Fluttering."

Ron glanced back, motioned for'em t'hurry. Around the corner, a loose tarp fluttered against a wall, but nothing else. "Up this way, I think."

T'other two rounded a corner, huffed. They'd've set Jim down, stood bent over, breathing hard, hands planted on their knees.

"Trade off," Ron called. "You two get out front." No less winded than t'other two, Nathaniel and Ron knelt and lifted Jim again and moved as fast as they'd've been able. Tarps fluttered either side of'em. Equipment'd've roared till the ground seemed t'tremble. Sharp beeps'd've pierced the air.

"We'd better hurry," Nathaniel said.

But Ron'dn't reply. He'd probably already noted the absence of shivers, the conversion of live mass into dead weight.

"Up here!" they called. And Nathaniel and Ron took deep breaths and moved fast as they'd across a square filled with tarp-wrapped statues, through half-finished stonework and rebar-filled ditches, piles of cement bags and mortar tubs and hoes and shovels and upturned

wheelbarrows. A whistle blew and ahead blue hardhats filtered round a corner. Some still probably chewed wieners. Others stuffed napkins into their pockets. And they'd've been busy enough among'em-selvesn't t'notice the boys at the far end of the square till—

“HELP—” Ron's voice'd t've been hoarse'n that stifling afternoon air. But't'd've done'ts job.

After the moons'd set, they lit their oiljar and pressed into the night.

"Sounds like t's just ahead," Ambeth said.

They paused, waited for water-slosh t'sound again.

Li pointed. "Through there."

Fountain spouts died down t'a dribble as they entered a small square. Kayla reached and caught drippy dregs'n'er palm and let'em trickle over'er fingers and into the draining fountain basin.

Others dropped their packs. "Nicen't t've t'crap on stairs," Helena said.

"Roughin't gettin t'b'too much fer yuh?"

"Y—"

But the fountain gurgled and sputtered and gushed and drowned any replies. And they thrust their hands into'ts multitudinous streams and washed'emselfs of dust and grime and splashed their faces till't died t'a dribble, again.

"Might aswell go ahead and start filling the canteens," Mara said. "We'll start lookin for some place t'sleep."

Li said, "Make sure't's'igh nuf so Kayla's bogie can't get'er."

"Y—"

But Mara motioned t'er. "Dig out t'other light."

Anything else they'd've said'd've drowned when that fountain gurgled and sputtered and gushed.

He threaded between blue-painted trailers and mounted corrugated metal stairs and knocked and waited. Over the door, a light lit blue and a lock'd've clicked and whirred. He stepped inside, momentarily shivered because of the sudden change t'air conditioning. He removed'is hardhat and combed'is fingers through'is thinning hair. "We have an issue."

Sheryl looked up from behind'er desk. She laid down'er stylus and straightened and the inflatable ball she used as a chair realigned with'er motion and made'er shift'er core. "What?"

"We found some boys onsite."

She stood. Her ball wobbled back. "How did they get out here?"

"Truck, apparently."

"Shit."

"One of them was injured."

"Oh, shit. How bad?"

"Don't know. He's in medical now. Looks like some kind of bite. Probably some of our friends."

"God—if I ever get my hands on that contractor..."

"At least it's not site related."

"Let me worry about the insurance premiums," she said. "Shit."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Where are they now?"

"I left them in the commissary."

She nodded—"Right."—and buttoned'er jacket and tugged't smooth. "I'll deal with this."

"Need me?"

"Can you spare the time?"

"Still behind schedule as ever. Shouldn't hurt anything."

She crossed'er trailer and lifted a hardhat from a rack. "You might wanna take it easy out there," he said.

"Why's that?"

"It ain't air conditioned out there."

"Oh, ha ha."

“Ever consider joining the amateur archaeology society?” Ron said.

Nathaniel shook his head. “Of course, if what happened at school is the standard fair, it might be worth going once in a while.”

Ron chuckled. “No, but I mean it. Think about it. Millions of years of history laid out right here.” He motioned toward a partially tarp-covered mudbrick wall where individual bricks’d slowly subsumed into singular mass.

“Maybe I’m more interested in what could happen.”

“What do you mean what could happen?”

“Never mind,” Nathaniel said. “It’s just an expression.”

Behind them at one of the blue-plastic tables erected beneath a same-colored tent, t’other boys still whispered furtively and huddled over the tabletop and glanced round. “Sheesh, I wish they’d settle down,” Ron said. “They’re beginning to get on my nerves.”

“There will be a bill to pay, you know,” Nathaniel said. “From their doctor or whatever.”

“Well, sitting round and worrying about it isn’t going to do anything. And—”

“Good afternoon,” Sheryl said. She smiled and walked between tables. The boys looked up. And Ron and Nathaniel turned. But it was Ron who’d’ve visibly glanced at her bare leg where her taupe skirt ended at her knees. She adjusted her same-colored jacket again. “Of course you know,” she said, “visitors generally aren’t allowed onsite without special permission at this time. It’s a safety issue, you know.” And for whatever reason, she’d’ve gravitated toward Ron and Nathaniel. “We’re sorry,” she said. “For any inconvenience.”

"It's only our friend that's inconvenienced at the moment," Ron said.

"Oh...yes." She cleared'er throat, but smiled. Momentarily, she glanced over'er shoulder at the foreman. "Maybe you should go see how..." She turned t'Ron. "What's his name?"

"Jim."

"Maybe you should go see how Jim's doing." But this time she'dn't bother t'look over'er shoulder as she spoke.

"I—"

She turned and motioned'er head. The foreman nodded and motioned with'is clipboard.

"You go," Ron said. "I'll stay here" Nathaniel regarded'm a moment, but followed t'other man from beneath the tent.

"I'm sure," she said, "he'll be fine."

"Which one?" Ron said.

For a moment, she seemed puzzled, but'er expression slowly softened into a faint smile. Left just looking at each other, they seemed at a stalemate. "So," he said, "how long's it going to be before everything's done?"

"Oh, another few years. Just a few finishing touches, really, you know."

"Won't Tillman be like a cat who's heard the icebox open," Ron said.

"Tillman?"

"A member of the local archaeologist society. Kind of big on the whole Martian history thing. Really chomping at the bit to see the restoration work done."

"Oh," she said. "What about you?"

He shrugged. "It has it's moments."

She still smiled. "Maybe you'd like to see what we've done so far. Sort of an early sneak preview."

"Sure," Ron said. "That'd be neat, wouldn't it, guys?"

She glanced over'er shoulder at t'others, as'f she'd forgotten they'd been there. One of'em opened'is rucksack, said, "What did you do with the rest of the sandwiches?" Reply: "I didn't do anything."

"If you boys are hungry," Sheryl said, "I'm sure we can see what the cafeteria can do." Absently, they looked up at'er. And she smiled

at Ron and pulled the velcro tab on the case at'er hip and stepped away and tapped'er phone. "Someone will be around in just a bit with something to eat," she said when she returned. And she slipped'er phone back into'ts case. She turned t'Ron. "Everything's really mostly done. We're just working on the finishing touches," she said.

And they walked off round a tarp-covered mudbrick wall. "This way," she said. "I think you'll find this interesting."

“Yuns thin...” Genie said as she lay’n’er hammock. “Yuns thin the doctor Nathaniel met out there’s the same one from later?”

“Could’ve been.”

“They’d t’ve’d more than’ne.”

“I’dn’t say they’dn’t. I’s jus wonderin.”

Kayla sighed. “It’s nice t’b’somewhat clean again.” She yawned. “Can we wash somethins’n the mornin?”

“Better keep moving,” Mara said.

“I’mn’t comin all the way out’ere,” Li said, “with all yuns jus t’b’late.”

“We won’t b’late,” Mara said.

Coreman's leg twitched and he jerked awake, stared a few moments through the windshield as he didn't know where he was. He cleared his throat, climbed out and paced round the patrol car, perhaps to clear his head. Shadow crags sprouted across high rock faces and grew as the sun diffused into the horizon. Checking the water, the engine, the tires he'd've only taken so much of his time, even he'd done it two, three, four, or more times. He reached through a rolled-down window and pulled out the flare gun and a shell box from the passenger seat. He set them on the hood. More than once he broke open the barrel and looked down it, snapped it shut. He counted shells. He closed the box and put everything on the dash.

Sunset.

I think a cat peed on this page. It smells that way. And ink's run everywhere. So this's just me. And I don't wanna b'called a Fenchurchian or anything, but'n putting together what the policeman'd've done while'e waited, how'e must've felt, or what'e might've said t'mself, I wonder'f what we really do's we invent people³¹⁶, if that we build little dolls of'em'n our heads³¹⁷ and that's what people're³¹⁸, so made-up people're really people too³¹⁹. So really we (yuh and me and anyone else that might b'listening'f this's being read aloud) can imagine'm t'say whatever we want'm t'say³²⁰.

I don't think'e'd've said anything

or nothing

Maybe'e'd've climbed outa'is patrol car and stood awhile leaned against't as'ts bodyworks cooled. After a while, he'd've climbed back'n and sat there. He perhaps'd've just sat there'n darkness and waited and done nothing. But I don't think'e'd've accepted that. Once'n a while, he'd've flicked-on'is headlights, squinted at shadow-cragged rockfaces. Maybe once'e'd've gotten out and gone a little ways up that path. He'd've climbed back'n and cut off the headlights. He'd've'd t'watch the battery meter. Too low and'e'dn't've been able t'start the patrol car. And'f'e'd t'start'ts engine t'charge't, they mightnt've'd enough gas t'get back.

After a while, his eyes'd've adjusted t'see the mountain'n full moon-slight

He leaned forward and flicked-on'is headlights, squinted at a new-lit world. He pulled'mself from the seat, looked ovetop the driver side door. "CATHERINE?" His yells must've seemed hollow and meaningless'n the wilderness. "CA—" Movement upslope. Then step-by-step, dirt-stained dresses descended into the periphery of the headlights' bulwark against darkness and moonlight. Coreman scrabbled up that path. But before'e'd say anything—

"Help her," Catherine said. "She's dead on her feet." Coreman put'is hand round Mary-Celleste's waist, as Catherine'd. For a moment, it must've seemed as'f'e might've'd t'carry'er. But Catherine shook'er head. "Almost there."

He opened a rear door. "Let me." He motioned for Mary-Celleste's child. "While you get in." Mary-Celleste looked down, seemedn't quite t'realize the warm, tiny thing she'd held against'er breast all night'd've been detachable. Catherine put a hand on'er shoulder. "It's alright. Let me have her. You get in."

"Here you go," Catherine said, after Mary-Celleste sat back. "All safe and sound." Mary-Celleste held'er sleeping child t'er breast and Catherine removed'er hat so she'd lay back'er head and close'er eyes.

"Joe," Catherine said. She motioned t't'other side of the car. "Clean it out on that side. So she can lay down." He nodded. Near-nuf Catherine touched Mary-Celleste's shoulder and woke'er enough t'ease'er down. And Mary-Celleste lay there, one arm over'er swaddled child. Both breathed softly.

Catherine nodded t'Coreman, who quietly as possible closed the door. And she'd the same on'er side. They climbed'n and she

dropped'er hat into the floorboard. After a moment's silence, she glanced toward'm. "What's the matter?"

He motioned t'the passenger door. "You have to slam it or it won't shut right."

Catherine glanced into the back seat. "Not a good idea." She pushed against't. "Will it stay closed?"

"It'll rattle."

"Then it won't be worse than anything else," she said. And she shook'er head and closed'er eyes. "What time is it?"

He glanced round, lifted'is watch from the floorboard. "After midnight."

"I owe you a flashlight," she said.

Coreman looked over'is shoulder. "You think it'll wake them if I start it?"

She rolled'er head against the seat. He depressed the ignition switch, glanced back. He dropped into reverse, looked back onto a night-ensconced world, red-orange landscape washed blue by tail-lights. He turned and'is headlights fanned over desert. "Catherine," he said.

"Yeah, Joe."

"I don't know if I'm going to be able to stay awake on my own."

"It's alright," she said. Eyes still closed, she put a hand on'is arm. "It's alright. We'll keep each other awake."

“’ere’t comes,” Li said, and she groaned as she lay back’n’er hammock.

None else replied.

Those old roads'd've been worse by night. But that'dn't've stopped several boys from falling asleep with their heads on their rucksacks. Nathaniel and Ron sat with their backs t'that truck cab. Occasionally, one or t'other'd've glanced over'is shoulder. A phone screen eerily lit Jim where'e lay blanketed'n the passenger seat. "You know," Nathaniel said, "one of those would be useful, I bet. Why don't we have one in town?" Onscreen, a white triangle traversed blue-green vectors.

Ron looked over'is shoulder. "Gotta be a reason."

Their driver sat silent, as'e'd done since the foreman'd taken'm aside. His blue hardhat rested on the dash. Tobacco smoke shredded through the half-down driver side window. One of those boys'd've gone on for days bout how'e'd sold a half-pack of cigarettes for five whole bucks. He slept with that new bill folded'n'is front pocket.

Amidst night, tiredness, the engine's hypnotic influence, it'd've been impossible t'say who saw anything first. But either way, Ron or Nathaniel touched t'other's arm. "What do you suppose that is?"

Light tracked along the distant landscape.

"You know," Ron said, "that could be the old mountain road."

"What makes you think that?"

"Don't know. Just do."

Their driver dis-latched the rear cab window and slid't open and preempted anything Nathaniel might've said. "Any idea what that is?" He spoke round'is cigarette.

"Probably just delivering a baby," Ron said.

Screen-glow lit the side of the driver's face as'e stared. He turned and slid-closed the rear cab window.

In the distance, t'other vehicle continued parallel. Maybe'ts high beams blinded the truck driver. Maybe each'd been moving too fast for t'other t'react'n time. Boy's woke midair, slammed against the

truck bed. Headlights flared against the truck and forced Nathaniel and Ron t'shield their eyes as they staggered up. "Hey," Ron said. "That's the patrol car."

"Fuck—" The truck driver jerked's door—but't smashed against the patrol car's wheelwell. He spat through the half-down window. "What the fuck's wrong with you—are you fucking blind?"

Coreman stumbled from the patrol car. He'd lost's cap. There may've been a faint wet-black mark on the side of's head that may've been blood. "Anyone...hurt?"

"What the fuck's wrong with you?"

Coreman rested's elbow on the patrol car's roof and touched the side of's head.

T'other boys'd've climbed up and looked outa the truck by then. "Now," one of'em said, "they'll know." Probably the plan'd been t'b'let off at the town's edge and t'walk the rest of the way.

"Shut up," Nathaniel said. He called over t'the patrol car. "Officer Coreman, you alright?"

Coreman looked up. "N...Nathaniel?"

Ron waved. "Goodnight."

Coreman held's temple, squinted. "What're you boys doing out here?"

Catherine climbed out. "Joe, how bad is it?"

Everyone must've noticed the crying by then, because even the truck driver'd've quieted. Catherine helped Mary-Celleste out. Shak-ily, she stood, her wailing child'n'er arms. Catherine said, "Do I need to take her awhile?" But Mary-Celleste shook'er head. Catherine put'er arm around'er shoulders.

"Mrs Stowe," Nathaniel called. "Are you alright?"

She looked up. "Nathaniel? W—" She shook'er head. "Fine," she said. "I'm alright." The child cried. Catherine looked down. "We're all fine."

Ron leaned over. "How bad is it?"

The driver craned through the window, but'dn't've seen much. And with's door jammed, the only way out'd've been t'crawl over Jim, which'e'dn't do.

"Joe," Catherine said. He looked back the way they'd come. "How bad is it?" But'e'dn't turn. "Joe—Joe!"

He breathed deep. And'e put'is hand on the patrol car's hood and peered into where truck and car'd merged. He shook'is head, stopped, would've leaned against the truck as'f'e might've vomited. "Doesn't ...look too bad," he said. "Just have to...get them apart."

Catherine pulled'er arm from round Mary-Celleste and moved round the patrol car and toward'm. "Joe, are you okay?"

He turned away, put'is hand t'is mouth. "Fine..." He stepped toward the patrol car and touched the open driver side door and eased into the seat. He gripped the steering wheel so hard'is knuckles discolored. He touched the ignition. Sputtersputtersputtersputtersputter. He tried again. ChchChchChchChch. He pressed the ignition till either't or'is thumb'd've'd t'break.

"Joe." Catherine bent t'eye level with'm but'e still looked through the dust-impregnated windshield. "Come on, Joe."

He whispered, "I'm sorry."

"You're just tired, Joe. Everyone is. And you're hurt." Her fingers floated a whisper's width from the side of'is head. "You need rest."

"... my..."

"Get out, Joe," she said. "We'll figure something out." She helped'm out. "The engine seems to be damaged," she called. "We can't back up. Can you pull away?"

The truck roared, clucked-chunked as the driver shifted. Sand spewed against'ts undercarriage. He shifted. Cluck-chunk. Spun. He killed the motor. And'e punched the dash. "Fuck." He rooted'n'is shirt pocket for a cigarette and pinched't between'is lips.

"Maybe we can push it," Ron said.

Nathaniel called, "Everybody outa the truck."

They took positions against the patrol car's four open doors and Ron leaned'n and shifted't t'neutral. "Ready?" he called. "Alright, on three." Opposite'm, Nathaniel braced'is shoulder. "Three—" They grunted. The patrol car lurched, bogged somehow. "Come on—push—that's it—keep it up—don't let it roll back."

Behind'em, the truck roared. Its rear tires spun and't tried t'fishtail, but the driver shifted—cluck-chunk—and't lurched onto the road.

"That does it," Catherine called.

"Alright—HOLD IT." Ron dipped'n and set the handbrake. "Brake's on." T'other boys sighed and pulled away t'massage their

shoulders. One bent and popped the hood and tried t'pull't up, but't jammed.

"Gonna have to have a tow truck," he said. "May have cracked a shaft."

Coreman turned away. He bent and spat. Catherine put'er hand on 'is shoulder. She whispered, "Come on, Joe." Then louder: "At least we have a ride. It could be worse." Except she'd've probably known't'd been the wrong thing t'say as soon as she'd said't. Silently, she squeezed'is shoulder.

Ron returned from talking t'the truck driver. "We should get everybody in and get going," he said.

"But..." Mary-Celleste said. Her baby'd quieted by then.

"Don't worry," Ron said. "It's safe. We do it all the time." He rubbed the back of'is head where't'd struck the cab earlier.

Catherine nodded. "Nathaniel, will you see if you can get the spare blanket out of the trunk?"

He nodded.

"But..." Mary-Celleste said. "The wind." And she cradled'er child.

"It's okay," Ron said. "You can sit up at the cab. You won't feel anything there."

"I..."

Catherine touched Mary-Celleste's arm. "It'll be fine. We won't drive fast." She glanced at Ron. "Right?" He nodded and walked back t'talk t'the truck driver. While they spoke, the cab flickered as'e fired another cigarette. Nathaniel returned with a blanket. "Those'll do nicely," Catherine said. She said t'Mary-Celleste, "Let's get you two buttoned in."

Ron banged the cab when they'd all settled. And inside't, a cigarette flared as the driver'd shifted gears and started forward. Ron offered Coreman'is canteen, but'e shook'is head. He sipped and passed't t'Nathaniel. The patrol car sat there left behind'n night. Nathaniel offered the canteen. But Catherine shook'er head. She glanced over t'where Mary-Celleste sat, somewhere between sleep and wakefulness as she held'er sleeping child'n'er lap.

In darkness, fingers touched the back of Nathaniel's hand. He looked over, but even'f'e'd barely been able t'discern'er, she'dn't've

looked at'm while she guided'is arm round'er waist as that truck
rumbled on into the night.

with many hours t'go till dawn.

Zeb skulked through shadows as they shouted. Cars sat at haphazard angles on the street. People haloed by porchlight glow crowded onto the Holdfasts' lawn.

"Why wasn't there a plan for something like this?" someone said from that crowd.

Councilman Reedland stood on the Holdfasts' porch and leaned over the railing. "Now," he said, "there's no need to become overexcited."

"They could be stuck out there lost in the desert, for all we know."

"Now—"—Reedland offered his palms—"—Now, I believe our intrepid public servants are more than capable of meeting this challenge, just as they have many others. And I'm sure Officer Coreman is on his way back as we speak."

"Then where are they? They should've been back by now."

"What about it, Bill?"

Councilman Reedland turned a glance at the chief, who cleared his throat.

"As our Chief of police can point out," Reedland said, "Officer Coreman is more than prepared for these kinds of circumstances—"

"Then where are they?"

The chief stepped forward. "Officer Coreman is more than adequately trained for this type of emergency. And his vehicle is more than adequately stocked with the necessary provisions and equipment for these types of incidents."

"We should do something."

"And what do you propose to do?"

"Get a couple trucks and go out there."

"The best thing to do," Councilman Reedland said, "is to wait until morning. Then we can—"

"Morning might be too late!"

"If we leave now, we can be out there by morning and if we don't find anything we can go up the mountain."

"You don't just... You just don't go trammeling over sacred ground... Reverend..."

"Nothing—that's my sister out there."

"Don't talk to me that way, young man." The old man ambled toward 'is grandnephew on 'is cane. "I know perfectly well who's out there."

"If we could just have some calm," the reverend said. He mounted the Holdfasts' steps and raised 'is hand.

"We have to do something!"

"We can't take power into our hands that's not ours to wield."

"Please," Councilman Reedland said. "If we could just—"

The Holdfasts' front door opened behind 'em and they turned. The doctor slipped out.

"How is he?" someone called.

Falstaff paused, bag and hat 'n-hand, and looked over that crowd. He nodded. "He'll be fine. A couple day's rest is all. And I would recommend the same for everyone else."

"We have to do something!"

"Please," Reedland said. "Rushing off would be the worst thing to do. We—"

"Heeeeeeeey." A voice carried down that street. "Heeeeeey." Someone waved as he ran down pavement and finally doubled over with 'is hands on 'is knees and panted. "... truck... coming in..."

"Truck?" Jack Moore forced 'is way through. "Where?"

That bent over young man gasped and extended 'is arm.

Helena said, "Yuns think'e was startin t'get hungry by then?"

"Who?"

"Zeb."

"Guess't'd depend on how many people'ere lockin their doors by then."

"What'd've'e done then?"

Li snorted. "Well, yuns can tell wut'e'd've said, nowise."

Zeb's stomach growled. He grumbled. He scowled. "Change is a'comin', fuckers," he might've said t'mself. He'd've chuckled.

The driver flicked'is last cigarette through the half-down window. The town lay under hazy streetlight blue'n the distance. He slowed, knocked on the rear window. Mary-Celleste jerked awake. He stopped. "Everybody out."

Ron half-stood. "What's going on?"

"Just everybody out. This is as far as I go."

Catherine slipped Nathaniel's arm from round'er. "What's going on?"

"We're almost in town," Nathaniel said. "What's the problem?"

Headlights appeared'n the distance, moved toward'em.

"Fuck." The driver grabbed'is phone and slipped't into'is coveralls. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck—everybody out—now."

Mary-Celleste said, "What's—" She glanced round.

Catherine touched'er shoulder. "We're back," she said.

"But what's going on?"

Catherine shook'er head. She glanced at the driver through the window. "Let's just get everybody down."

"Come on—" the driver said. He drummed'is hands against the steering wheel, eyed distant headlights. "Fuck." He climbed out and went round and opened the passenger side door.

"Are we home yet..." Jim said.

"Come get him—"

Ron and Nathaniel steadied Jim between'em and the driver slammed the passenger side door, jogged round t'climb back'n.

"Hey—what's the hurry?"

Headlights washed over'em. Car doors jerked open. Jack Moore ran toward'is sister. "You okay? You're not hurt, are you?" And

as f on cue, her child woke and cried. "It's a girl," Mary-Celleste said, as f e'dn't've seen'er pink swaddling with all those headlights. "Dear—" Mrs Moore threw'er arms round'er daughter. And'er husband put a hand on'er shoulder. "Give the girl some room to breathe." Her brother pulled away, looked at Coreman. "What happened?" But Coreman'dn't reply. Someone said, "What're you boys doing here?" Ron said, "Jim's hurt." "Where's the doctor?" Someone formed'is hands round'is mouth. "SOMEBODY GET THE DOCTOR OVER HERE." "What's going on?" "Is somebody hurt?" New headlights appeared from the town's edge and moved toward'em. "OVER HERE." Falstaff pushed through with'is bag'n-hand. "What happened?" Ron said, "He got bit by something." Falstaff glanced at'm quizzically, but motioned. "Let's get him to the car. Need a couple men over here." And they relieved Nathaniel and Ron and carried Jim toward a car as Falstaff called: "Clear the way. Clear the way. Move those cars back there." The doctor moved toward Mary-Celleste. He nodded. "Let's get her to your car. I'll be by later." Headlight beams glinted from small mirror-polished things on the chief's uniform. "Officer Coreman, let's get these cars moving." After a moment, Coreman slipped on'is cap, nodded. "Joe," Catherine said. He glanced back at'er, but'dn't reply. Councilman Reedland extended a hand toward the truck's driver side window. "I understand we have you to thank for helping bring everyone back safely." He started the truck. "No need to be taking off so soon, now. I'm sure we could get you something to eat if I know any of the ladies around here. We don't get many of you archaeology types out here. In fact—" He gunned the engine so'ts roar disconcerted everyone enough t'move back. Wrapped'n a robe and long coat, Mr Tillman forced'is way through. "So—you're one of them." And'e jerkily kept pace as the driver backed the truck through that clearing crowd. "Well, I got something to tell you—we ain't hicks out here, you know, and we're not gonna put up with this monopolization of our common resource any longer and I don't know what you all aren't being completely incompetent out there—can you say you haven't destroyed something vital—no—you—" The truck turned, thunked as the driver shifted gears. "YOU WON'T GET OFF THAT EASY—NONE OF YOU—*THERE WILL BE A RECKONING.*"

People watched the truck head into the desert, but slowly returned t' their own concerns as 'ts taillights shrunk outa sight. Jack helped 'is sister into the Moores' car. The Falstaffs headed back.

Tillman with 'is hands'n'is pockets

scattered

Ron looked but'dn't find Nathaniel.

They met dawn on Maple Street. In other parts of town, the newspaper man put aside the backward-facing type that'd b'the special edition for the graduation and turned t'scribble notes and blindly slotted fresh lead type for a new article. And storekeepers balanced their books and took stock as delivery trucks made their way along Backstreet and beeped as they turned and reversed toward loading docks. And at the diner, the cook scraped a griddle, pulled cold boiled potatoes from a icebox t'b'grated into hashbrowns. And Mr Tillman stood with'is hands'n'is bathrobe or'is coat pockets and looked down at'is dig site and maybe mumbled something bout a next layer. And Nathaniel's grandmother, no doubt, back'n the Walcott's kitchen, where she'dn't've seen anything that'd've transpired on the street, had already started water t'boil for oatmeal.

They stopped on Catherine's side of the street. Nathaniel glanced across't. Maybe'e'd noticed the Walcott's garage'd been empty. Maybe't wasn't and'is parents'd made't back before'm. Or Maybe they'd stayed away from the fray altogether. It'dn't matter.

They'd slept some, yes. For what't'd been worth. Her head on'is shoulder, his against a sideboard.

Catherine paused atop'er front steps, maybe she'd even've climbed'em without realizing and she turned and Nathaniel stood below. He stood silent, if only because'e'd've probably'd no idea what t'say or that any thing'd've been said.

She offered'er hand and drew'm into the front hall and closed the front door behind'em. Knowing intimately every chair and coffee table and stool, she led'm through darkness and down the back hall. In'er bedroom, blackout curtains dammed light as they'd always done and't must've seemed as'f they'd stepped into that void into which

the first being'd been formed. Her fingers found a bedside lamp and even'ts meager bulb made'em wince. She looked at'erself, him, hands still clasped, arms outstretched. Their rust-tinted arms and faces. Maybe for the briefest moment she reconsidered, thought better of't. Blood pumped through'er middle and'er tongue struck'er dry lips and retreated.

She released'is hand. "I want to show you something," she said. A whisper. She probably'dn't even intended t'speak so low. But't'd've been all she'd manage. Standing there by'er bed, the lamp'd've set'er dress aglow against'er body. She reached back. Buttons loosed, her dress flopped round'er and drooped over'er shoulders as she lowered'er arms. She shifted, withdrew'er arms. And't settled round'er waist. Maybe she'd've paused, given'm a momentn't t'b'overwhelmed. Or maybe she'dn't've and she'd've shoved'er dress over'er hips so rust-stained, flower-print fabric crumpled round'er feet. Her chest ached. Dust on'er neck, arms, face, rendered'er two-toned. But she'd've only stood there for a moment. It'd've been too much too soon. Maybe... But she'dn't've waited, only trusted'n'is ability t'endure whatever might come, even'f she'dn't trust'erself. Her heart hammered as she dis-buttoned'er undertop and pulled't back and let't fall down'er arms. She'dn't've stopped. It'd t'b'fast. Something rattled across hardwood. Her undergarment button'd've popped where she'd tried t'force't. But she'd've ignored't or never noticed't and'd've shoved'em down, stepped outa'em, pulled'em off'er foot, almost lost'er balance. And where they'd've landed, she'dn't've cared.

She straightened. She stood before'm not-forgivably naked except for that rust patina. Just being that way'n front of'm...clay must've seemed t'fire into porcelain. She stepped toward'm till they'd've been as close as'd b'andn't touch. Looking into'is eyes, she touched the backs of'is hands and guided'em t'er waist. And'is dust-stained fingers'd've smudged what of'er skin'd remained clean. His breathing must've been as ragged as'ers. She said, "Do you ever look down and wonder what I'm doing?"

He nodded.

He'd t've been nearnuf t'scent that sweat'n'er hair from a long, hot night.

She lifted'is hands from'er. "Let me show you." And she retreated

so'e once again'd've seen all of'er, or at least, as much as'e'd've seen then. She touched the comforter and moved t'allow'm by. And'e sat at the foot of the bed, almost missed the edge. And't'dn't've mattered what dust or dirt smeared from'em t't. She adjusted a pillow longways against the headboard and sat beside't, legs together. She turned and looked at'm. "Do you want to see?" Without awaiting an answer, because't'd arrived before the question, she turned, drew'er leg on the comforter while'er other foot still touched hardwood. She'd've burned. Nearly shook. Burned as she'd never've when she'd merely faced that dammed, curtained window. And as'e watched, she eased'er hand down through'er hair and touched'erself, must've almost called out as'er breath quickened. And she watched'm watch'er rub'erself.

Too much. Her head sank into'er pillow and the headboard tapped the wall. Her stomach tightened. Twisted. She groaned. Waves rushed, crashed on some not-seen beach and withdrew and crashed again, fainter, and withdrew and crashed again, fainter still, but again still...

Sweat'd've trickled between'er rising-falling breasts. Dampness spread beneath'er.

She opened'er eyes.

Mud smeared'er fingertips.

In prolonged silence, they just looked at each other. "Do you..." she said. She struggled t'regain'er breath. "Do you do anything when you're alone?" This is where she'd've been proven wrong, where everything'd've fallen apart, shattered. Her eyes burned. She blinked t'stopper tears.

Nathaniel stood. That'd've been't. His shock'd've dissipated. He'd've come t'is senses. He'd've run.

He put one sneaker toe against t'other's heel. Her chest tightened again as'e pulled off'is shirt. He popped'is jeans and shoved'em down so'is underwear went with'em and they tangled at'is ankles and turned inside out and peeled off a sock as'e kicked'em away.

It'd've been'er turn t'look.

His erection curved and pointed faintly toward the ceiling. "Is that..." she said. "... the way it always is?"

He must've boiled. Arms at'is sides, his hands balled. "When... When I think about...you...it...gets like this." His faced turned toward the floor.

“What...” She clasped a hand over’er breast without’er seemingly conscious attention, revealed a partial mud-and-dust handprint on’er flesh when she lifted’t and caught’er nipple between two fingers as’er other hand drifted down over’er stomach. “What do you do?”

He whispered, “I touch it...”

“Show me.”

Slowly, he dis-clenched’is fists. He touched’is shaft, lightly slid up and down’t. Tension pulsed through’is groin.

“Climb on the bed,” she whispered. He must’ve looked as’f’is knees’d buckle.

His eyes remained fixed on’er as’e climbed up. His hand still wrapped’is erection.

“Is this what you do when you think about me?”

He nodded.

“Does it feel...good...when you do that to yourself?” She pressed’er fingers into’er pubic hair.

He shivered. He’d t’t think she’d’ve thought’t’d’ve been disgusting. But... He pulled away’is hand. And’is freed erection faintly bounced as a pulse traversed’is groin. He spat into’is cupped hand. He groaned as’e rubbed’mself, almost closed’is eyes, and thrust’is hips forward into’is hand, dust intermixing with spit t’form a faint-orange lather. His eyes burned. He tensed, thrust’is hips, shook’er mattress as everything between’is legs contracted and released and contracted and released and everything that’d collected over those past few days spewed across’er bed and over the far side and spattered on hardwood.

A final groan and’is chin dropped against’is heaving chest. Too sensitive, he’d removed’is hand as those last waves lapped at’is groin, tightened, released, and a small rivulet oozed onto’er comforter and puddled.

Catherine pressed’er hand between’er legs. Rubbed. Furiously rubbed. It built. It. Almost. Almost—

Knock. Knock.

The sound carried through’er house and rather than die into fainter echoes must’ve seemed t’build and crash against’er bedroom door. They stiffened.

Knock. Knock.

"Hurry." She whispered as she stepped into'er dress and'e worked t'dis-entangle'is inside-out jeans and find'is sock.

Knock. Knock.

She shivered, finished with'er buttons. Heat rolled from'er face. He'd just gotten an arm into'is shirt when'er hands touched'is naked chest, smeared orange-red. "Please... Promise..." She choked, seemed on verge of tears.

Knock. Knock.

"Promise not to tell anyone about this."

Knock. Knock.

He nodded.

She'd too.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

He pulled down'is shirt.

Knock, knock.

"Quick," she said. "Go into the kitchen. Get a glass of water." And she almost pushed'm down the hall and into the living room. "Get a glass of water." She swallowed, her throat dry. She walked toward the foyer.

Knock, kn—

She opened the door so fast she must've jerked the knocker from the lady's hand.

"Well," the lady said. "I was beginning to wonder what had happened to you. Thought maybe you'd gone out to get another baby." She smiled. "Brought you this." She raised a napkin-covered pot'n both hands. "Figured you wouldn't be up to cooking much under the circumstances."

After a moment, the woman cleared'er throat. "Well, um, are you goin to invite me in?"

"Mmmm." Catherine nodded t'erself. "Sorry," she said. And she took that offered pot and stepped aside. "I just got back and it's, well ...been a long night." Catherine paused, looked down at'erself. "And as you can see...I haven't had much chance to cleanup. In fact I...just barely got my shoes off."

"It's dark," the woman said. "How do you see?"

"Well... Like I said, I just got back. Hadn't...hadn't even turned on the lights yet."

They walked toward the living room. Catherine struck the light switch with'er elbow and winced at the brightness.

"Oh, don't worry about it," the woman said. "Here—" And she took back'er pot. "I'll just put this on the stove for you. You can heat it up whenever you've a mind."

And before Catherine'd say anything, the woman'd've stepped into the kitchen.

"Oh," the woman said. "Good morning, Nathaniel." She passed'm on'er way t'the stove. "I thought you boys had gone camping."

"Yes, mam." He finished'is glass of water. And pretense or no, he'd've needed't.

"They got back early," Catherine said. "We...all did." She glanced at a cat-faced electric clock above a kitchen counter. "We got back early and since nobody was up yet, I offered Nathaniel a glass of water so he wouldn't have to wake anybody."

The woman nodded, smiled. "Of course," she said. And said t'Nathaniel: "You take care. Ready for graduation?"

He nodded.

"Excited. I can tell. Always happens." The woman smiled at'm. "Well anyway," she said t'Catherine, "I'll get out of your hair so you can get some rest." Catherine backed into the living room. "It's a good thing you got back." The woman laughed. "After all, we'd never figure out where the decorations you've ordered are." She smiled and shook'er head.

Catherine nodded.

"Well, I'll get out of your hair. You get some rest, now, hear?" She turned. "No, don't bother. I can show myself out." And moments later the door closed.

Nathaniel set'is glass on the counter. Morning light streamed through a kitchen window. He put'is hands on'er hips, would've felt fabric, yet known there'd been nothing but'er underneath. But before she'd become breathless again, she stepped back and put both'er hands on'is chest. "You should go," she said. "They'll start to wonder where you are."

And she took'is hand, led'm down the foyer. He let'mself b'led. She touched the doorknob. "Remember," she said.

He reached t'touch'er again, but she caught'is hand and opened the door and the only thing that'd've remained'd've been for'm t'step through't. "Remember."

But how'd e've forgotten?

“That part’dn’t make sense neither,” Li said.

Kayla and Helena groaned. “What’re yuh talkin bout now?”

“’ow’d they leave,” Li said, “on two different roads—and yuh’dn’t know’ow fast each’s travelin, yuh’dn’t know’f the roads are the same length—and they probably can’t b’cause’t takes the boys a couple days or wutever t’drive out t’the ruins and only’ours t’get t’the mountain—or wutever’t was—”

“But they,” Genie said, “they took a different route t’get out there the first time. So—”

“—And they all jus *somehow*’appen t’b’at the same place at the same time t’crash. It jus don’t... It jus’dn’t work.”

Mara sighed. She pulled’erself over the side of’er hammock.

“Where are yuh goin?”

“Can’t sleep,” Mara said. “I’m gonna sit outside awhile.”

“Yuh see,” Genie said, after Mara’d left. “Yuh see what yuh’ve done now.”

“Wut’d I do?”

“Gah.” Helena faintly rocked’erself. “Yuns know, I’dn’t know’f this trip was such a good idea.”

“No,” Genie said. “Don’t say that. Mara’s gonna win.”

“Well, she’d better sharpen-up’f she’s,” Li said. “She left off the endin.”

Farther down Maple, maybe half-hidden behind one of its eponymous trees, bleary eyed, collar still'n-hand, the reverend watched Nathaniel cross

If there were something here, it would most likely go:



Damn Juri! She knows she'sn't supposed t'come and take the stuff I'm working on!!!! Just cause she leaves the scriptorium sometimes she thinks she's so high and mighty.

How the hell'm I supposed t'ver get this finished??????????

BOOK II

TOOTFRUIT: i think i found something new !!!!!!!
TOOTFRUIT: anyone seen this chap before ???????
TOOTFRUIT: peel://w.tiny.shorty/31356183643861083663313345

INTERVIEW

Last year James Marsden and Anabeth Gabriel burst upon the literary scene with their translation of the first volume of *The Secret History of Mars*. This month sees the release of their third effort in this ongoing series, which has already received advance praise from New York Times book editor Joseph Markumm, who described this forthcoming work as: ‘A rare treat in a world of flattened fair’. The Lamplight Review caught up with the pair on their promotional tour in New York City®.

INTERVIEWER

What drew you to this project?

MARSDEN

I would say it was the scope of it. The grandeur.

INTERVIEWER

In terms of time and space?

MARSDEN

That. But also in the sheer volume of material.

INTERVIEWER

Is there any indication yet of how many volumes there will be in total?

MARSDEN

No. Because of the nature of translation, that is difficult to determine at this time.

INTERVIEWER

Part of the interest generated seems to be around the fact that these are translations the two of you are working on. How do you react to that?

MARSDEN

Well, I can, of course, understand why some people would find that a novelty. We were just recently in Paris, France®, which, of course, is one of the few countries to have a bi-lingual requirement. But I think, even if you look there, it's mostly a matter of tradition at this point, local character, if you will, since you can find almost no one who can read the French halves of street signs, outside of some specialist, that is. It was very interesting. We were shown around by John Franks, who is a fellow at the Moorehead Institute, who would go around reading the French phrases for us. But I think that sort of exoticism is really a small part of it.

INTERVIEWER

But the fact that it is a translation does drive part of it?

MARSDEN

Yes, I would say so.

INTERVIEWER

Did that ever concern you starting out? Did you ever feel the translation aspect would hamper the work's market viability?

MARSDEN

No.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel there is a certain nostalgia involved? A longing to experience a time when there were great linguistic barriers?

MARSDEN

It's hard to say.

INTERVIEWER

How did the two of you first encounter the material that would become what we now know?

MARSDEN

It started a little over, I would say, fifteen years ago.

INTERVIEWER

A long time.

MARSDEN

Yes.

Someone'd chalked a cat on a wall.

"'ow'd they get up there?" Genie said. "It's so big."

Thin black-lined legs stretched down from'ts roundish purpley body t'lumpy same-colored feet.

"They'ven't a sense of proportion," Li said.

And'ts black whiskers drooped all the way down that wall t'the paving stones.

"Someone'd t'make alotta colored chalk," Helena said.

It'd tiny, little yellow ears.

"How long," Kayla said. "How long'd yuns think somethin like that'd stay on a wall?"

And a blue-green segmented tail.

"Depends," Ambeth said. "A light storm'd scrub't off. Just regular wind, maybe...I'dn't know. Long time."

Genie said, "What'f't rained?"

"Oh, fudge." Li threw back'er head and raised'er arms. "Don't tell me yuh believe'n *rain* too."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Oh, nothin," Li said. "I'd expect someone like yuh t'go'n fer that kind of'okey-pokey superstition."

Councilman Reedland's secretary furrowed'er brow at'is pink gaze. "Mrs Holtcraft and Mr Chapman are in your office," she said. "I told them you might be in late." He'dn't reply. "They say it's something very important."

He nodded. He cleared'is throat. "What about?"

"I don't know. They...wouldn't say. Just that it's important." The corners of'er mouth turned down, as they'd've always done when she'd've been nervous. "I told them it would be okay to wait in your office. I hope that was alright."

"Fine. Fine."

"Councilman..." Hand on the doorknob, he partways turned. "I hear they made it back alright with the baby."

He nodded.

"Boy or girl?"

"I wouldn't want to ruin the surprise." He nodded again and pushed into'is office. He looked back through the open doorway. "Could you go get some coffee, please. Black. Very black."

She nodded and whipped out.

Councilman Reedland yawned.

Mrs Holtcraft and Mr Chapman looked up from seemingly whispering among'emselves. Chapman said, "You look awful."

"Thank you, Ford." Councilman Reedland nodded. "Morning, Deloise."

"We've got a problem," Chapman said. "A big problem."

"Just hold it." Reedland eased'mself into'is chair. "Now," he said, his eyes closed, "what's going on?"

“This.” Chapman slapped a stack of papers onto Reedland’s blotter with a thump that jolted’m forward where’e sat on the sofa’n the Jacobs’ living room. He blinked, glancing round, maybe’d’ve wondered how long’e’d nodded off, but Mrs Jacobs’dn’t’ve seemed t’notice. Politely as’e’d, he cleared’is throat and accepted a tea cup and saucer from’er.

“You look so tired,” she said. “Can I get you anything else?”

Councilman Reedland sipped’is tea as steam battered’is face. He shook’is head politely.

“Cookie?” Mrs Jacobs said.

He shook’is head. They waited’n polite silence. And after too long the front door shook. Their bell rang. “Oh.” Mrs Jacobs stood and hurried into the front hall. A distant click. And the door opened t’hushed voices. Mr Jacobs’d shed’is jacket and hat when’e entered the living room.

“Oh, me,” Mrs Jacobs said. “I’m afraid I haven’t quite gotten the hang of these new locks yet.” She smoothed’er dress against the backs of’er legs as she sat. Her husband stood, hands’n’is pockets. Reedland set’is cup and saucer on the table.

“I don’t know how to tell you this,” Reedland said.

His voice filtered out and upstairs, where Trent’d’ve sat’n’is pajamas and robe. He yawned as’e listened.

Below, Councilman Reedland cleared’is throat and started again.

Gold-red brightness transfused Nathaniel's pillow and'e tried t'roll away, but't'dn't work. He pushed't off'is face. Terrible brightness poured between open cupola shutters. His sweat-damp shirt clung t'is back as'e sat up. He still'd one shoe on. He glanced round for'ts mate. He rubbed'is neck. His other sock still dangled from'is pocket.

He stood and yawned and stretched. He glanced at'is orange-stained pillow. He rubbed'is dust-impregnated hands against'is cheek. Yawning again, he bundled fresh clothes'n something used but clean and climbed down through the trapdoor.

He closed the bathroom door behind'mself, stripped right there and'is half-erection'd've bobbed as'e walked toward the bathtub and he turned the faucet and rinsed'is hands before'e stoppered the drain. And'is legs shook as'e touched'mself. A dust-masked faced'd've looked at'm from the mirror.

He kneeled on lukewarm tile, splattered't quickly as thoughts of the night before must've enveloped'm.

He wiped up the mess with'is dirty shirt.

Not-steadily, he climbed into the filling tub.

“Nathaniel, come in here, please.” As’e reached the foot of the stairs, his father gestured from the den.

“Well,” his father said. He stood by’is desk and rested’is fingertips on’ts polished surface. His other arm’e held behind’is back. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Mr Walcott pulled’is fingers away from the desktop. “I have to tell you,” his father said. “It pains me to say it. But your mother and I are very disappointed with you.”

Finally, Nathaniel said, “How did you find out?”

His father pitched a folded newspaper from’is desk into an empty chair. “Did you really think the flurry of your return would go without notice? It’s all right there.”

Nathaniel’s throat’d gone dry. He struggled t’swallow. “What’s... in the paper?”

“Don’t try to pretend it didn’t happen.” Mr Walcott straightened. “You haven’t done that since you were a little boy. And it’s unbecoming now.” He walked behind’is desk. “You’re very practically an adult. Don’t you think it would’ve been wise to exercise some good judgment? And what’s more, lying about it all this time. I don’t see how you expected me and your mother to react to this.”

“I...”

“You’ve been told time and time again how dangerous it is to go deep into the desert. And you should know how dangerous those ruins are. Yet you boys go out there—on your own. And what happens—you get James injured. He could have died out there. Did you think of that?”

Something’n Nathaniel’s chest dis-wound and air sucked into vacuumed interior and’e breathed again. “Is Jim alright?”

“The doctor says he’ll be fine—luckily. But that’s beside the point.

What would you have done if you'd gotten out there and they hadn't had a doctor? Hm? This was totally irresponsible. The Taggarts—"

"Now, Harold." Mrs Walcott rose from'er seat. "We should be grateful things worked out the way they did. At least everyone came out of it safely. You know what they say, every young man has to have a short wild time in his youth. And they also say it builds character." She glanced at'er husband. "Don't you think?" She flattened the pleats down the front of'er dress. "After all, if the Lord hadn't wanted it to happen, it couldn't have happened, could it?" If'er husband tried t'reply, she said instead, "And I think he's learned a valuable lesson from this. Haven't you?" And she looked at Nathaniel. "Besides, I'm sure whatever job the reverend has planned, a hard days work will alleviate his conscience." She still looked at Nathaniel. "I hope you haven't forgotten you promised to help the reverend with the church." Nathaniel'd no time t'reply before she'd turned back t'is father. "Don't you think that's appropriate, Harold?"

Mr Walcott remained silent. He drew'is arm behind'is back again. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I think that would work out. But—"—he raised a hand—"—There will be no more of this. Understand?"

Nathaniel nodded.

"Good," his mother said. "Everything's decided. Now—"—she smiled at Nathaniel—"why don't you go out to the kitchen. I'm sure grandmother can put you together something for lunch. And then you can get right over to the church. Okay."

Nathaniel nodded, moved toward the door, touched the frame, then turned. "Did the doctor say what it was that bit him, Jim, that is?"

"What are you going on about?"

"That thing, insect or whatever, that bit Jim and made him sick. Did the doctor say anything about what kind it was?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Mr Walcott said. "James twisted his ankle. Quite badly from what I hear. They say his whole lower leg and foot will be black and blue for some weeks."

"Please, Harold. Spare us such details." Mrs Walcott shook'er head. "Besides, hopefully he can hide it under a graduation robe."

Her husband glanced at'er. "I don't know that this situation calls for levity."

“Who’s making fun?” Mrs Walcott shook’er head. “Anyway, Nathaniel, go get a bite to eat. And don’t be late getting to the church, understand? I plan on being down there myself to help out in not too long.”

“Yes, mam.”

Coreman stopped on the sidewalk at a striped crossing. The tow truck rumbled by, dust-covered patrol car behind, front-end hoisted as 'f just t'accent'ts mangled fender and cocked tire. Silent, hands'n pockets, Coreman crossed the street and walked round the Town Council Building. Someone came down the steps, another clap on the shoulder, "Good job last night. Really saved the day." And'e was gone. Coreman'dn't even glance round at'm. It'd been the same at the diner as'e'd sat and looked at'is fried eggs. The same since'e'd left home that morning.

Mangled image of child flying into windshield...

He opened the police station door.

Blood osmotically leaching through spider-fractured glass...

"I was wondering when you'd be in."

Coreman looked up. The chief sat at'is desk, scribbled absently.

"They brought the car back in," Coreman said.

"I know," the chief said. "They called just a moment ago. They say it's not too bad." He looked up. His pencil stopped. "It should be ready to go by the middle of next week." He looked down and'is pencil scratched into paper.

Joe closed the door.

"Since we're obviously going to be down the patrol car..." Pencil scratches. "And the graduation is coming up so soon, we've got a real mess." Scratch scratch. "So I've been making some...improvisations." Scratch scratch scratch. "I've spoken to Hershley this morning, and he's agreed to let us use his vehicle to head off the parade."

"Sir?"

"It's what we've got."

“Wouldn’t something like the fire engine—”

“The fire engine’s already been placed,” the chief said. “It’ll be bringing up the rear.”

“But...”

“Hershley,” the chief said. “Hershley’s assured me the whole thing can be made to look quite festive. They’re going to tie some streamers to it, paper lanterns and whatnot.” He looked up and slid his pencil into a mug with the rest. “So you’ll be patrolling the next few days on foot. I hope you can manage.”

Joe nodded.

“Good.” The chief reached for a blank sheet of paper. “Public service,” he’d’ve said, maybe to himself. “It demands everything we’ve got. We can’t slack for a minute.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I want you to go down to the park this afternoon and keep an eye on things. The traffic’s bound to get bad with all this decorating.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And just so you know, Officer Coreman, dispatch is already down there helping out. But I don’t guess that matters since we don’t have the patrol car.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well,” the chief said, and picked out another pencil. “Get going. We don’t want anything else going wrong.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ladders'd been erected against lampposts and men'n twos strung guidewires for streamers and paper taffeta while below women girded each post'n giant bows. Too many dashed'n-and-outa shops, lugged half-crushed paper bags...shoe polish, fabrics, hair tonics... "Morning, Joe." "Morning, Joe." "How's it going, Joe?" "Joe." "Glad we got you around, Joe." And as'f on automatic, he stepped between two parked cars, into the street and raised'is hand. An old man, barely able t'see over the wheel, pulled out, stuck a wrinkled hand up through the window and waved as'e passed. Joe nodded and stepped back and motioned the traffic t'continue and'e returned t'the sidewalk. Hands'n'is pockets, he walked on, pushing into the heart of town.

Children ran and half-empty pop bottles glistened while multi-colored liquids sparkled within their crystalline confines. More ladders. Already, guide wires hung filled with whirled and looped pastel papers. Fresh-mowed grass. But that scent contrasted too much with the rust-hued hills on the horizon and green grass'd recall desert and harsh midday sun'd recall dark night cut only by headlights—

“Afternoon, Joe.”

Empty words with little more meaning than a short wind-burst.

“Joe, are you alright?”

He glanced up. Catherine leaned over the gazebo banister, rolled paper'n-hand.

“Afternoon,” he said.

She looked at'm thoughtfully. “No, it isn't, is it?”

He'dn't reply.

“Have you had any sleep this morning, Joe?”

“Some.” But't'd've been too obvious a lie.

“Are—”

“Sorry—” A girl ducked between'm and the gazebo, pastel-blue paper unwinding from between'er thumb and forefinger. “Sorry—” Her sister followed with green. Joe stepped back t'allow'em room.

Catherine glanced over'er shoulder, said, “Susan, could you take this for a while? I've got to do something. I'll be back in a bit.” And she came down the steps. “Come on,” she said, and took Joe's arm. “I need your help with something over here.” He nodded and assented with automatic ease and they both followed a side path round the gazebo and deeper into the park, where'n-bloom azaleas grew more than head-high and must've formed a sort of greenandwhiteandpink

mazelette. A u-shaped section of bushes formed an alcove t'one side of the path and provided space for a cast-iron bench. Already, its black-painted iron legs'd've been wrapped'n pastel-blue paper and tied with large matched bows on each curved armrest. "Here," Catherine said. And when Joe seemedn't quite t'understand, she said, "Let's sit down a minute." Automatically, he removed'is cap, pushed'is fingers back through'is hair. She watched'm stare into the bushes opposite. "What's going on?" But'e'dn't move. "Look, Joe..." She touched'is arm. "Joe—"

"Stop it!" He jerked up, and'is cap dropped onto the fresh-mowed grass.

"Stop what?"

"All day—Joe this—Joe that. Thank you, Joe. You did a good job, Joe." He breathed hard. "I'm sick of hearing that. It doesn't even mean anything. It... It..."

"J—" Lightly, she touched the back of'is hand. "Please. Sit down." She kept'er hand on'is as'e'd. "Now. What's wrong?" He opened'is mouth, but nothing emerged. "Take your time. Say whatever you need to." After a moment, she added, "If it's about—"

"I could've killed everybody." He jammed'is elbows into'is thighs and planted'is face'n'is hands. "You. Mary-Celleste. The baby."

"Now..." Purple-blue patches'd've ached along the back of'er hand as she squeezed'is. "The crash wasn't that bad—"

"Luck." He croaked. "I went to sleep. We could've gone off the road—hit a ditch—flipped over..."

"I fell asleep too."

"But I was driving. It was my... my responsibility."

"And I was supposed to keep you awake, remember?"

"But... You shouldn't... You shouldn't've had to. You're just a..."

"What?"

Seemingly confused, he looked up from'is hands, face puffed, eyes pink-tinged.

"What were you going to say? I'm a what?"

"Well...a woman."

"So?"

"..."

She jerked up off the bench. "Let me tell you something, Joe

Coreman. I spent half the night on the side of a mountain with a tired, mixed-up young woman who's practically still a girl herself and a crying child all of it while trying to walk down a path cut on the side of a cliff—in a stiff breeze—and then that stupid light goes out... I..." But as soon as'er anger'd flared, it seemed t've effervesced and left only soot-taste at back of'er throat. She sat again. "Lots of things could have happened," she said. "One—or both of us—could've tripped or fallen up there. A rock could have come down on our heads. For that matter, a [goose] could fall out of the sky right now and knock either of us in the head." She sighed, bent and lifted's cap. "You did the best you could do. And we all walked out of it alive." She offered'm's cap. "And you can't ask for more than that."

After a moment, Coreman sat looking into the sky.

"Well?" Catherine said.

"It's not the [season] for [geese]."

She smiled. "You really haven't slept any, have you?"

He shook's head.

"Well, I think you should go home right now. Come on. Let's go find Maureen, and she can take you."

He shook's head, but stood, anyway. "I can't. I've got responsibilities."

"They can't take precedence over your health," she said as they followed the path out.

"I'm fine," he said. They came t'the end of the bushes, where vines covered a wire-form arch. "They've arrange to use Hershley's vehicle as the lead car in the parade."

"Lord," she said. "Are they crazy?"

"They say they can fix it up nice. That's one of the things I'm supposed to check on—if it looks good enough or not."

She shook'er head. "I can see what you mean by responsibilities." And she touched's shoulder. Farther down the park, a truck'd backed against the curb and they'd started t'dis-load stacked chairs.

"Where is Maureen?" he said. "Have you seen her?"

Catherine rose onto'er sneaker toes. "I think she's over there with the paper lanterns. See? Over at the corner there."

"Thanks," Joe said.

"Sure there's nothing I can do for you?"

He shook his head. "You've done more than enough already." He ran his fingers back through his hair and slipped on his cap.

"Well," she said, "just so you know. I'm donating the police department a pair of flashlights and a set of fresh batteries."

He laughed. "I'm sure it will be appreciated."

She smiled and waved him toward the park's far side, where women busily tugged flattened paper lanterns into their ribbed-formed fullness and piled them on a table. Streamers tied to the gazebo wafted on a light breeze. She paused, almost rose to tiptoe again to look over the crowd. But a white-gloved hand caught her attention.

Near the curb, beneath the tree-shade, slick-coated print table cloths'd've been stretched over plank boards balanced on sawhorses. Small old women busily flitted round them, adjusted pots and trays, peeled back foil so biscuits'dn't sweat and sog and removed pot lids to check baked beans and chicken and devilled eggs with rust-red-dusted, sun-yellow centers.

A small crowd'd've gathered at one table's far end. And from within it, Mary-Celleste'd've smiled as Catherine approached. "How is the new mother today?"

"Out too early," someone said. Then to Mary-Celleste: "You really should get more rest, dear. You'll tire yourself out otherwise."

"Ah, pish," Mrs Brubaker said. Though the tables'd been erected under the trees, few women'd've removed their hats. And Mrs Brubaker's'd've been so wide-brimmed't'd've seemed more picnic parasol than hat. Young boys who'd've known no better'd stare wide eyed at it as she walked down the street. "New little things," Mrs Brubaker said, "can inspire one with energy stores never before tapped in previous life."

Mary-Celleste smiled and looked down at her child as she slept in the shade of her mother's pink, broad-brimmed hat. Without looking up, she said, "It's all because of you, you know." The child, eyes closed, gummed, and her arms twitched.

Someone else approach pot-laden and women looked over their shoulders. "That's the Walcotts, isn't it?" someone said as a car pulled from the curb. And two women went out to intercept Grandmother Walcott and they approached the tables together, leaned over them and

seemed t'look for just the right spot, moved pots according t'whatever filing schema such events'd.

Mrs Walcott smiled as she approached, her handbag hung from the crook of'er elbow. "This must be the new little one," she said. Mary-Celleste smiled.

"We were saying," Mrs Brubaker said, "how lucky it was Catherine was available to help."

"Yes," Mrs Walcott said. "I've heard you were...involved in this affair."

Mary-Celleste laughed. "Without her *we* wouldn't be here." Bout then, Allison shifted, stretched as best as possible'n'er swaddled confines and, eyes still closed, plaintively wailed, so'er pink, toothless mouth gaped. "Well," Mary-Celleste said. "As you can hear, someone else thinks it's lunchtime too."

"Where's your bag, dear?"

The young woman motioned'n the drugstore's general direction. "Benton's keeping it chilled for me." She shifted Allison t'b'able t'walk easier. "If you'll excuse me, ladies."

"Take care, dear."

Mary-Celleste nodded and crossed open grass toward the street. At the curb, Joe approached'er and removed'is cap, nodded. And'e'd've gone out over the crosswalk and raised'is hand.

"Good man, that Joe Coreman," someone said.

"Yes," Mrs Brubaker said. "We were lucky to have *both* of them out there."

"It almost seems," Mrs Walcott said, "like everyone was out there in the desert."

"Funny," someone said, "how things tend to pile up, as it were."

"Yes," Mrs Walcott said, and nodded. "If you don't watch it, a whole lot of bad things can end up happening at once, or so they say, you know."

"Lucky," Mrs Brubaker said, "we have Catherine around in case they do."

"Yes," Mrs Walcott said. "But you know what they say."

Mrs Brubaker cleared'er throat. "Mary, what time is it?" T'other woman looked over'er shoulder, and'f'er view'd been obstructed, she'd've walked a short distance t'the side of one tree t'b'able t'glimpse

the bank clock. Mrs Brubaker nodded as she answered. "I think it's about time to call lunch. Anyone else?" Several women nodded. "Well," Mrs Brubaker said, "start rounding them up."

Late afternoon sun, a yellow haze over building tops, lay at an angle so as t'recolor the paper lanterns, so plum-red became burgundy, dark-blue purple, purple plum, pink something not-nameable. Only the gazebo remained devoid of'em.

"Short at least twenty-five," Mrs Boothman said.

Catherine turned. "I know I ordered enough." She shook'er head and looked over broken-open packing crates.

"We'll just have to make do."

Catherine's cheek puffed as she ran'er tongue along the inside of'er mouth. "Just a minute," she said, and turned. "Let me go see about something." A car honked as she crossed the street and she waved.

Coming down t'other sidewalk, bag still'n the crook of'er arm, Nathaniel beside'er, Mrs Walcott waved. Mrs Boothman waved back. They crossed the street into the park.

"Ah," Mrs Boothman said, and smiled. "Another addition to the labor force." Nathaniel removed'is cap and combed'is paint-speckled fingers through'is damp hair.

Mrs Walcott faintly laughed. She'd've still wore the same smile as when she'd taken the reverend aside earlier. She looked over the park. Being so late, only those women whose husbands'd accept cold-cut sandwiches remained. "I'll leave him in your capable hands," Mrs Walcott said. Still smiling, she crossed the greenspace toward where teenage girls clustered beneath a tree.

"Well then," Mrs Boothman said. She glanced over'er shoulder. "Where is..." Her mouth went askew. "Ronald—Ronald Lindercott. Where are you? R—"

He waved and jogged round the gazebo. "Right here."

“Right here. Right here.” Mrs Boothman shook’er head. “And always somewhere else when there’s work to be done.” She shook’er head. “Well then.” Mrs Boothman pointed. “Those benches, all along there, need to be moved out of the way before we can put the chairs out. I want you both to put them all in a line over by that hedge. Got that?”

They nodded. “Yes, mam.”

“Well then, get to it.”

Under’er watch, the pair crossed paths and greenspace t’ the nearest bench.

“So, they roped you into it too, huh?” Ron said. He took the bench’s other end.

Nathaniel grabbed a curved cast-iron arm, let’t go, reached under the seat instead.

“Guess you saw what was in the paper.”

Nathaniel shook’is head. “Your father’s mad too, I suppose.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” They set the bench down.

“A little more to the left,” Mrs Boothman called. They looked up at’er. She waved from the gazebo.

“What about you?”

“Mowed the church and painted the door,” Nathaniel said.

“Crimeny. They had the reverend bending your ear too, huh. All about how God made the world a certain way. And how when he created Adam and formed the Rocket around him it proved Adam’s faith he was unafraid of the void, like we have to prove every day the Lord will provide the next.”

“Yeah.”

“And how,” Ron said as they lifted the next bench, “when The Book says Eve was created she was a mirror for them and they were fitted together *as the hammer is fitted to the hand of him who wields it*.” He rolled’is eyes, shook’is head.

“And make sure,” Mrs Boothman called. “Make sure those benches are all in a straight line. Parallel to the hedge. Evenly spaced. Got it?”

Ron waved, nodded. “We better watch it,” he said. “She’ll come over here with a measuring tape and then we’ll really’ve had it.”

They lifted another bench. “Where’d you go this morning?”

“What do you mean?” Nathaniel said.

Ron motioned, said, “A little more that way. There.”

“Don’t crush my hand,” Nathaniel said. “Move it over a little.”

“You just disappeared,” Ron said when’e straightened.

“Good,” Mrs Boothman said over their shoulders. “That’ll do nicely. Now, Ronald, come with me. You can start moving those stacks of chairs out onto the lawn.” He nodded and motioned for Nathaniel t’follow. “Now, hold it,” Mrs Boothman said. “You go on, Ronald. I need Nathaniel right now.” She motioned. “Well, go on then.” And after she watched Ron cross t’where they’d dis-loaded stacked chairs along a walk, she turned t’Nathaniel. “Nathaniel, I want you to take a run down to the hardware store and see what’s keeping Mrs Stowe. Got it?”

Nathaniel nodded, jogged across the grass before’er punctuation’d settled. “Careful now,” she called as’e dodged into the street. She shook’er head and turned toward the greenspace. “No. Put them in rows of twelve. Yes, twelve—” She crossed the lawn and pulled a measuring tape from’er pocket.

Maureen'd disappeared. Coreman stood on the sidewalk and watched traffic. As the afternoon'd passed people'd've seemed less inclined t'call'm out and instead passed'm with general nods, 'good afternoons', a tip of a hat, a good-natured wave from a passing car. On occasion, he managed a smile, though weakly. He tipped'is hat t'passing teenagers, who huddled and whispered. They whispered, laughed, flowed around'm and re-massed. One of the girls averted'er eyes. T'others laughed harder.

He paused'n the shade of a white-blue striped awning out front of either the bakery or the drugstore or maybe the flower shop and adjusted'is cap. Across the street, Nathaniel pushed a box balanced on a handtruck, Catherine beside'm. The wind'd quieted and allowed exhaust scent, among others, t'settle. He sniffed.

"Joe. ... Joe Coreman. Over here." Up the street, parked beside the curb, Thurbor waved'is white apron. Coreman waved back and checked the street and jogged across, waved off someone who sounded a good-natured honk.

"Hero of the hour," Thurbor said. "Where you been all day? Been looking to see you since lunchtime."

Coreman shook'is head. "Going it afoot today. My rounds are kinda off."

"Lord, yeah, I heard. Nasty business. But..." He slipped the apron noose over'is head and flipped'ts straps round'is back and caught'em and tied a bow over'is stomach. "Everything works out, though, don't it?" Joe nodded. "Anyway. You eat yet?" Joe shook'is head. "Well then—one hero special coming up." His hands and tongs

danced. "One. Two. Three. Presto. Chango." And'e handed across a wiener on an oblong paper tray.

Coreman held't up as'f t'assess the weight. "What all is on this thing?"

"Everything—" Thurbor's hands went wide, then slammed back into'is chest. He hooked'is thumbs'n the apron's neck strap. "And then some." Coreman stood and looked at't as'f the 'then some' might emerge from under camouflage t'strike. "Well," Thurbor said. "Go on. A growing policeman's got to eat."

Coreman raised the corrugated paper tray, nibbled, nodded, folded the paper back and turned'is head t'fit't'n'is mouth. "Not bad," he finally said, after'e'd gone through half.

"Not bad. You hear that, lady?" Thurbor extended'is arms t'a woman on the sidewalk, grocery bag'n'er arms. "This is what I live for. Not bad. Not bad. No, not bad at all. Why—"

"Don't overdo it, Regg." Coreman popped the last bite into'is mouth.

"Well, just for that, I ought to charge you double—triple even. Heck, you oughta pay off my fry-oil bill for the next month."

"Speaking of," Coreman said as'e wadded the paper tray. "What do I owe you?"

"Psssshaw. On the cart, of course. What do you take me for?"

"I can't—"

"Well, I tell you what. You only owe me if you have a wiener. And I don't see you with a wiener, do I? Nope. Is there one missing. I say there isn't—and I should know. Nope, just as many as I should have. So obviously you must be mistaken."

Coreman raised the balled-up paper tray.

"Circumstantial evidence. Nothing but circumstantial evidence. For all I know, you coulda gotten that from anywhere, dug it oughta the garbage, for all I know." Thurbor lifted a rag off a peg, started t'wipe down the cart. "Now get outa here before you run my paying customers off."

Coreman held up'is hands. Bowed'is head. "Thanks, Regg."

"For what?"

Coreman shook'is head. He dropped the crumpled paper tray into a garbage can along Mainstreet.

Mrs Walcott'd been taken farther afield than she'd probably planned. Each girl'd offered some tidbit as t'where she'd *thought* she'd seen Regina. And she'd followed'em all the way down t'the drugstore, where Regina sat at the counter, long spoon'n-hand and poised over a half-finished ice cream.

"A word to the wise," Mrs Walcott'd said. "A young lady should really start watching her figure as soon as possible. You know what they say about slippery slopes."

"Oh," Regina'd said. "I wouldn't eat it all anyway." She'd only split the one with two other girls, who'd already gone.

"Well," Mrs Walcott'd said. "In any regard..." She'd set'er purse on the counter and eased onto a stool. "Sparkling water." The paper-capped youth behind the counter nodded. And the conversation'd continued from there.

As they re-entered the park, chairs, by then, girdled the greenspace. Sawhorse tables'd been removed. Leagues of paper tape floated on a light breeze, as'f the park were centered amidst a shredded pastel spider's web.

"It looks like everyone's already gone home," Regina said.

"Well," Mrs Walcott said. "If so, you can come over for dinner." But as they rounded the corner, Mrs Walcott smiled. Nathaniel stood by a ladder propped against one of the gazebo posts. Her smile withdrew. Two steps below the upper-most rung, Catherine balanced and adjusted a paper lantern's hook wire.

"Is that," Catherine said, "in line with the others?"

"I think so."

"Well, then..." She touched the post for support and stepped down the ladder. "I think that may be it."

"Working late?"

They both turned as Mrs Walcott and Regina approached.

"Just...finishing up," Nathaniel said.

"Well," Mrs Walcott said, "almost, anyway." She looked at Catherine. "You know what they say, always something left to do." She looked back t' Nathaniel. "Did Mrs Boothman tell you what we had in mind?" Nathaniel shook 'is head. "Well, that's alright. Regina knows all about it. So, Nathaniel, why don't you go with her and she can show you what needs to be done. Alright?"

"O...kay."

"Well," Mrs Walcott said. "Go on." Faintly, she laughed, shook'er head. "We don't want to be out all night, do we? Well, go on, you two."

"This way," Regina said. She started across the greenspace, passed down the aisle between the two sections of chairs. Nathaniel glance back at the two women. "Well," his mother said, "go on." And'e turned and followed Regina. They disappeared among far hedges.

"I hope," Mrs Walcott said, "Nathaniel hasn't been too in the way this evening."

"Not at all," Catherine said. She collected'er pliers from the ladder and slipped'em into'er skirt pocket.

"Are you coming to the graduation?"

"I had planned on it."

"I just thought, it being mainly a family affair and all, you wouldn't have much interest in coming."

"I always figured it was more a community affair, myself. After all, it's the youth who are going to inherit a place in the town."

"Yes. And I think you'll agree they have to get the proper start in life. You know what they say."

"No," Catherine said. "What do they say?"

"Well, it's not important now. But I think we can understand the stakes here."

Catherine propped'er forearm on the handtruck. "I would say so."

"And we have to be willing to do whatever we need to for our children. After all, as you said, they are the ones that will inherit their place in what we've built. Or at least, some of us, that is."

Pink azalea blossoms'd've darkened t'a red near indistinguishable from blackness'n evening light and'd've appeared veined, more akin t'animal biology than plant. But any white ones'd've popped'n dimness and maybe when the moons rose they'd've appeared as stars...yet been nearnuf t'touch.

They entered an alcove and white bench slats appeared t'hover midair.

Nathaniel said, "So what do we need to do?"

"Let it wait," Regina said. She stepped toward the bench.

"But—"

"Let's just sit awhile. It's nice this time of evening, don't you think? Nobody around. Everyone gone home. It's enough to make you think you're all alone in the world, isn't it?"

"I guess." He stepped off the path, but'dn't approach the bench. She sat and smoothed'er skirt.

"Come on," she said. "What's the matter?"

"What about whatever it is that needs to get done?"

"Sometimes..." she said, but shook'er head, and'er curls bounced against'er shoulders. "Sit down." And she tapped the bench with'er gloved fingertips.

He approached and sat on the far side.

"You know," she said, "everything's going to change soon."

"So everyone keeps saying."

But she continued as'f she'dn't heard'm. "Don't you ever think about the future, Nathaniel?"

"I guess."

"Have you heard?" she said. "They're planning on a new street.

It's going to come off Spruce and intersect Cherry. Your mother was just telling me about it this afternoon. She says your father's pretty much given it the go-ahead."

"I don't—"

"Can you imagine it? A whole new street. Brand new houses. And I'm sure since you'll be helping oversee the whole thing, we'll have no trouble selecting the best spot. It should be a blue house, don't you think? And I've always favored a white fence. And if the eaves were done in white, everything would match perfectly. Wouldn't that look wonderful?"

She turned toward'm, framed by voids between white blossoms. "Don't you think that would be wonderful?"

As preternatural evening gloom'd've settled between those high, thick hedges, her dark hat and print dress'd've blended into the background, so only a pair of white gloves'd've remained floating among pearlescent azalea blossoms.

"Have you ever wondered," he said. "Have you ever wondered why we're supposed to get married?"

Her white teeth flashed: a smile. "What is there to wonder about? It's what's supposed to happen." White gloves floated'n darkness. "It's like being born or going to school or graduating. And then you get married. And have a house. And a baby. And the whole thing starts all over again."

Nathaniel'dn't reply. Crickets that'd faintly chirped deep within hedges'd gone silent at their earlier approach and remained so.

"So," she said. "Don't you have something you want to ask me?"

His hand rested on the bench's curved arm. Paint'd bubbled and popped there, flaked where rust'd seeped beneath't. "Regina," he said. "We're not getting married."

Silence.

"W... What are you talking about?"

"I'm not going to marry you." He gripped the bench till'ts bevels'd've made'is hand ache.

"What are you talking about?" Bench slats creaked as she shifted. "What else is there to do?"

"I don't know." He spoke into void. "I guess I'll find out."

"Y..." Her dress rustled. White gloves moved'n darkness and

shrank. “You’re crazy. You’re...” Her shoes clopped against the walk. “And stupid. You’ll regret this. Just you wait and see. You’ll—You’ll...” Footsteps receded along the walk. Bushes rustled as she touched’em t’find’er way.

Nathaniel pulled’is hand from the bench. The impressions across’is hand’d’ve throbbed. He worked’is forefinger against’is rust-coated thumb, brought’t t’is nose. It must’ve smelt the same as fresh-drawn blood.

“Why that?” Li said.

“Just because,” Mara said. “I’ve always heard’t that way. And that’s the way I like’t.”

“Fine,” Li said. “But why?”

“Maybe’t’s a metaphor for somethin,” Helena said. She chewed a dried-fish chunk as she lay’n’er hammock.

Kayla said, “Don’t yuh ever get tired of arguin?”

“Don’t bet on’t,” Ambeth said.

Li said, “A metaphor fer wut?”

“It doesn’t’ve t’b’for anythin,” Helena said.

“Does’f’t’s a metaphor. That’s whata metaphor’s.”

“Maybe...” Genie said. “Like...it means that...yuh know ’—”

“So’t means wut’t means. That’s subtle.”

“That’sn’t...what I mean.”

“I wish everybody’d figure out wut they meant.”

“The only thin worse than a metaphor,” Ambeth said, “is some-one who’s t’go on and say what the metaphor means.”

“Yuh talkin t’me?”

“Take’t however yuh want.”

Genie yawned.

“Can we just go t’sleep?” Kayla said. She shifted. “I’m tired. And we’ve got alotta stairs tomorrow.”

The sky pinkened and tinted the world a shade darker.

Coreman tipped his hat. "Evening, ladies."

Catherine turned, her forearm still on the handtruck. "Joe."

But Mrs Walcott remained silent.

"I'm...not interrupting, am I?"

Catherine shook her head. "Not at all. We were just discussing the importance of our youth and the future of the town."

"Ah..." He removed his cap and combed his fingers through his hair. "Okay."

Absently, Mrs Walcott adjusted the line of buttons down the front of her dress so their pearlescent faces aligned. "Well," she said, "I'm sure you've got better things to do than let us keep you." She touched the button at her collar. "Good night, Officer Coreman." And she followed the path round the gazebo and toward the street.

Coreman combed his fingers through his hair again, replaced his cap. "Did I miss something?"

"Very little," Catherine said. She glanced toward darkened trees and azalea bushes.

"Waiting for someone?"

"N—no," she said. She turned and fiddled with the handtruck. "I was just going to take this back up to the store before going home."

"I could walk you back."

"No. No, I wouldn't want to impose."

"Don't worry about it. I've got evening rounds, anyway." He slipped his hands into his pockets. "I—"

"Stop! What're you doing? Hey—get away from there!"

They both turned.

“Get away from there—Stop!”

Coreman pulled his hands from his pockets—“Wait here”—jogged across the greenspace, between chairs.

“STOP!”

Thurbor ran down azure-tinted Mainstreet. His arms flailed, apron flapped in one hand. “Get out of there!”

Buns clutched his chest, Zeb lunged and ran down the sidewalk and his ill-secured backpack flapped over his shoulder.

From the park: “Nathaniel—don’t!”

Three converged on one.

Zeb ran streetlight-to-streetlight, from azure-to-shadow-to-azure, seemed to appear from and disappear into the darknesses between. He jerked into an alley. But Nathaniel lunged, caught his backpack and Zeb flailed and both tumbled.

“Goddamn—” Zeb huffed and struggled to rise, tried to snatch back any of the scattered wiener buns. “Goddamn Denmarks—” He rolled, kicked. “Fuck off—” Nathaniel’s head snapped back. Blood droplets sprayed between his clenched teeth.

“Hold it!” Coreman turned down the alley, grabbed Zeb as he scrambled up. They rolled, slammed each other into brickworks. Coreman yelled for Thurbor’s apron, snatched it from him as he stood their agape, and with his knee planted in Zeb’s backpack, Coreman caught his other arm and wound the cord at his wrists. “Settle down.” He looked up. “Nathaniel, you okay?”

“What’s going on?” Catherine appeared at the head of the alley, framed by a nearby streetlight. “Nathaniel?”

He struggled to his feet, shook. A viscous glob rolled from his mouth, splattered on asphalt.

“Are you hurt?”

“... it ... ja...” Rust-taste he’d’ve filled his mouth. He’d’ve tried to spit, but he’d’ve just oozed out and dripped from his chin.

Catherine approached, gently touched his arm. “Let’s get you to the doctor.”

“Goddamn—GOD FUCKING DAMN FUCKING DENMARKS—”

The board rang. Sarah'd've stirred, opened'er eyes and found'er-self looking at the backside of'er sleeping mask. The board rang. Tentatively, she'd've reached for the lamp, pushed the mask above'er eyebrows and checked the clock. Still half-asleep, she'd've pushed off the sheet and reached for'er robe and cinched't over'er night-clothes. The board rang as she'd've shuffled down the hall. In the back room, a red light'd've blinked with each ring. Automatically, she'd've flicked-on the lamp and tugged a roll-around chair and sat and yawned and reached for the plug and lifted'er headphones and pressed one side t'er ear rather than try t'fit'em over'er curlers.

"Operator," she'd've said. "It's currently after nine o'clock. What's your emergency?"

Li cleared'er throat.

"What now?"

"Nuthin."

Everyone groaned.

"I jus thin't's weird t'ear'er talk on the phone's all."

"Why?"

"Cause we never'ear'er any other time."

"She talked bout'er bein at Mrs Thawcraft's."

"I guess."

"Yuh gonna keep interruptin'?"

"Fine, I won't say nuthin else. I know when t'shutup."

Someone snorted.

After Gregor Falstaff'd u-turned and brought the car against the curb'n front of the Walcott house, Nathaniel watched through the car window as Catherine closed'er front door. She'd've held'm by the arm and told'mn't t'speak. But between long silences as they'd walk down Mainstreet and t'the doctor's house, he'd've spat blood, blubbered not-intelligible things. And she'd've looked away when'e'd've stopped and retched and splattered on concrete what cobalt streetlights'd've rendered black. And even'f'e'd've spoken, from the moment they climbed the Falstaffs' front steps and the doctor'd told'm'e'd better come into the back room and'd left'is wife t'see t'Catherine and Gregor'd came downstairs and Nathaniel'd spat a porcelain sink fulla red till only pale pink swirled'n the basin and Doctor Falstaff'd told Gregor t'bring the car round and the phoned'd rung, they'd've'd no moment alone even'f'e'd've spoken. And they'd've sat silent as they'd passed back onto Mainstreet and round the Town Council Building and let out Doctor Falstaff with'is bag.

With the car sitting there'n front of the Walcott's, Gregor'd've looked into the rearview mirror. He'd've said, "Dad says just give a ring if any intense or unusual pains develop," but for everything else, the small brown-glass bottle clenched'n Nathaniel's hand'd b'sufficient. At some point, his grandmother'd taken't from'm, disappeared and reappeared with a glass of water and a pill'n-hand. That was after they'd congratulated'm on getting engaged. Though, Mr Walcott'd said, "I have to say, Ozz, Mr Prescott and I are somewhat put out. We'd hoped you would've consulted us first." But'is mother'd said something bout how impulsive youth'd be, and you know what they say. And'is grandmother'd said something bout a spring wedding. And...

Voices receded, borne into the vast outerdark that swept through the windows and snuffed-out light fixtures. Nathaniel's head drooped against the loveseat and his grandmother eased a blanket over'm.

The chief opened the closet door. “Ah, fucking Denmark pig. Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you—” Zeb lunged and the chair imperceptibly squeaked forward. “Ahhhhhhhhhhh ggggggrrrrrrrrr bbbrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr” The chief closed the door.

Councilman Reedland rolled over and fumbled over the nightstand'n the dark. The phone slipped from'is hand. Bakelite struck hardwood. A faint voice echoed from far down the line and up from the floor. He hung over the bed and spoke'n that general direction. "Hello?"

In the dark, Zeb touched smooth plaster walls. Nearby, wire crates packed with empty milk bottles'd been stacked head high. He crossed void and touched the roller chair, seized't, flung't aside. Bottles rattled and tinked and poured crystalline sound into that underground space.

Afraid t'dis-tie'm and give'm the chance t'run, and with the chief's insistence'e'dn't b'kept'n a closet indefinitely because they'd never get any work done with all Zeb's shouting, Coreman'd pushed the chair out into the parking lot.

Casters'd rattled as'e'd shoved the chair down the sidewalk. And Zeb, of course, wouldn't've stopped shouting the whole time. Compulsively, Coreman'd've watched t'notice'f a window'd lit, but only a handful lived on the floors above one or two shops. In particular, he'd've eyed the windows above the distant newspaper office.

"Fuck you. Fuck you. Fucking Denmark—" Invectives echoed down cobalt-lit Mainstreet. Coreman, hoarse from telling the old man t'b'quiet, stopped, huffed, his undershirt damp, and stuffed'is handkerchief'n Zeb's mouth: "Whore's s—" Caster scrape and rattle and squeak overwhelmed'is muffled voice. They'd've continued like that till Coreman turned the chair into the alley behind the grocer's.

When the back-alley'd've washed with yellow light and motor hum, Coreman'd've waved'is arms for Ferguson t'cut the engine. The driver climbed out, arm over the open door. "What's going on?" He'd've yawned.

Zeb mounted the stairs again, jammed his shoulder against the trapdoor. The bruise that'd've sprouted from previous such attempts'd've been tender by then. "Fucking fuck..." He found his way back through the dark and the overturned chair and righted it and sat. He double-tapped his watch. The display'd've lit blindingly and he squinted at it till a sensor'd adjusted the brightness to account for the lack of ambient luminescence.

“Come in, Reverend.” Coreman motioned’m toward the den. Pink-red eyes must’ve been standard issue’n that room.

Doctor Falstaff stood by the desk, where Mrs Jacobs’d placed a tray with a water pitcher and glasses. He’d finished pouring’mself a glass when the reverend entered.

Councilman Reedland looked up. Hands behind’is back, he paused on the circuit that’d faintly impressed a route’n the rug. “Ahmmm. Since everyone’s here, I think it’s best to get right to the matter.”

Falstaff handed the reverend a glass of water. Mrs Jacobs occupied a corner chair and stared at an infinite point while’er husband stood nearby. The chief sat on the couch, glass of water’n-hand.

“There’s been...an incident,” Reedland said. “It was brought to my attention this morning. And I have already conveyed it to Mr and Mrs Jacobs.” From’er corner, Mrs Jacobs gurgled. Reedland adjusted’mself and cleared’is throat. “This shouldn’t go beyond this room...at the moment.” He closed’is eyes, dipped’is head, massaged the bridge of’is nose. “The fact of the matter is we have a situation.”

“Come to the point,” Falstaff said. He yawned, sipped’is water.

“Mrs Holtcraft went over the test twice and Chapman backed up her calculations. All passed but one. Trent Jacobs.”

“You’re saying...” Falstaff shook’is head. “Someone *failed* the examination?”

Reedland nodded. Falstaff set’is glass on the tray.

“How is that possible?” Joe Coreman said.

Falstaff shook’is head. “That can’t be right. Someone must’ve made a mistake, somewhere.”

“No mistake. None at all. I can show you the documentation.”

“But,” Joe said. “What does that *mean*?”

"Impossible," Falstaff said.

The reverend mumbled.

"What's that?"

The reverend shook his head.

"Okay," Joe said. "But how does this connect with Trent's disappearance?"

Mrs Jacobs gurgled. Her husband placed his hand on her shoulder.

"All I can think..." Reedland shook his head. "I think—I'm sure he must have overheard me this morning when I was speaking with his parents."

"But," the chief said. "To run away..."

Falstaff glanced at him. "Imagine you discovered you hadn't passed the examination. What do you think you would do?"

"I..." The chief shook his head.

"If that's the case," Joe said. "He could be anywhere...or done anything by now."

Mrs Jacobs gurgled and Mr Jacobs extended her handkerchief.

"Which is why it's imperative," Reedland said, "we start the search as soon as possible."

Falstaff said, "Why haven't you been on the phone? What are we standing around for?"

"I thought we might be able to get a few good men and—"

"A few?" Falstaff turned toward a window. "This'll spread like wind spreads dust." He turned and lifted his glass and drained it.

"Does anyone know what time he was last seen?" Joe said.

"I..." Mrs Jacobs said. "...went up...about...noon...to see if... he...he...he..." Her husband squeezed her shoulder as she buried her face in his handkerchief.

"A little over twelve hours ago, then," Joe said, and glanced at the chief. "We should call the next station. The train would've left at five and that was the only one out after ten this morning. It'll be fourteen more hours or so before it comes in. If somebody's ready to check it when it does, we might get lucky."

"You know the train schedules by heart?" the chief said.

Falstaff cut in, "He's right. Good thinking." He looked at Reedland. "We're just going to have to get on the phone and start waking people up."

Reedland put 'is knuckles between 'is eyes, but nodded.

"Is it alright if we use your phone?"

Mr Jacobs nodded and Falstaff stepped toward a nearby table.
"Anyone know if Sarah's still awake?"

The chief looked over from the couch. "She's holding open an emergency line."

Falstaff nodded as 'e lifted the receiver. "We'll also need some equipment, flashlights and such."

The chief sat forward. "Do we have any in the...storage closet?"

"We've got the new ones Mrs Stowe gave us."

Falstaff cupped 'is hand over the receiver. "Better add a few more. Or at least some new batteries." He dis-covered the phone. "Sarah—"

"I guess..." Joe said. "I guess I could go over and wake Cath—Mrs Stowe."

Connelly turned from a window. "Let me do that," he said. He set down 'is glass.

"Alright," the chief said. And 'e turned and looked at Coreman.
"I want you to go down to the garage. Wake up whoever you have to—but get something to use as a temporary patrol car. Whatever. Just so long as it runs."

Joe nodded.

"I'll go, then," the reverend said.

Falstaff covered the phone. "Wait a minute and I'll call to let her know you're on your way."

"Don't," the reverend said. "Let her get a few more minutes sleep."

"We'll need about half-a-dozen or so lights," Joe said.

The reverend nodded. He'd've already started toward the door.

Some things may have gotten out of order.

Ron'd've sat up'n'is sweat-damp pajamas. He'd've sat at the head of the stairs and listened t'half the phone conversation carried on below, then t'is parents. Finally, he'd've snuck back into'is room and closed the door. Under cover of engine noise, he'd've opened'is dresser. And barefoot, he'd've crept downstairs, down the hall and into the kitchen, where'e'd've dis-fastened the latch as headlights flashed through a window. Huddled on the back stoop, he'd've slipped-on'is already tied shoes. Then'e'd've eased across the lawn.

The sheet'd've slid across'er skin as she rolled over. Half-waked, her hand drifted between'er legs. The doorbell rang again. Her eyes opened. It rang again and she pulled'er hand away. She clicked-on the lamp. The clock-face stared back. The doorbell rang. She put'er fingers through'er hair and sat up and the cover fell and light spilled over'er skin. She lifted a robe from the foot of the bed and wrapped'er-self, tied'ts belt and pulled'ts collar tight and high so none'd've thought she'd been naked beneath. The bell rang as she reached the door. She opened't and cobalt streetlamp light spilled into the hall.

"Catherine."

She tug together'er collar. "What do you want? It's late."

"There's been an emergency," he said. "The Jacobs' boy has disappeared and they're starting a search. And we need some extra flash-lights."

"Yes..."

"I'm sorry to wake you."

She shook'er head. "Where should I bring them?"

"I can take you in my car."

"No...that's fine. I—"

"Really, it would be the more efficient thing, don't you think? I could take you down there, we could load up what we need, and I could take it over. Don't you think?"

"I—"

"We might not have that much time to spare. He's been missing for hours and...every second counts."

"Yes...well I..." She paused. "I'll be ready in a few minutes."

He glanced down at'er bare feet. "Would it be alright if I waited inside?"

“N—You should probably go ahead and start the car. I’ll only be a minute. And like you said, we don’t want to waste any time.” And before’e’d reply, she shut the door. It took a moment for’er t’release the knob.

But as she sat on’er bed and slipped-on’er sneakers, a sound came from inside the house. She looked up. And when she went back through, someone was’n the darkened kitchen.

“Sorry,” he said. He set the glass on the counter. “I needed something to drink.”

Streetlamp light filtered through the still open door and faintly illuminated the front hall’n shades of blue.

Silence.

“We’d better go,” she said. “If it’s an emergency.”

He nodded’n the dark, moved into the living room.

“You go on,” she said. “I’ve...forgotten something.”

He paused, waited there as she looked over’er shoulder and as she walked down the hall. But when she’d returned, he’d gone. And when she’d reached the front door, the car gently rumbled amid quiet night. She closed the front door behind’erself.

“Don’t tell the next part,” Genie said.

They lay there awhile’n their hammocks as moonlight filtered through high windows.

“Yuh’re such a wuss,” Li said.

“I jusdn’t ike that part. It’s mean.”

“Nothin’ appens,” Li said. “Besides, it’s funny.”

“Funny?” Kayla said. Quetzalcoatl lay asleep against’er chest.

“Funny,” Li said. “As’n’a’a and giggles and snorts and all that—”

“I know funny.” Quetzalcoatl stirred as Kayla’s chest vibrated with’er voice, and she added’n a lower tone, “I just’dn’t see what yuh mean bout how that part’s funny.”

“Cause...” Li chuckled amid semidarkness. “Cause’t’s stupid. ’e’s goin round yellin thins—*yuh make me...feel these...thins...do these...thins... why? ... why? ... why?*—and all that poppy-cock and she shoves’m away and’e its the shelf and jars start fallin all round and’e’s screamin—*YOU*—and—wham—glass crashes somewhere behind’m and’e winces and glances over’is shoulder and—‘*Rawwwwr*’—the cat leaps offa shelf—”

“Odin,” Genie said.

“—Wutever. And climbs over’is shoulders while’e’s battin round and stumblin and lunges and goes right through the front door and—wham—slams’eadfirst into the open car door.” Li snorted. “Now, that’s funny.”

“Yuh’re...” Genie said. “...”

“—And then—‘*Rawwwwr*’—the cat leaps down from the car hood and strolls tail-high back into the store. And’e’s jus layin there half off the sidewalk. ’a.”

“It’s a little funny,” Helena said.

“Well,” Genie said, “I still’dn’t thin so.”

The inside of 'is mouth might've felt as f' t'd been dried-up, old cropland left t' lie fallow. And when'e went into the hall, the grandfather clock's ticks'd've struck 'is temples as f they'd been hammers.

"You're awake." Sausage smell'd've pervaded the kitchen. "You should've waited and let me bring you something to eat." His grandmother rubbed'er fingers on the rag draped over'er shoulder and tilted back'er head t' look at'm. "How do you feel?"

He tried t' shake 'is head, winced.

"Here. Sit down." She pulled out a chair. She shook'er head, but turned toward the stove. "Here you go." She set a bowl'n front of'm. "Nice hot, soupy grits. Just what you need." Tentatively, she hovered'er fingers near 'is face, as f she might touch'm, but'dn't.

"... where... s... ever... eee... bod... eee..." Nathaniel stirred the grits and steam rolled towards the ceiling.

"Your mother went over to visit the Prescotts this morning. There's a lot of planning to do, you know. Of course—" The front door closed. She looked up from the griddle pan and sausages. "That'll probably be your father." Heavy, slow steps carried down the hall.

"Morning."

"Oh, look at your eyes," grandmother Walcott said. "As red as beets."

"They feel like beets." He turned'em on Nathaniel. "Feeling any better this morning?"

"... fine..."

His father nodded. "Any coffee ready yet?"

"You just sit and I'll get you some." She wrapped a rag round the pot handle and lifted't from the stove. "Is there any word yet?"

Mr Walcott shook 'is head as she carried the cup and saucer over and set'em on the table and tipped the coffee pot. "Ronald Lindercott's gone missing too."

"Lord," grandmother Walcott said. "What's going to happen next?"

"... what... s... going... on..."

Paint flaked into his face as he grasped each new rung. His rust-stained hands smelled of blood. Ron hooked his elbow on the ladder and rested. Below, pinhead-sized streetlamps extended to the town's edge. Clearing his throat, he huffed and started up the last couple dozen rungs. The hatch'd already been opened and he looked down into a water tower's dark interior. "Trent." His voice echoed through emptiness. "Trent, you in there?" Echoes died in silence. "It's me. Ron." He still huffed from the climb. "If you're not in there, I'm going to close the hatch." Hinges squealed as he shifted it.

"Wait!"

Ron eased it back open.

A voice out the dark: "Anybody else with you?"

"No."

"What do you want?"

"What're you doing here? Everybody's out looking for you."

Silence.

"Go away."

"Not until you tell me what's going on."

"They might see you out there."

"So what if they do?"

"You don't understand."

"Because you haven't told me." Ron paused. "Can I come down?"

"I... I guess. Just don't try anything. I'm... I'm not going back."

"Where are you? I don't want to come down on your head."

"Wait..." A flashlight blared and Ron winced and jerked and shielded his eyes.

"Watch it."

"Sorry." Light settled on the freshly painted light-blue half of the interior. "Hurry up. Before they see."

Ron stepped down onto the ladder, climbed down, let go and dropped the last bit and landed with a raaaaaaang that made Trent shudder.

"Quiet—"

Ron said, "So what's the deal?"

Trent shook his head and moved toward where his rucksack lay and sat there. He clicked-off the light. "They might see it."

"What does it matter if they do?" Ron said, in the dark.

"Keep your voice down."

"For..." Ron took a breath. "Look—are you going to tell me why you're out here, or not? There's a lot of people out there looking for you. And they're gonna be pretty mad by now."

"Not as mad as they could be..."

"What's th—"

"I failed the test."

"What?"

"I failed. I failed the test."

"That can't be right," Ron said. "Somebody must be pulling your leg."

Trent'd've said, "I heard councilman Reedland...when...when he told mom and dad."

Last echoes ebbed into silence.

"And," Ron said. "What does that have to do with hiding out here?"

"I've thought it out. I'm..." He paused. "I'm going to work my way up north. They say—up north—you can get a job on the ice fields. They say just anybody can sign up for it, it doesn't have to run in the family or anything."

"But why?"

"What else am I supposed to do? You can't graduate unless you pass the test. What else am I supposed to do?"

"There's got to be something. I—"

"What?"

"You can't just—"

"I'm not going to stay around...stay around and be laughed at—"

His voice broke and he sobbed. "I'm not going to embarrass my parents."

"You—"

"I FAILED THE TEST!" Ron jerked to cover his ears as echoes cascaded round him. Choked, Trent'd've gone on with a halting, airy voice, as if his throat were raw. "That's the end of it."

"Well," Ron said. "It's stupid. You should—"

"That's not how it works..."

"Look—"

Barely more than a whisper: "Just go."

"Tr—"

"Go."

Ron paused, opened his mouth, then closed it. The sound of that echoed back to him. He turned and found his way along the wall to the ladder.

"Promise... You... Won't..."

But Ron didn't reply as he climbed. Predawn vermilion light filtered through the hatch. Silence below.

“More metaphors,” Li said.

Morning sun rested hot on 'is back as 'e knocked and waited.

"Why..." Grandmother Walcott said as she opened the kitchen door. "Good morning, Ronald. What in the world has gotten into you, young man?"

"Is Nathaniel up?"

"Why, yes." She pushed-open the screen and 'e'd t'step back. "Come in. He's just having breakfast."

"What happened to you?" Ron said t'Nathaniel.

"Terrible," grandmother Walcott said. And when she'd explained't, she walked back t'the sink and assaulted a soaking frying pan with a scrub brush. "Have they found that poor boy yet?"

"They haven't that I know of."

"Oh my," she said. "Such a horrible thing. I can't imagine what the Jacobs must be going through right now. And you, young man." She glanced over'er shoulder. "Disappearing in the middle of the night. You should be ashamed."

Ron eyed Nathaniel's puffed face. "Really did a number."

"Poor dear," his grandmother said. "He's had the worst time trying to speak. You shouldn't tax him too much. And after he just got engaged, too. I really don't know what this week's coming to."

"Engaged? You're getting married?"

"Now," his grandmother said t'Nathaniel. "Don't overtax yourself. Remember what the doctor said. I don't know how you expect to be able to get to say 'I do' if you don't take care of yourself." She turned and lifted a hand towel and rubbed suds from'er wrists and hands. "And you know, we really ought to look through the album to pick out a good picture. We'll—I'm sure they've already picked out

The launderer churned and jumped and sometimes rattled the pictures on the walls and 'is grandmother went up-then-down the stairs with water pitchers for potted plants and up-then-down with dirty clothes and fresh-off-the-line-crisp clothes and later ran the carpet cleaner round the rooms. And 'f'e'd've trusted 'is balance enough t'get up into the cupola t'escape the house's workings, he'd've. Afternoon sun angled through the living room windows and the ceiling fan rustled the curtains. He stood and pushed a curtain aside and squinted into brightness. In the kitchen, cast iron rink-ranked against cast iron as 'is grandmother moved pans'n a cabinet, and 'e clinched 'is teeth, winced. Shoving 'is hands into 'is pockets, he walked into the hall and toward the front door.

"Where are you going?" His Grandmother poked'er head through the kitchen doorway.

He sighed. "...get...some...air..."

"It's almost lunch time, you know."

He nodded. "...sit...on...porch..."

"Oh, well then. A little fresh air'll do you some good. Just remember to come in if you get too hot."

A rustle overhead. "That'll be your father, I expect." His grandmother looked toward the dining room. "You go on out and sit down. I'll call you when lunch is ready. But stay out of the sun, now."

He pushed-open the screendoor. He walked toward the swing and eased down into't. Curtains on the far side of the street remained as tight as always. But movement at the corner drew 'is attention from'em. And down the sidewalk, hats emerged from afternoon brightness. His mother waved. "Hello, dear." And she ascended the steps. "Feeling better?"

"...fine..."

"I'm afraid," Mrs Walcott said over'er shoulder t'Mrs Prescott, "he's not going to be up for much in terms of conversation for the next few days." Smiling, she looked at'm. "What are you doing out in this heat?"

Grandmother Walcott appeared behind the screendoor. "Oh," she said. "I thought I heard someone out here." She smiled. "Lunch is just about ready if you all want to come in."

Mrs Walcott waved t'Nathaniel. "We can all have lunch together and visit."

Regina looked at'm from beneath'er hat when'e rose from the swing and'e'd've bitten the inside of'is mouth and so a pulse'd've rippled through'is teeth, a dull ache through'is jaw.

"Good to see you weren't too badly hurt," Mrs Prescott said as they went'n. "I almost can't believe this whole strange business is happening."

Mrs Walcott'd shed'er hat and bag and glanced at'erself'n the hall mirror, adjusted'er hair. "Yes," she said. "Thank goodness that business is all over."

"Did I tell you what I heard from Mrs Nelson?" Mrs Prescott said as they walked down the hall.

"No, what?"

"Well, she supposedly got it from Sarah on the switchboard that—you know I don't have anything to do with gossip, of course—but supposedly they've got him confined in the storage building out behind the grocer's."

"That," Regina said as she took a seat, "sounds just awful."

"Afternoon, ladies." Mr Walcott entered dressed'n'is usual pin-striped suit, with'is usual fresh-combed mustache, yet somehow still must've seemed rough at the margins.

Grandmother entered with another tray.

Mr Walcott lifted the tongs and moved a devilled egg onto'is plate.

His wife looked at'm. "Harold. Ahmmm."

He looked up. "Hm?" Blinkled. "Oh." Nodded. "Of course. Sorry." Then, flatly, he gave the blessing. And'e bifurcated the devilled egg with'is knife.

"Nathaniel, you're not eating anything."

His mother espied'is empty plate. "You have to keep your strength up."

His grandmother patted'is shoulder. "It's alright. I'll make him some broth." And she went back into the kitchen.

"You know," Mrs Prescott said. "Oswald and I were talking before

he went out this morning, what with all this mysterious stranger business going on, why is it there has never been any place to detain such persons?"

Mr Walcott looked up from 'is plate. "Hmm?"

"You know, dear," Mrs Walcott said. "That stranger that's been stealing things from all around."

"It just sounds awful," Regina said. "Just think of having to stay down there all the time."

"I..." Mr Walcott shrugged, bifurcated another devilled egg. "I guess."

His wife glanced at 'm. "Anyway," she said. "Did I tell you we put the announcement in the paper today?"

Mr Walcott looked up. "Sudden... isn't it?"

"Why not get it out there as soon as possible," his wife said.

Grandmother Walcott came back 'n, carried a large glass of juice and set 't by Nathaniel. "There you go. Start with that. It'll be good for you."

"They guaranteed it would be in the paper today."

Grandmother Walcott glanced at 'er. "What's that, dear?"

"We had the engagement put in the paper."

"So soon? We haven't even picked out a picture yet and—"

"Oh, I picked out something this morning. There was this very nice headshot of you from Sunday school," she said t' Nathaniel.

"Oh." Belatedly, his grandmother turned toward the kitchen. "I'll see about that broth."

"Has," Mrs Prescott said, "there been any word? About the boy? Jacobs, isn't it?"

Mr Walcott touched the napkin t' the sides of 'is mouth and faintly rumpled 'is mustache-ends. "Not yet."

"How awful," Mrs Prescott said. "And how are the Jacobs?"

"I expect—" —he glanced toward Nathaniel, replaced 'is napkin into 'is lap— "—about as you can imagine."

The phone rang 'n the den.

He lifted 'is napkin from 'is lap and dropped 't on the table. "Excuse me a moment."

Mrs Prescott took a bite of something and, when 'e'd gone, shook 'er head. "Are you sure he's getting enough sleep?"

Mrs Walcott glanced toward the empty doorway. "No," she said. "You know what they say."

"Yes," Mrs Prescott said. "Oswald too."

Grandmother Walcott emerged from the kitchen with the broth, set the bowl'n Nathaniel's plate. "Let it cool a bit," she said. She looked toward the doorway as Mr Walcott entered. "I hope ham's alright for dinner," she said. "I was going to take it down for the party after the graduation, but..."

Mr Walcott nodded absently. "I have to go out for a little while."
"Dear?"

He shook's head. "It's nothing. I...won't be long." Absently, he disappeared into the hall and after a few moments the door closed.

"Well," grandmother Walcott said. "Who wants some dessert? We'll have to eat up everything out of the icebox, you know."

Mrs Walcott nodded. "I think we will. Don't want anything to go to waste. You know what they say."

But Nathaniel glanced toward's grandmother and shook's head.

"Are you sure? Maybe you could eat the whipped cream off?"

He shook's head. "...later..."

She nodded, patted's shoulder. "I'll keep it in the icebox for you." And she went back through t'the kitchen.

Nathaniel glanced toward's mother. "...may...be...excused..."

"You haven't eaten anything."

"...later..."

"You need to keep your strength up," she said.

"...just...need...some...air..."

His grandmother emerged from the kitchen, tray'n-hand. "What's going on?"

"...need...some...air..." Nathaniel said.

"Probably set too much today," his grandmother said as she put down the tray. "It's late enough there's some shadow out back. Maybe he could go out there for a while."

Mrs Walcott slipped a spoon into'er dessert. "There's no need to run out on our guests."

"Oh, don't worry about us," Mrs Prescott said. "After all, it's completely understandable after what happened."

His mother glanced toward Nathaniel. "Alright," she said. "But

stay in the back yard. Remember what the doctor said. And you know what they say.”

He faintly nodded and pushed back his chair.

“I’ll go too,” Regina said. “Alright, mother?”

“You haven’t eaten any dessert.”

“Oh,” Regina said. “It was very good. Thank you, Mrs Walcott. But I don’t think I could eat another bite at the moment.”

“Watching her figure,” grandmother Walcott said. “That’s a smart habit to get into early in life.”

Mrs Prescott nodded. “I don’t see any problem if Mrs Walcott doesn’t.”

“Oh, heavens no,” Mrs Walcott said. “You know what they say.” She motioned with her whipped-cream-spotted spoon. “You two go on.”

Behind them, grandmother Walcott carried the not-touched crystal dessert bowl back into the kitchen and Nathaniel’d’ve held the door for her then opened the icebox. “And be sure not to get dehydrated,” she said. She lifted a lemonade-pitcher from the icebox, eyed him. He nodded and opened the back door, stepped off the stoop and onto the path that led round to the garage.

“You know,” Regina said as she pushed open the screendoor, “it’s customary for a gentleman to hold the door for a lady.” She clopped across the walk. “Of course, I don’t know if you’ll ever figure out how to treat a *lady*.”

He spun. “... what... did... you... say...” Pain must’ve contorted his face as he tried to speak, because she blanked and stepped back.

“I don’t see what there’s to be so upset about.”

“... what...” His hands clench to fists. “... told... you...”

“Well,” she said. “Now everyone knows what you *really* told me.” She rested her hands on her hips, leaned forward.

“... tell... the... truth...”

“This,” she said, “is... the... truth...”

“I...ll...tell...”

Her eyes flashed. “Y...” But she jerked her head. “Ha. Go ahead. See what happens.” She turned and walked back to the door. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to return to someplace with a more *adult* atmosphere.” And she stepped up and let the screendoor slam behind her.

Nathaniel's clenched jaw spasmed and he blinked and tears rolled outa one eye. Breath ragged, he turned and looked over the back yard, over the fence that divided that one from the next.

The back door opened.

"Nathaniel."

He turned.

His grandmother said, "Are you alright? You..." And she came down the steps and touched her fingers to his forehead. "You're warm. Maybe you should come in and get something to drink. Lie down."

He shook his head.

"Now," she said, and took his arm. "Come on. You're beginning to look pea-kud." And she led him inside. They passed down the hall and turned and went into the living room.

Mrs Walcott looked up as they entered. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," his grandmother said. "Just a little hot."

"I knew you shouldn't go outside feeling like that."

His grandmother guided him to the loveseat. "He'll be fine. I'll go get you some lemonade so you can sip it." She patted him on the shoulder, glanced over at Regina and winked. "You keep an eye on him for me."

Regina smoothed the front of her dress. "We were just talking about the flower choices for the wedding."

"Yes," Mrs Walcott said. She glanced at Nathaniel. Then to Mrs Prescott. "How do you feel about white lilies, Harriette?"

"Hm? Oh, yes. Well, it does depend on the dress, doesn't it."

Mrs Walcott nodded. "Of course."

A light portal, the tiny opening'n a brick foundation, would've shrunk behind'm and left'm only with'is flashlight for guidance as'e moved on hands and knees over desiccated, hard-packed ground, between brick support columns. Dust wafted and twirled through'ts beam. The bandanna over'is nose sucked into'is mouth with each breath.

Ahead, white chips flashed. And'e rolled onto'is side and aimed the flashlight toward that detritus. He picked through bits of insulation, rolled onto'is back and pointed the flashlight up. Bare copper wire streamed through bore holes, even the inner paper covering gone. Bits littered the ground along with the chunks of outer insulation.

He muttered and pulled'is cutters from'is front coverall pocket.

He stilled, listened. He flicked the flashlight left, but there was nothing between'm and the brick wall but foundation columns and their shadows. But... He shifted, rolled toward t'other wall, that part of the foundation shared with the next building. Clenching'is cutter's taped handles between'is teeth, he listened, eventually pressed'is ear t'the brickwork.

Paper lanterns lazily shifted on evening breeze. Catherine sat'n one of the wooden folding chairs gridded before the gazebo and watched'em list. Sometimes the lanterns gained enough momentum t'strike a post and they'd've made a hollow, dry sound married with a crinkling that'd've ticked some not-settling register. She rose and the newspaper slid from'er lap onto the grass. But she'dn't stoop t'collect't before she departed.

Umbur horizon framed shop roofs. Streetlights'dn't've yet lit. The bank clock's thrombic ticks'd've carried on the light breeze not-obstructed except by'er tread.

She paused, confronted a darkened shop window. Evening-blood-coated advertisements and price slips and perhaps made'em seem as postcards from a world on a slightly different track. And beyond the few pairs of gloves stacked on the inside sill, a wind chime hung nearby, a scissor-size chart—lay only impenetrable, depthless dimness, so that'f someone where t'smash the glass, reach'n, their hand'dn't travel an arm's length before they touched a large, black-painted plywood sheet, or maybe a curtain. And'f they'd opened the door, there'd b'nothing beyond a tiny alcove. And t'walk round back'd only prove the whole merely a façade.

As'f t'disprove this, Odin lept onto the ledge and stared out. But'dn't acknowledge'er.

Catherine stepped toward the door, [froze] as she grasp the knob. When she opened't, she'd b'washed by old cardboard and burlap, tool oil, sour metal, dry...

She tapped the glass and Odin leaped down. He slipped through the barely cracked door. And still holding'er breath, she pulled't closed after'm. She knelt and lifted'm and they went up the sidewalk drenched'n deep umbur evening.

His grandmother extended a pill'n one hand and a glass of water'n'er other. Nathaniel shook'is head. "Go on," she said. "You need your rest." He shook'is head. "Now, come on," she said. "You want to get better, don't you?"

"There you go.

"Now you just sit down here and get comfortable. I'll bring you a pillow. You shouldn't be climbing up into that cupola anymore right now."

Already the quietude'n the house and of the street beyond receded into something deeper, borne into a vast outerdark that swept through the windows and snuffed-out light fixtures.

“FUCK YOU—”

Coreman still huffed from shifting the pickle barrel, when’e knelt and shone a flashlight down through the trapdoor. “I brought you something to eat.”

“FUCK YOU—as if I didn’t have to shit already, YOU GODDAMN FUCKING BASTARD—” A brace of milk bottles rattled.

“Don’t damage private property.”

“All the way to Mars—ALL THE WAY TO FUCKING MARS TO END UP IN A THIRD-RATE NORAMERICACO PRISON—CAN’T EVEN GET FUCKING CHINA-CORP QUALITY OUT OF YOU FUCKING BASTARDS.” He lifted’is wrist and said t’a dimmed screen: “Slowly by groping steps, the prison industrial complex recreates its image even billions of miles away and we have to wonder if it’s a function of a genetically memetic construct.” He squinted up the stairs. “You still here—FUCK YOU—what’m I supposed to do—take a fucking dump in the corner?”

Coreman tilted back’is cap and scratched’is head. “What’re you saying?”

“I’m saying—YOU FUCKING DIPSHIT—I have to shit—to defecate—make doo doo—ca ca—YOU GET ME YOU FUCKING RETARD—”

Coreman scratched’is head again, readjusted’is cap. “I’ll leave the food on the steps. Don’t try to come up until I close the door.”

“FUCK Y—”

While she walked, she folded'er arms as'f chilled and perhaps she'd wished she'd worn a shawl. Too early for streetlamps, too bright t'see lights through windows. Houses looked on empty streets with so many dead and glazed over eyes. Only the sound of'er heels on concrete. She sighed and she climbed the steps onto a porch and knocked.

The door opened and the woman on t'other side seemed t'try and smile but failed'n the same way as t'other half-dozen or so women already'n the living room.

"The reverend didn't come with you?"

Mrs Connelly tried t'smile. "Oh, he couldn't come. Very busy, you know." She seemed t'force'erself t'look round the room. "He sends his regards though. And he says it will be good to see you all Sunday."

The words circulated through dead parlor air.

"Um, yes." Mrs Peterson nodded. "Thank you for letting us know. Here, why don't you have a seat?"

"He didn't," someone said. "He didn't mention anything else, did he?"

"No... No, he didn't say anything...as such. But I'm sure it's just because he knows how important it is and he wants to be as...efficient as possible."

"You would think," someone said, "he could parcel out a bit of it."

Mrs Peterson cleared'er throat. "Yes, well... Would you care for some lemonade?" A tray with a pitcher and matched flower-print glasses sat on the coffee table, but remained full, glasses clean and dry.

Mrs Connelly shook'er head. "No. Thank you. Not now."

"I just don't know," Mrs Peterson said. "I just don't know what we're going to do with it. We had seven gallons made up, you know. But nobody is in the mood to drink it. And the younger kids should only have so much at a time, you know, the sugar and they'll be bouncing off the walls and such."

"Sugar rush," an old woman said from the depths of a high-backed chair, "is only a myth. It's a socialized phenomena." But'er voice'd've been so low someone'd've'd t'lean'n t'hear'er.

"And," someone said. "has anyone noticed how...spooky it is out on the streets?"

One after t'other, they silently nodded. Mrs Connelly sighed.

"It reminds me of Halloween," the old woman said. "Mother used to cover the porch in cobwebs and make everything all creepy." Aimlessly, she worked'er jaw. "And she used to have full-sized candy bars. Not those bite-sized things."

"Poor dear," someone said, and leaned over and whispered t'Mrs Connelly from behind'er white-gloved hand. "I'm afraid Mrs Denison is almost ready for Oak Street."

"What're you saying about me? I know you're saying something."

The women glanced toward that old woman'n that high-backed chair. "What's that?" Mrs Peterson said. She cleared'er throat. "Of course... Is everyone sure they wouldn't like something? We have several trays of cupcakes out in the kitchen."

"And jack'o'lanterns," the old woman said. From the depths of'er chair, she turned'er head as'f t'look at something the rest'dn't see. "Maybe we should make some. We'll need some pumpkins. And a knife. And—"

"Ahmmmm." Mrs Peterson stood. "It's awfully late, grandmother. Maybe I should take you up to bed."

"Candy corn," the old woman said. "My father used to like the pumpkins." It'd've been impossible t'tell from'er wrinkled face whether she'd pursed'er lips. "But I guess it's all just colored wax, anyway."

"Here," Mrs Peterson said. "I'll help you up the stairs. I'm sure you're tired."

"One year," the old woman said as'er granddaughter helped'er up, "I dressed up as B... B... B something the other." She shuffled across the floor and Mrs Peterson held'er hand. "And Mazie...what was her name...dressed as... We snuck away and made out in back of the gym."

"See what I mean?" the same woman whispered.

And several nodded.

He turned the volume knob till the radio dial faded. "Static."

"No need to state the obvious, dear." Mrs Moore set'er saucer on the table by the sofa and placed'ts tea cup into't and so the two pieces of china tinked. "They said earlier they were going to be—how did they say it?—'off the air' for a while."

"I don't remember that."

"It was earlier this afternoon. While you were napping."

"Speaking of sleep," Mary-Celleste said as she emerged from the hall. "Allison is finally off." She sighed, smiled. "Coffee, daddy?"

"No." He shook'is head. "No, that's fine."

"It'll only keep him up," her mother said. "Now, sit down. You've been on your feet all evening, it seems like."

Mary-Celleste sat'n a nearby chair. "I guess," she said. "Sometimes I just keep going and don't even know I'm tired and just sit down and—poof."

"That's how you get yourself in trouble," her mother said. "You have to watch it and not overtax yourself."

"I know."

The kitchen door opened and closed. "Mary, I'm back. Where do you want me to put this?"

"Just a minute, Jeff." She started t'rise, but'er mother waved'er off.

"Sit. Sit. Let him do it."

Mary-Celleste hesitated a moment, called, "Just put it in the icebox. Alright?"

A few moments later, Jeff entered the living room.

"How was Mrs Lockeman?" Mrs Moore said.

Jeff nodded. "Fine," he said. "She offered what formula she could spare."

"That Tony Ferguson," Mrs Moore said. "I don't know what to think of him. How does he think people are going to make it with the store closed so many days in a row?"

"It was open a few hours today," Mary-Celleste said.

"Still, there's just no excuse for it."

"It's not like he was the only one," her husband said. He stood and rubbed his face and stepped toward the mantel and laid his arm across it. "He's probably still asleep."

"Even so," his wife said. "People can get by without your fix-it shop for a couple days. A grocer is another matter entirely." She shook her head. "Anyway, Jeff, I hope you didn't have any trouble getting around our car."

"Why should he?" Mr Moore said. "It's parked next to the curb."

"You never can tell, Seymour."

Jeff crossed the room and stepped behind his wife's chair, rested his arms atop its back. "It was fine."

"But really," Mrs Moore said. "You should make sure she doesn't do so much."

"Mother."

"Well, I'm sorry but... You know how a person can worry about their daughter."

"I'm starting to."

Faintly, almost mechanically, they laughed.

Mr Moore said, "Heck of a thing."

Mrs Moore waved her hand. "Please, let's talk about something else." And she took up her tea again.

Jeff crossed the room toward the mantel and lit a cigarette and fished from his shirt pocket. Mr Moore yawned, not-successfully covered his mouth with his hand as he sat. The mantel clock chimed.

Mrs Moore turned toward her daughter. "You're awful quiet, dear."

"Hm?" Mary-Celleste looked up. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"You see," her mother said. "Too tired. That's what it is."

Mary-Celleste shook her head. "I was just thinking, is all."

"What about, dear?"

Her daughter looked round the room. "I was just thinking how nice it is to have people around, you know. You and dad. Jeff. Jack."

"Speaking of which," her mother said. "Where is your brother?"

"Probably at home," Mr Moore said. He covered his mouth again. "Asleep."

Mrs Moore glanced at him, then back to her daughter. "Now, what were you saying, dear?"

Mary-Celleste shook'er head. "I was just thinking how lonely I would feel if I didn't have any of that. And that made me think about how Mrs Stowe must feel."

"Here we go again," Jeff said. He stubbed-out'is cigarette'n the ashtray on the mantel. "Can't we go one day without a mention of Catherine Stowe?"

Mary-Celleste looked up and across at'm. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, dear," her mother said. She set'er tea down and glanced over'er shoulder at'er son'n-law. "We can talk about it later."

"What?" Mary-Celleste said.

Her mother turned t'er. "Later, dear. There's no need to get into anything tonight."

"I'm just saying—"

"Maybe you're right, Seymour."

Mr Moore's head'd drooped. He looked up and blinked.

His wife said, "I'm sure everyone's tired and would like to get some rest." And she nodded at'm. Absently, he nodded back. Jeff produced another cigarette from'is pocket, lifted the lighter from where'e'd laid't on the mantel.

"We," Jeff said round'is cigarette and into the flame, "might as well talk about it now." Cigarette scissored between two fingers, he lightly skated'is thumb knuckle below the stitches along the side of'is forehead. "What do you think she's done the last twenty years? Since he died." He replaced the cigarette between'is lips, spoke around't, and smoke gave'is words tangibility. "She takes over *his* store. Who anywhere else ever heard of a woman running a hardware store?"

"Well," Mrs Moore said, and rose. "You're sure you have enough formula? What about any other food? Until the grocer's opens again."

Jeff removed'is cigarette and blew smoke across the mantel. "Ask Mary. She keeps track of that kind of stuff. These days, I'm just a glorified delivery boy."

"N—"

"Ahmmm." Mr Moore, who'd crossed the room without being noticed, had slipped on'is rumpled jacket and held'is hat. "If we're going to go, we'd better go. It's getting late."

Mrs Moore paused, looked at'er husband, then back t'er son'n-law. "Yes, well..." She turned and lifted'er purse from the couch. She

went and bent t'hug'er daughter. "See you tomorrow, dear." And she glanced at'er son'n-law as she crossed t'where'er husband stood by the door. "You two get some rest, now."

A faint cry carried down the hall.

"Oh, dear." Mary-Celleste rose and moved toward't.

Jeff nodded, stubbed out'is cigarette and left't broken and crooked'n the ashtray and a curlicue smoke-line dissipated toward the ceiling. "Night."

"And be sure to tell Mary to make sure the baby has a hat for tomorrow. The weather forecast said it's supposed to be extra sunny."

Jeff glanced up. "Extra sunny?"

"You know what I mean."

Mr Moore said, "We'd better go."

His wife glanced at him. She turned toward her son'n-law. "Be sure to tell her that, now." Jeff nodded. And she turned toward Mr Moore and walked t'the door, paused. "Are you coming?" Her husband slipped on'is hat and went out behind'er and closed the door.

Out'n the car, she crossed'er arms. "He's not well right now," she said.

Her husband touched the ignition switch. "They'll have to work it out." He yawned.

As'e flicked-on the headlights, she glanced across at'm. "Are you awake enough to drive? Do you need to roll-down the window?"

"Do you want to do it?"

She remained silent. After'e'd pulled away from the curb, he cracked the window and let night air strike'is face.

Jeff loosed his tie enough to pop his collar button. He turned and glanced toward the hallway, stepped away from the mantel, paused, pulled an empty cigarette pack from his pocket, looked at it, set it beside the ashtray.

Light spilled from the nursery, across the floor and opposite wall. He settled his shoulder against the doorframe. Mary-Celleste stood at the foot of the crib.

He said, "You weren't respectful today."

She looked up from the crib. "I don't—"

"Did you ever stop to think how it reflects on *me*? Huh?"

"Jeff—"

"Be quiet." Absently, he touched his empty coat pocket.

"I don't..." she said in a low voice. "I just don't understand what you're so angry about."

"You don't understand? YOU—"

"Jeff—please—you'll wake the baby."

He breathed hard through his nose, pulled his shoulder from the doorframe, undid his tie.

"You're tired, Jeff."

He motioned with his hand. "I'm tired of it."

"What?"

"Her."

"Who?" She shook her head. "I don't—"

"Your *Mrs Stowe*."

"But she—"

"Yes—she took you out there and all the way up the mountain and back again." He struck his chest with his knuckles. "Because I

couldn't. Because *I* crashed the car. Because *I* wasn't capable." His tie flailed'n'is clenched hand. "But there's this *woman* who comes along—out of the blue—and *she* can do it. A woman, by the way, save for select few public gatherings, you didn't know *at all* before this." He touched'is fingers t'is temple.

"But, Jeff—"

"I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ABOUT IT ANYMORE!"

Allison gurbled, started t'cry.

"Jeff..." And Mary-Celleste bent and lifted'er, rested Allison's chin against'er shoulder.

"I..." Jeff turned down the hall. "I'm...sorry. But just..." He motioned with the tie. "Remember what I said." And'e added from farther down the darkened hall, "And...get her to be quiet."

Mary-Celleste rested'er cheek against what there'd've been of Allison's soft, fine hair. "Shhhh." She moved toward the rocking chair. "Don't worry," she whispered. "Everything's going to be alright."

“We probably won’t be back until late,” Mrs Walcott’d said. Red evening and blue streetlamp light’d’ve tinted their front porch and might’ve rendered Mrs Walcott’s hat one and’er gloves t’other as she adjusted’em. “So be in bed on time, you hear?”

Nathaniel’d nodded.

And with’em gone, the house remained silent except for’is grandmother’s hums from the kitchen and plates tinkling as she moved’em from the sink t’the counter or the counter t’the sink.

He walked down the hall. His fingertips skated over the banister end, along the paneled wall, over the dusted and polished table, across the wainscoting, till’e touched the swingdoor and pushed through

Grandmother closed a cabinet door and stepped off a chair. “Everybody off?” she said. He nodded. “You h—” The phone rang and she leaned toward the door and glanced past’m down the hall. “Will you ge—what am I thinking...” She shook’er head and glanced at’m. “I’m going to send somebody who can’t even talk to answer the phone.” She shook’er head and motioned toward the chair. “Put that back under the table for me, will you, dear.” And she hurried down the hall.

His grandmother’s muffled voice’d’ve barely carried from the den and’n that near silence’e’d’ve discerned the mechanism-buzz from within the electric wall clock as’t perpetually smiled and’ts eyes flicked left-then-right and’ts tail flicked right-then-left.

His grandmother’s shoes patter-shuffled down the hall. “Oh, dear,” she mumbled. She stopped and stared blankly at the cabinets. She called, “Nathaniel.”

“... here...”

"Oh. Sorry, dear. I seem to have... Never mind. Will you get down under that cabinet—that one there. There's a small brown bottle in the back. Get that out for me, please, will you, dear." She turned and went back into the hall. "A small brown bottle," she called.

He knelt and felt into the dimness and offered a small, dusty, brown glass bottle t'er when she re-entered.

"That's it," his grandmother said.

"... what..."

"Is it?" She took the bottle. "Just a bit of something. For medical purposes." She laid'er apron over a chair and'd already wrapped'er-self'n'er shawl and drew'ts ends better into place.

"... someone... hurt..."

"No," she said. "Not quite. Mrs Tuftcraft is... well you don't need to know about that. Just take my word for it."

"... doctor..."

"Heavens, no. There's no need for that. It's... It's a woman thing, and you don't need to know about that right now." She adjusted'er shawl. "I'm going to walk over there. So you get ready and come along."

"... why..."

"Now, don't argue. It was going home alone that got Mrs Tuftcraft all... Never mind. Now, come on. The air will be good for you."

Near the front door, she took'er bag from the rack, slipped the bottle down into't and refastened't.

Nathaniel closed the door behind'em.

Wind played through treetops and rustled hedges as they passed. Few windows were lit. And streetlamps rendered the façades alternate shades of blue, with black and bottomless windows. They turned at the intersection. "Just a little farther," she said as they crossed at the next intersection. "It's like everyone's gone away," she said. She glanced at void-black windows. "We've been so concentrated on the wedding. I guess... I guess most everyone else doesn't have something to take their minds off it."

"... what..."

His grandmother shook'er head. "We're almost there," she said. Yellow light spilled'n checker-pattern across a distant lawn. Nathaniel opened the gate and they went up onto the porch, where's

grandmother dis-entwined their arms and pressed the bell. Light spilled over'em as the door opened.

"Oh, thank you for coming," the woman said, and pushed-open the screendoor for'em. "Please, come in. Mother's in the den." And she added, "lying down."

"...what..." Nathaniel said as'is grandmother passed'm, "...should I...do..."

She paused. "I...don't know. You shouldn't really be around here right now." She spoke low and fast, as'f meaning t'talk only t'erself. "No, I don't think so."

The night was so quiet they heard footsteps approach down the sidewalk. And the three looked toward the street. Coreman touched'is cap. Though blue, his uniform'd've seemed t'blend into night, possibly revealed only by the glintings of'is buttons and badge. "Evening, everyone."

"Joe," Grandmother Walcott said, and raised one hand and passed-off'er bag t'the woman'n the doorway. "Joe, it's lucky you're here, would you do me a favor?"

"If I can."

"Are you by any chance going by our street?"

"I'll probably be around there sometime. Why?"

"I wonder—I have to stay here with Mrs Tuftcraft awhile—and I was wondering if you'd walk Nathaniel home. I don't want him to be out by himself tonight. I'm sure he thinks I'm a silly old woman but—would you mind?"

"Not at all." He paused. "Something wrong with Mrs Tuftcraft?"

"Nothing serious."

"...how are...you...going to...get...home..."

"Oh, I can have John drive you back later," the woman said. "We'll have to pass right by there on the way home, anyway."

Nathaniel's grandmother nodded. "There. All settled." She motioned. "You go on now. I want you to get in bed before too late. Go on." And she stepped into the doorway, waved toward the street. "Good night, Joe. Give my regards to Maureen."

"Yes, mam."

Nathaniel dropped off the porch after the door closed and the light receded behind't. "What's the matter?" Coreman said. But

Nathaniel just shrugged. "Oh." Coreman glanced up at the house. Someone pulled a shade across the lamp-lit window. "Well, I guess we had better be going, then."

They walked into quietude. "Lucky thing I came by," Coreman said. "One of those flukes, I guess." They turned the corner at an intersection. "Let's just go on down your street. That's as good as anything right now." He glanced toward darkened houses. "Quiet night." They went on. "Yes, a quiet night." His fist tapped his thigh as he walked. He yawned. "Oh..." He covered his mouth and yawned again. "I should let you know, you'll probably be called to testify before the town council about...you know. Or something like that. When they figure out what they need to do." Nathaniel nodded absently, watched the distance as they crossed the next intersection. Ahead, faint light had emerged through the window over the door from where his grandmother had left the one lamp on in the front hall. "Well, here we are. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow." He touched his cap, walked on, raised his hand to his mouth as he passed beneath a streetlamp.

As Coreman receded in the distance, Nathaniel glanced up-then-down the darkened street. He crossed the road. And when he pushed the gate opposite, its rust-eaten hinge might have squealed and he'd have jerked to see no windows lit. Squeezing through, he crossed the yard to get under cover of hedge shadow. High grass had brushed his ankles but he'd needed mowing. He moved round the house, found the stone path by feel and sound and followed to the back stoop, almost tripped and planted his hand on the siding. Shaking, he opened the screendoor and a hinge cried. He reached through the gap and knocked. But his hand shook and the sound might have been too quiet. And he'd knocked again, but probably hadn't been able to hear it over what pounded through his chest. He kn—

The kitchen lit. The curtain faintly brushed aside.

The door opened. She'd pulled her robe high around her throat and wore slippers. "Nathan" She finally said.

"... need...to talk..."

"I....." She shook her head, said in almost a whisper, "You should go home."

"... wait..."

"It's okay," she said. "I...understand."

He shook's head. "...d..."

"No. I understand. You're a young man... That means certain things... And..." She spoke through the barely open door. "I'm sure you'll be happy. I just hope...just hope you can forget...everything that's happened and...that it won't cause you any harm in the future. It's all my...my fault..."

"...no..."

She shook'er head, eyes low. "You'd better...go home."

But Nathaniel put's hand on the doorjamb before she'd close the door. "...I...did...n...t..." He growled and kicked the step.

Her face blanked and she opened the door enough t'put'er hand on'is. "Don't hurt yourself."

Kitchen light flashed'n's eyes. He might've reached through the door and grabbed'er round the waist'f there'd been enough room. "I...didn...t—ask—her...to—marry...me..." His knuckles discolored as'e gripped the jamb. "She...s...lying..." He breathed hard, would've'd t'force'is jaw t'relax.

The weight of'is breath washed over'er hand. Faintly, she seemed t'shake. In a low voice: "Really?"

He nodded.

She paused a moment, but started t'turn away. "...No..." She shook'er head. "You..." She looked back at'm, and without'er seeming t'realize't, her hand ran along'is forearm. And she opened the door t'reach out with t'other and delicately touched'is jawline. "Does it hurt?" As'f answering'er own question, she shook'er head, withdrew'er fingers. She looked over'is head, beyond the back yard. "Can you come in?" Her voice was quick and low.

But before'e'd reply, light washed between two houses, disappeared, washed between the next two houses. He turned. She followed'is gaze and leaned through the door.

"...home..."

She touched'is hand. "Go."

He looked back at'er. But before'e'd shake'is head, she shook'ers. "Hurry."

"...when..."

"I don't know. But you have to go."

Lights flashed between'er house and the next.

“Go.”

Clenching his jaw, he withdrew from her touch, jerked away and round the house and left her to catch the screendoor before it slammed. He paused at the corner. Blue taillights stared from the Walcott's garage, but momentarily extinguished. Shadowed figures emerged, walked across the cobalt-lit lawn. As soon as they were through the door, he started across Catherine's yard, squeezed through the gate, but didn't bother to pull it shut, and hurried across the road. Exhaust smell still permeated the garage and he pressed by the still warm car hood and through the garage's back door and quietly made his way along the path around back of the house and toward the kitchen door. Hand on the kitchen door knob, he paused and tried to peek through the curtain, where his grandmother'd left the light on. Carefully, he turned the knob, slipped through.

“... must be in bed.” His father's voice carried down the hall.

“But your mother's room is empty. What—did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“It sounded as if something is at the back door.”

“Probably just a cat prowling.”

“Maybe...”

“I'll go check.”

Nathaniel'd just managed to get to the kitchen sink when his father pushed-open the kitchen swingdoor. “Nathaniel. What're you doing up?”

“What is it, dear?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Just Nathaniel.”

Mrs Walcott peered over her husband's shoulder. “Why are you not in bed?” She looked round the kitchen. “And where is your grandmother?”

But before he'd reply, motor rumble'd've carried from the street. Mrs Walcott turned. “Harold, that sounds like it's stopped in front of the house.”

“I'll see.” But when he'd've reached the door, taillights'd've already shrunk into the distance and disappeared round the next intersection. Grandmother Walcott climbed the front steps.

She looked up at the sound of him opening the door. “Oh, you two are back.”

"Where have you been?" He stepped aside t'allow'er into the hall. She pulled off'er shawl and put't over a hook. "Mrs Tuftcraft had a bit of a spell. So I went over."

"At night? Alone?"

"Oh, no." She put'er bag down. "Nathaniel walked me over."

"But he's here."

"Of course," she said. "I didn't want him hanging around with... Well, you know. And Julie and Sam drove me back. And Joe Coreman was passing by, so I sent him home with him."

"When was this?"

"Oh, I don't know. A while ago. Why? What's going on?"

He glanced toward the kitchen. "Nathaniel just came home."

"What?"

Mr Walcott turned and walked toward the kitchen. And grandmother Walcott followed.

There, Nathaniel'd've been amidst a similar account with 'is mother as 'is grandmother'd given t'is father. But 'is grandmother interrupted'em, "What in the world is going on? You should have been home and in bed by now."

"I think," Mrs Walcott said, "he was just coming to that." She turned back t'er son. "Well?"

"...walked around...with...Officer Coreman...just got...back..."

"Well I—" grandmother said. "I never. I tell you what, I'm going to have a word with that Joseph Coreman, keeping a boy out at this hour. I don't know what he was thinking."

"...had to talk...about testifying at...town council..."

"What's this?" Mr Walcott said.

His wife glanced at'm. "I think he means they had to go over something regarding that man who was stealing things." She looked at Nathaniel. "Is that right?"

Nathaniel nodded. "...time...got away..."

"Well," his grandmother said. "That's hardly reason—"

But Mr Walcott raised 'is hand. "It's late," he said. "And there probably isn't much harm done. Provided everyone goes to bed." He looked at Nathaniel. "Understood?" Nathaniel nodded. "Alright then. You may go up." And'e stepped aside t'allow Nathaniel into

the hall. As'e mounted the stairs, his mother's'd've voice carried faintly through the kitchen door. "So how is Mrs Tuftcraft..." And Nathaniel'd've sighed as'e climbed.

“There’s nother’ne,” Genie said.
Li said, “We’re’n’t blind.”
They paused beneath another chalked cat.
“Isn’t as big as t’other’ne.”
“More colorful, though,” Kayla said.
“What yuh thin’t means?”
“I’dn’t thin’t means nothin,” Li said. “Do yuh thin everythin means somethin?”
“Well,” Genie said. “I can’t see why someone’d go through so much trouble’f’t’dn’t.”

As'e'd threaded'is tie, he'd turned'is head and checked'mself'n the mirror. He worked'is mouth silently, with only a dull occasional ache. He finished with'is tie and fastened both collar buttons.

Walking down the aisle, he must've felt absolutely conspicuous. Men and women glanced at'm from the corners of their eyes and some young kids turned full face till their mothers or fathers tapped their shoulders.

Mr Walcott waited as'is wife and Nathaniel and grandmother Walcott filed along their pew and sat. Then'e passed up the aisle and took'is place among those seated behind the pulpit.

Ceiling fans turned listlessly.

Nearby, Mrs Jones nudged Mrs Lindspector and nodded toward the far side of the church. And when Mrs Lindspector gave a tactful glance, she whispered, "I don't think I've ever not heard her play on Sunday before." Mrs Jones whispered, "Poor dear. You can see it."

The reverend rose from'is seat amidst the deacons and approached the rostrum and placed'is hands on either side of't, as'f t'support'mself. Women whispered at the tape bandages on'is neck and ear. "Everyone," he said, but paused. "These last few weeks have been a difficult time for us all." He looked t'the ceiling, as'f'e expected t'draw something from the air. "There is knowledge," he said. "And there is faith. And we must beware faith. I can know. Or I can have faith. But the one contradicts the other." Behind'm, deacons'n their high, straight-backed wooden seats looked on impassively, but moved their hands, feet, inclined their heads t'suppress the need t'yawn. "And I say that I *know*. I do not *merely* believe. I have no need of belief. Is it not better to know? If I were merely to believe,

then everything stands to be taken from me. I can believe I have a cigar box full of money on my mantel so long as I never open it. But if I *know* what is in that box, I can take it out and spend it. So it is better to know than to believe.” At that refrain, ladies hats tipped as they nodded t’emselves and bareheaded men’d likewise and some dabbed their necks with their handkerchiefs. “Any child *knows* the story of the creation of the Great Rocket and how the Lord *knew* the first man, Adam, even before he formed the ship around him. So the Lord *knew* Adam even before the Lord created his helpmeet. But before all that—at the first moment of creation, when the Lord brought Adam into being in the void, what did he do? Adam was but a thing, was he not? He had a body. He existed. But what happened? Part one, section one, subsection five. ‘And the Lord said: who art thou? But the body of the man, Adam, remained moved not.’ Moved not. He could not speak. He could not see. He could not feel. He could do no more than any rock you might pick up from the desert. So what did the Lord do? Same section, subsection six. ‘And the Lord *knew*—’—remember this word, knew—‘—the man, Adam, was but a thing. And the Lord spake and said: I have made this man from the void. He is divided from the void. So he is a thing apart.’ And it goes on, start of the next section, ‘So the Lord breathed out of the man, Adam, he had made so that void was again in the heart of the man.’ What has the Lord done here? He has made Adam from the void, nothingness, separated him from the void. But he is incomplete. So the Lord takes a small part, the smallest part, away and makes Adam something that is void and yet is not void. And what happens? Subsection seven, same section. ‘And the Lord said: What are you called? And the man, Adam, he had made answered: I am thy creation the man Adam.’ Ninth subsection, ‘And Adam *knew* the Lord.’” Connelly paused, finger pressed t’the page so hard’is knuckle discolored. “What has happened here? I speak not merely of Adam’s creation. But of...” He paused, removed’is finger from the page, leaned’is head back and closed’is eyes. And’is arms extended and’is chest heaved as’e breathed deeply and exhaled. “I have come to *know* something.” And’e opened’is eyes and lowered’em on the congregation. “We speak of man in the Lord’s image. But what does this mean? Do we say the Lord has two

legs? Two arms? A shaven face? No. That would be absurdity. But here we have the essence of it. God *knew*. But what of Adam? What did he say to the Lord? He said ‘I am.’ And what happened? He *knew* God. Adam *knew*¹⁸⁴.

“Adam knew. Remember that.

“The Book says there is a division between man and all things. But what is this division? We have hair and flesh as animals do. Doctor Falstaff will tell you our blood, our bodies, have minerals the same as rocks do. So what then *is* this separation?” He raised The Book, pages open. “It is *this*. It is that *we*—exclusive of all else in creation—are made in the Lord’s image. And what does that mean?” He put The Book down, looked at’t a moment, looked up. “What was it in Adam that separated him from the void. Do you remember?

“To *know*. The Lord gave him the ability to know. And that distinguished him from everything else. This is the gift *we* are given.” He paused and a murmur transversed the congregation, whispers ill-contained behind fans and gloved hands.

He gripped the rostrum.

“We have all wondered why the events of the past days have taken place. We have all thought, ‘how can this fit the Lord’s plan?’ And you will turn to this—” he raised The Book again—“—and you will look from cover to cover for words to explain. But you only need search for *one* word.

“Let me tell you of this morning. I received a telephone call. A call to inform me the Jacobs’s could not be with us today. You will see their empty pew there. And as I spoke to Doctor Falstaff on the phone, I cannot tell you how much my heart was moved for this family. And do you know what I did? The same as you—as any of you—would have done. I picked up this. And I prayed the Lord would guide me and open it to what I need see. And this is what I read: part fourteen, section eight: ‘And Johnathon, son of George, son of Michael, son of Adam spoke unto the rock which burned unceasingly with blue fire yet was not consumed. And it revealed to him thus: All are born children. And all children must become men. And all men must put

¹⁸⁴ TRANSLATOR’S NOTE: It is doubtful that the word knew contains any euphemistic subtext.

away childish things. For this is the law and nature of creation.” He closed The Book, lifted his eyes.

“And this morning, I will tell you, I read these words and I didn’t know what they meant. I did not *know*. I was as an animal. Blind. Confused. Do you understand? We have all clung to our faith and in so doing we separated ourselves from the very thing that makes us of the Lord’s image.”

He removed his hands from the rostrum. “But the time has come for us to *know*. And I don’t want you to be disheartened in this. No—I want you to be joyful. We fell to our complacency. But these events, these tragedies, they are the Lord’s plan, because they have laid before us the path. And let us remember what is said in part two of The Book, ‘For the road of life is laid down by the Lord. And it appears to wind far from whence you are bound. But it always comes to its destination.’”

Our journaller'dn't record mosta any of this, but I found a few scraps of several different sermons and pieced'em together because't seemed as'f something similar belonged here. But they go on for what must've been a really long time and I think this's enough t'get the idea.

Finally, he stepped away from the rostrum and raised his arms. "Please. Everyone. Rise.

"Today, many of us came here to be comforted. But this is only the start of our journey. Together, we will go forward knowing that even though the destination does not show itself, the Lord has placed it there. 'This is as he promised.' I wish that I could have told you everything today. But that would be impossible. So with Mr Tisdell's blessing, I want to inform you there will be a change of scheduling. Tomorrow night at eight o'clock, and every night going forward at that same time, there will be a new hour program. And together we are going to go forward. And we are going to learn what it means to *know*. We are going to reawaken that which makes us in the Lord's image. We are going to *know*.

"Now, I know—you see, already we have begun—"—a faint laugh passed through the congregation, or something close to it—"—we have endured here quite long this morning, and now afternoon. But since I was a boy, and my father stood where I stand now, I cannot recall a single Sunday in all those years without Mrs Sutherland at her organ. And I think you will all agree there is nothing more right than that. So, Mrs Sutherland, if you would, please. And while she takes her place, will everyone please take your hymn books. And let us sing."

Connelly made his way down from the pulpit and down the aisle and towards the front of the church as Mrs Sutherland played. And as usual, Coreman'd've stood by the inner door, cap'n-hand, and nodded as the reverend shook his hand. "It's going to be a fine day, I think," Connelly said as he looked through the open double doors.

Coreman nodded, looked out at the parallel-parked cars along the roadside.

The crowd milled and filtered into the aisle, but Connelly'd've'd time to say, "Joe, even in school you always seemed too concerned with something somewhere else to know what was going on around you."

Coreman looked back at him. But before he'd reply, Mr and Mrs Wilkins approached, and instead Coreman'd've just nodded and turned down the steps and combed his fingers back through his hair before he slipped on his cap.

"Wonderful sermon, Reverend." Mrs Wilkins smiled as she held her husband's arm. "I can't tell you how interested I am to hear more."

Connelly smiled, nodded. "Everything in its season."

"Reverend." Mr Walcott offered his hand as he approached.

"So," Mrs Walcott said, "does this mean an end to your usual program?" She offered her hand.

"I had no idea you were a listener, Mrs Walcott."

"Of course," she said. "From the very beginning, of course."

"Well, yes it does, I'm afraid. But I would say it's probably for the best in this case. Or you might even liken it to an extension of the former program. A bit of growth, you might say."

She laughed. "I'm sure we'll all be delighted to tune-in, as they say."

"I hope so. And I was glad to hear of the good news within your own family. Of course, it will mean some work on my part. But it's a burden I would happily bear. By the way, where is your son?"

"Oh," Grandmother Walcott said from behind Mr and Mrs Walcott. "He's off somewhere with the other boys. You know how they can be at this age."

"Well, of course," Connelly said. "That can only be expected. Things will change soon enough."

"Yes," Mrs Walcott said. "And you know what they say. Of course, we will be by to see you as soon as we go over a few more details with the Prescotts. You know, of course, about the...accident. Nathaniel hasn't been quite up to talking, you know."

"I'm sure that will sort itself out soon enough."

"Oh, I'm sure it will. Nathaniel already looked much better this morning, didn't he, dear?"

Her husband nodded. "Yes. Quite well. I'm sure he will be better in no time."

"The young are very resilient," grandmother Walcott said.

"But don't let us hold you up, Reverend." Mrs Walcott tugged'er husband's arm. The reverend nodded, extended a hand t'grandmother Walcott as she followed'em outa the church.

"Mr Hume... Mrs Hume... Mr Salisbury... Mr Taylor... Mrs Ruck... I'm so sorry to hear about your husband. I hope he's well. What did the doctor say?...Mr Peabody...Mrs Peabody... Very nice to see you this morning...Mrs Holdfast...and here she is, Allison, I believe... This will be the first time I've ever shaken your hand, I believe...Precious... The Lord's gift... And the proud father... Yes, take care... And don't let the little one get too much sun... Mr Prescott... Yes, I've heard... I'm sure the Walcotts are quite pleased... Yes... Just let me know... Mr Johnson... Mrs Johnson... Mrs Holtcraft... No, I assure you it's far from life threatening... Quite... Thank you... Mr Quigley" Everyone'd've trickled through the narrow outlet, a blur of names and hands. And as the church emptied, the cacophony of the milling crowd'd've balanced with engine roar from the street and slowly shifted t'the motors' favor. He extended a hand t'Mrs Sutherland's sister, but fleetingly'is gaze rested over'er shoulder and'e'd t'arrest'mself. "... you and your wife have to come for lunch

today," she said. "I won't have anything else." And before'e'd reply: "And I've already spoken to her and she's agreed if you do. So you might as well say yes." Connelly assented. "Excellent," Mrs Sutherland's sister said. "We'll expect you both." But even before she'd released'is hand, he looked over'er shoulder again as she smiled and passed through the doors.

He smiled and nodded. "Mrs Stowe." But stiffened.

"Reverend."

"I don't... I have to say this is rather unusual."

"Oh?" She glanced down and'er hat brim obscured'er face. "Well, he's an old dear. And he's all the time getting out, anyway. So I figured I would just bring him along." Odin looked around from'er arms with no particular interest. Glanced up at Connelly. "Of course, if it's a problem..."

"No." He'd lost'is smile somewhere and only a faint remembrance of't worked at the corner of'is mouth. "Just...unusual..." he said. "I have to say...I hope it doesn't become the trend."

She looked at'm. "Afternoon, Reverend." And she walked down the steps with Odin's tail drooped over'er elbow.

Coreman stood amidst the street and motioned as cars funneled from the parking lot and passed'm, or raised a hand t'allow one of the parallel-parked cars out.

Nathaniel, Ron and others stood'n the lot's far corner. Catherine glanced toward'em, but Odin moved'n'er arms and she'd t'turn'er attention t'm as she continued down the sidewalk.

"What's a fucking den mark?" one of the boys said t'Nathaniel.

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Down at the—"

"Can't you be quiet?" Ron said.

"What's the matter? He knows about him, anyway."

"Why don't you shout it to the whole church while you're at it?"

"Don't listen to him," someone said. "He's just testy because he's getting married."

"I notice you haven't asked anybody yet."

"I'm going to."

"Yeah."

Ron put'is hands'n'is pockets.

“You,” someone said, “couldn’t *pay* me to marry *Beatrice*.” And’e rolled’is eyes.

“Shut up.”

Across the parking lot, Mr Walcott put’is arm through the down driver side window of the car and motioned.

“You’re being called,” Ron said. Nathaniel glanced over’is shoulder. He’d’ve started t’say something, but Ron said, “You’d better get going.” Behind’em, traffic moved steadily. A horn blared. Nathaniel looked over’is shoulder. He turned back, but Ron’d’ve already started down the sidewalk.

Someone said, “Where’s he going?”

“How’m I supposed to know?”

And when they’d’ve looked round, Nathaniel’d’ve gone too.

Crickets hidden amid grass and hedges called and the voice of each type melded into a spontaneous composition where players only cared for their own section.

"There you are," his grandmother said through the screendoor. "We were wondering what had happened to you."

Preliminary blinkings hovered over distant yards. Nathaniel half-turned where'e sat on the steps, looked over'is shoulder. Occasional motor-noise from distant cars momentarily silenced the first crickets first waverings.

"Good idea," his grandmother said. "It's so nice this time of year. Right before it gets so hot in the summer. We were just going to have some ice cream. No need to ask you if you want some, is there?"

He shook'is head.

"You sure?"

He nodded.

"Alright then." She turned away from the door. "Maybe later."

Nearby cricketings'd silenced at'er tread and only after'er foot-steps'd long receded'd they start again, only t'b'interrupted by the screendoor opening. "Your grandmother seems to think you aren't feeling well."

Nathaniel glanced over'is shoulder at'is father as'e leaned on the porch rail. "Fine."

Crickets'n hedges across the way fell silent at their words.

"I know," Mr Walcott said, "the last few weeks have been...rough, shall we say. And believe it or not, I also know this can be a tough time in a young man's life. There are a lot of changes happening. And sometimes that can be overwhelming."

“I don’t think I’m overwhelmed.”

“Then you would be the first person who wasn’t.” His father moved by’em, down the steps, stopped on the bottom-most. “I’m going to take a ride out to look over some things before it gets too dark. Why don’t you come along.” He stepped onto the path. “I think it’ll help give you a better idea of what we do.”

“I already know that.”

“You know what it’s like to watch construction. But that’s not what it’s *really* about. Come on. It’ll give you a chance to get some fresh air.”

“I’ve just thought of somethin,” Helena said.

“What?”

“How’d Nathaniel know the back door’dn’t b’latched when’e tried t’sneak’n? Wouldn’t t’ve been latched? Didn’t they’ve locks round by then?”

“Yuh’re soundin too much like’er,” Kayla said.

“Maybe she’s jus gettin smart,” Li said, and laughed.

“Smart’dn’t b’the right word,” Ambeth said.

Li adjusted’er packstrap and chuckled.

Mara remained quiet. “I’d say... His grandmother’d gone’er whole life without’em. And she probably’dn’t’ve remembered t’set’t. So’t’s more likely as’n’t that the door’d’ve been not-locked.”

“Yah,” Helena said. “That makes sense.”

Li laughed.

Nathaniel'd sat silent as they wound their way out along the town's extremities. His father turned the car onto a dirt road and stopped. "What do you see?"

Nathaniel peered through the dust-covered windshield, turned and looked out the rolled-down window. "Houses."

"Most of these," Mr Walcott said, and let's foot off the brake so they eased forward, "won't be done for months. Some for over a year." They stopped'n front of one. Surrounded by a dirt yard, the structure'd've seemed more a tarp-covered stick tent than anything. "The key to everything is planning. Too many houses and you waste your resources. Buy too many lots from the township and you pay taxes on them even if they're empty. But too few and you have no place for young couples to go. It's all about balance. Otherwise you get a family with three, four, maybe more, kids in less than a couple of years, and they're all crowded in a bungalow or single story meant for two."

They rolled on. Patchy lawns grew ahead. The curb'dn't been poured yet, so'e pulled the car t'the side of dirt lane'n front of a blue-painted house with white eaves. "What do you think?" He leaned toward the passenger side and looked through the window. "Let's go take a look."

"This is a basic class B type. It's cozy enough for young couples, but flexible enough to account for a first child. It's also good for older couples. After children move out, large houses can sometimes be overbearing, so they might take a step down." Either side of the path, patchy grass grew high but stringy. "Of course, the sprinkler systems are already in. We're just waiting for the water company to

get around to hooking them up.” He moved quickly up the steps and opened the screendoor. “Let’s take a look inside.”

Hardwood floors stank of polish. Wallpaper glue, stucco, stickied the air.

“I know it looks a bit weird like this,” his father said. “It’s the emptiness. Though, you go through enough new houses like this, you get used to it. And you’ll be surprised about how fast they can fill up when people move in.” They passed through the foyer, into the living room. “The sinks are all hooked up in the kitchen, and it’s ready for the stove to be installed.” He motioned t’ the cabinets, then down the hall. “Two bedrooms. Bath. Spare room. And a closet at the end.”

“This is the same layout of house as Mrs Stowe has.”

His father seemed absorbed’n a length of crown molding’n one corner. “You know,” he said, and looked round at’m. “I think you’re right. Very perceptive.” His father seemed lost for a moment, shook’is head. “You know, those four houses on that side were the first ones I think I ever saw built. I must’ve been...six, maybe. Dad—your grandfather—used to go out every morning and sit on the porch and drink his coffee while the men came in.” He shook’is head, looked round the room. “Funny the things that come back to you, you know.” He turned toward Nathaniel. “So what do you think?”

“About the house?”

“What else?”

“It’s fine.”

“Good. Like I say, you have to see it with furniture in it to really get the feel of the place. But I’m sure you and Regina will sort that out in no time.”

Nathaniel staredn’t so absently at the cream-colored floral print wallpaper and’ts yellow-petaled flowers that filled everything above the wainscoting. “Dad...” His jaw faintly spasmed. “What if I said I never asked Regina Prescott to marry me?”

Silence.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, what if...I never asked her? What if somebody...made it up?”

“Well, that wouldn’t make very much sense. Why would anybody do a thing like that?”

“But what if they did?”

His father stood there’n the quiet a moment, eventually brought ’is hand t’ the back of ’is neck. “Nathaniel... –ahmmmm– You know what I said earlier, about being overwhelmed—”

“I—”

“Don’t interrupt me when I’m speaking.” His hand dropped t’is side and ’e straightened. “I know this is a tough time. But just because we get nervous doesn’t mean we can go around doing silly things.”

“But—”

“Enough. Let’s just let things lie where they are. I know what it’s like, believe me. But we can’t be rash.” He glanced through a darkened window. Somehow, without their notice, the interior’d sunk into gloom and each’d’ve only’ve barely discerned t’other. “We’d better be getting home. Your mother will be wondering what happened to us.”

Since there'dn't've been sidewalk yet, there'd've been no street-lamps. Skeletal houses'd've shone with new-risen moonlight while tarpaulin cloaks'd've fluttered round their shoulders. Headlight beams settled over bulldozed earth at road's end, where one day a new intersection might lay. They u-turned and light passed over naked windows where tarps rustled and'd've made't seem as'f momentarily some skeletal inhabitant of a skeletal house'd brushed'em aside t'peek out.

Eyes glinted atop stoops.

"Cats," Nathaniel said, seemingly t'mself.

"What?"

The necessity for silence between'em seemed t've somehow broken. And Nathaniel said, "Why are there so many cats?"

But by the time'is father leaned over and looked through the rolled-down window, they'd've all gone.

“Yuns think,” Kayla said. “Yuns think since ghosts’d haunt a place after’t’s built, they’d haunt a place before’t’s built?”

on the porch and toward the door. "But take him over and come straight back. You need to get in bed. There will be plenty to do tomorrow and we'll have to get up early."

"Yes, sir." Nathaniel turned and went down the steps. Odin's tail dangled over his elbow. His father watched him cross the street, but turned as Nathaniel opened the opposite gate, then he went on.

"Is that you, dear?"

Mr Walcott slipped free of his jacket as he walked toward the living room.

"What did he think of the new houses?" She laid her cross-stitch hoop on her lap and looked up, threaded needle still in hand.

He folded his jacket over his arm. "I think he liked it." He rubbed an eye. "It's hard to tell sometimes."

"Dear, I think you're still tired."

He nodded. "I think I'll go on up to bed."

"So you do think he liked it?" She raised the cross-stitch hoop and counted off, using the needle as a pointer.

"You already asked me that."

"Well," she said without glancing away from her work. "I just wanted to make sure."

He shook his head. "Fine, I guess. It's just..."

"Just what?" She stopped and looked up. A lamp and its bulb-shaped, green-glass shade might've tinted one side of her face.

"He's just a little nervous, I think, is all. He'll come around."

"Well, you know what they say."

He nodded. "I think I'll turn in." He massaged his neck as he pivoted. "Make sure Nathaniel goes right up to bed when he gets back. We'll be getting an early start in the morning."

She looked up. "Where is he?"

"The neighbor's cat was on the porch. So he took it home. Mean little thing." He shook his head as he massaged his shoulder. "I have to say, I've never seen what most people see in them."

"Whose cat was it?"

"Mrs Stowe's, I believe he said." He paused in the doorway and loosened his tie. "Anyway, he should be back shortly. Goodnight."

He didn't wait for her reciprocation, just turned down the hall and started upstairs. And she sat there with her cross-stitch hoop on her lap

till a door shut overhead. Then she put'er work on the table and went into the front hall and pulled the curtain aside. But all she'd've been able t'see'd've been blued, streetlamp-lit night...and perhaps a few late fireflies.

“’ow come yuh’dn’t see fireflies anymore?” Genie said.

“Cause, we ain’t got no grass, idiot.”

“But they’ve t’still b’somewhere, don’t they?”

Rose set a plate of ham and eggs on the counter. "There you go," she said. "Enjoy." She gathered the things left on the counter'n front of the newly emptied seat beside'm. Empty mugs and stacked plates piled with cutlery'n-hand, she turned toward the kitchen and thrust'er hip against the swingdoor.

"Morning, Joe." An old man climbed onto the next stool.

Joe nodded, a slice of egg already'n'is mouth.

And as the swingdoor opened, again, the old man raised a finger. "Coffee, please, Rose."

"Have it in just a minute." And she walked round the counter and t'a far booth, a plate'n each hand and a third balanced on'er forearm, pinched'n'er elbow.

"So, Joe," the old man said as'e pulled a folded newspaper from beneath'is arm and spread't across the counter. "What's all this about having a man locked up in the grocer's basement?"

Coreman looked over, knife'n one hand, fork'n t'other. "What?"

"Oh, hush," Rose said as she rounded the counter and turned and lifted the coffee pot from the warming burner and snatched a mug from the rack. "Don't go bothering him with silly gossip when he hasn't even finished his breakfast yet."

The old man looked up from'is paper. "I just want to know what it's all about is all."

By then Coreman'd've managed t'swallow. "Where did you hear that?" He glanced at the fresh-smelling newsprint. "Not in the paper."

"Lord, no," Rose said. "It's just somebody's sick idea of a joke,

you know.” And she looked at the old man. “And you should be ashamed of yourself for repeating it.”

“I just want to know what it’s all about.”

“Well, I for one,” Rose said. “I—You want some more coffee, Joe?—I for one don’t understand a sensible man like yourself being taken in by such gossip. I mean, I can see those truckers sitting on the train for hours and hours needing something to fill the time. But you?”

“I just wanted to know what it’s all about.” The old man absently slurped his coffee. “How else am I supposed to know if I don’t ask?”

“You should take it for granted that some stuff is just too ridiculous to be real,” Rose said. “Tell him, Joe.”

But Coreman’d already slid from his stool and lifted his cap from the counter and dug into his pocket. “Sorry,” he said. “Don’t have the time. Got a lot of things to get done this morning.”

“But you haven’t even finished your plate.”

“Not as hungry this morning, I guess. But thanks.”

He’dn’t seem to notice her looking over his shoulder, through the large front windows, into the parking lot. “Joe,” she said, and he stopped, coins in hand, and looked up. “Isn’t that your patrol car, just pulled in?” His head cocked. But he turned.

Morning light glinted off chrome as Coreman stepped outside. And Charlie Varney pulled himself up out of the driver’s seat and rested his forearm on the door. “Thought you’d be here.” His long beard’d’ve flowed down over the door and moved when he talked, as if he were gonna use it as a polishing rag, or to scour off paint. “Good as new.” Varney stepped away and slammed the door. “Sorry it took so long. Old shaft was cracked but good. Pulled your points while we were at it. It was coming up time for them anyway.” He walked around and touched the hood. “Billy did a nice job on this. Regular artist. Might be near as good with a ballpeen as I used to be.” Varney slipped his hands into his coveralls as he looked down. “You et or just coming in?” And after a moment, he added, “You okay?”

“Hm?” Coreman looked up. “Yeah,” he said. “Fine.”

“Changed out your tires, too,” Varney said as he passed him and walked up the ramp to the diner. “Gotta do em all at once. More balanced that way.”

Coreman'd walked over t'the driver side, but'dn't opened the door, as Varney entered the diner. And as'f t've an excusen't to, he called, "What about the other door?"

Varney held the door, looked back through the open doorway. "Huh!"

"The passenger door," Coreman called. "You used to have to slam it to get it to latch properly."

Varney shrugged. "Nobody told me bout that." The diner door slammed behind'm.

After a few moments, Coreman touched a chrome-plated handle. Finally, when'e'd climbed'n, it must've smelled something like home after yuh come'n from being away for a long time. Without having turned over the engine, he put'is hands on the wheel. Sooner or later, he'd've'd t'push the ignition. Maybe'e even sat there long enough for a few t'turn'n their booths and look out and wonder what was going on.

His grandmother'd yetn't emerged from the kitchen with either bacon or oatmeal when'e'd entered, so only an egg tray and empty plates sat between'em.

"I hope you're ready," his father said. "We've got a lot to do today."

"I guess."

"Yes," his mother said. "Of course, if you're too tired, you shouldn't overexert yourself."

His grandmother pushed through the kitchen door with a serving plate'n each hand and leaned over the table. "There we go." Nathaniel started t'rise. "No," she said. "I can get it. You sit." And she tugged back a chair beside'm.

After'e led the invocation, his father leaned forward t'grab the server and brought two fried eggs t'is plate. "What's this about being tired?"

"Oh, it's nothing, dear," his wife said. "I just wanted to make sure our son got enough sleep last night is all."

"Why shouldn't he have?"

Nathaniel moved a small bowl from the nearby stack and spooned oatmeal into't.

"He was out a little bit late."

His father ran a knife through an egg and yolk spilled over china. "I thought I told you to come back and go to bed as soon as you took that cat back across the street."

"I did."

"Cat?" his grandmother said.

"Yes," his mother said. "Apparently, Mrs Stowe's cat was on our

front porch last night and was rather stubborn about wanting to go home. I guess it was a good thing then that our Nathaniel was willing to make the effort to take him back.” She served’erself an egg, cut into’t with’er fork. “Though, I have to admit it took you a bit longer than I would’ve thought it should.”

His father cast a sidelong glance as’e brought an egg slice t’is mouth. “How long were you over there?”

“Just a few minutes,” Nathaniel said. He looked down at’is oatmeal as’e ate. “She wanted to thank me for finding Odin. He’d gone missing earlier in the afternoon and she’d been worried.”

“Thank you?” His father paused, fork pierced into another egg slice. “How is that?”

“Mrs Peterson had given her a bag of cookies and some lemonade to keep from going bad and she told me to have some because there was more than she could eat.”

“Mmmmmm” His grandmother nodded as she swallowed a spoonful of oatmeal. “The poor dear was trying to give things away all yesterday afternoon. I would have taken some, but we’ve already got more than enough to do with as is.” She shook’er head. “It’s a problem. It’s a problem.”

“In any regard,” his father said. “I told you to come straight home and you should have.”

“I know,” Nathaniel said. He balanced’is spoon on the empty bowl and looked up. “But it seemed inappropriate to refuse the hospitality. And I was only there for a few minutes.”

“There’s a fine line there,” his father said.

“Of course,” his mother said, “since this business with the cat isn’t likely to be a common occurrence, we shouldn’t have to worry about it further. You know what they say.” She reached across the table. “Coffee, dear?”

“Please.” He lifted’is cup and saucer. “The first order of business,” he said, “is to go down to Smyth’s and see about a new set of clothes.”

“About that,” his wife said. “I thought I would go down with you this morning. That way we could go ahead and see about the wedding suit. If that’s alright, of course.”

“Alright with me. But I thought you were going to wait until later in the week.”

“Well, I thought it would be good to go ahead and get things done while we can. Don’t you agree, dear? You know what they say.”

“I suppose.” He sipped’is coffee, drew’is napkin from’is lap and touched’is mustache. “I have a few calls to make. But we should be able to leave after that. Alright with you?”

“Perfectly, dear.” She looked across at Nathaniel and smiled. “You know what they say. You have to make every moment count.”

Two or three women'd convened near the apples. "Was it in the paper?"

"It will be. They've just put out a special bulletin at the moment. And they're going to put it on the radio."

"But no ceremony?"

"Well, I think I'm almost glad. Let them just get on with it and declare them all de facto graduated so everyone can feel better and we can just get on with things."

"No, I don't think people feel any better," the grocer said. He balanced a box against 'is hip and reached across a display t'place another tomato. "I just don't think they feel as bad." And'e shifted t'keep the crate's edge from cutting into 'is side. He looked up as someone rounded the display. "Good morning, Catherine. Anything I can help you find?" Nearby, a small old woman lifted a cucumber from a bin and scrutinized the withered thing as'f nothing else'n the world mattered. And the women convened near the apples glanced up, nodded politely and dispersed among other produce.

"No, thank you," Catherine said. The wire basket pressed against'er thigh. "I think I have everything."

"Well, if there's anything you think you might..." He glanced over 'is shoulder and toward the cash register. "Where is that—Ralph. Ralph."

A boy emerged from behind the curtains'n back. "Yeah."

"Why aren't you at the register?"

"The truck was just coming in and—"

"Let Tony worry about that. We've got people here waiting to get on with their day while you lollygag around. So go on." After the boy passed'm, the grocer shook 'is head and turned, again, toward the tomato display. "Sorry about that. I don't know what gets into him

sometimes. I swear he'd spend all day talking with some truck driver if you'd let him."

"No trouble at all," Catherine said.

The small old woman looked up from the cucumber. "It's just a phase, you know. They get seduced by the bright lights and they think all of the world's New York and Broadway and the only thing in California is Hollywood or Los Angeles," she said. And she turned toward the tomato display wide eyed and, cucumber still'n-hand, shuffled toward'em. "You know," she said. "Those're real tomatoes."

"Um." The grocer eased the empty crate t' the floor.

"Oh, thank the Lord." Mrs Peterson pushed through the doorway and stood there huffing. She stumbled between produce, legs seemingly shaky. "Grandmother." And she edged by Catherine and took the old woman's arm. "What're you doing out here?"

"I'm doing some shopping. What am I supposed to be doing? Such questions. And you, young lady. Why aren't you in school?"

Mrs Peterson tugged the old woman's arm, tugged the cucumber from'er hand. "We need to go home. Bill is outside with the car." She looked at the grocer and said'n a low voice, "Sorry about this."

The grocer shook'is head as they both went out. "Shame when they go like that." He shook'is head again and bent and lifted the empty crate. "Reminds me of my own great grandmother. Such a sad thing." He shook'is head. "Well, Ralph should sort you out. If you need anything—"

"I'll let you know," Catherine said. She watched through what of the window wasn't covered with sales fliers and advertisements, as a car pulled from the curb, the small old woman'n the back seat hardly visible.

"Do you want this double bagged?"

She glanced round at Ralph. "Just put it in with the rest. I'm sure it'll be fine."

He nodded and set the oil bottle'n the paper bag with care. "Yes, mam. Do you need any help with this?"

The corner of'er mouth ticked into a part-formed grin. "Are you saying I'm old and can't handle it?"

"I..." He'd half-pushed the bag across the counter, but stopped, and'is hands crinkled thick, brown paper. "No, I—"

"Thank you, Ralph." And she lifted the bag from 'is grip, moved toward the door, pushed 't open and was halfway out when she turned. "Ralph." He looked up. "Don't take things so seriously." She smiled. He 'dn't. But 'e nodded. And she went out and started down the sidewalk with the brown paper bag held against 'er stomach.

Cars packed along the curb and others paused 'n the street t'disgorge pedestrians. It must've seemed as'f everyone'd somehow not-consciously agreed t'reimburse lost time. And with so many people she'd've'd any number of encounters and exchanges so't'd've been no surprise'f she met absolutely anyone at all.

A woman 'n an azure dress and turned-down white hat stood outside a shop door and adjusted one of 'er white gloves as'er handbag dangled from the crook of 'er arm.

Catherine slowed, stopped and smiled. "Good morning, Evelyn." Sunlight struck 'er chin as she looked up.

"That should be the last of it," Mr Walcott said as'e stepped out, an oblong box under one arm as'e held the door with 'is other. Nathaniel followed'm with a stack of three or more and a shoebox on top that blocked 'is view. "Watch it." His father dropped 'is hand onto Nathaniel's shoulder before'e stepped into Catherine.

Nathaniel canted 'is head aside the boxes. "Sorry," he said.

Catherine smiled. "No harm." And she nodded toward Mr Walcott. "I was just saying good morning to your wife."

"Yes," Mrs Walcott said. She adjusted 'er handbag. "I guess everyone's out this morning."

Nathaniel passed between the two women and stepped off the curb. He glanced at both as'e set the boxes among the rest 'n the trunk.

"Well," Catherine said. "It looks like you've gotten a little bit of everything."

"Just the necessities," Mrs Walcott said. "You know, with the wedding coming up and all. And yourself?"

"Oh," Catherine said. "Just the usual for me, I'm afraid. Cat food. Vegetable oil. The like. You wouldn't believe the number of uses one can find for vegetable oil."

"Yes, well..." Mrs Walcott faintly smiled. "I'm sure that just means you've been able to avoid some of the stress some of us have to endure."

"I'm sure," Catherine said. "Oh, by the way, thank you for having Nathaniel bring Odin over. I'm sure he told you he'd gotten away from me earlier in the afternoon."

"Glad he could be of help," Mr Walcott said. And'e offered the box under'is arm so Nathaniel'd put't'n the trunk.

"Nathaniel," his mother said, and she cast a quick side-glance at'm as'e reached up t'close the trunk. "Tuck in your shirt." And she turned, again, toward Catherine. "Yes. Though, we were disappointed it took him so long to do such a simple task."

"My fault, I'm afraid. I insisted he take something in exchange for his trouble."

"Well," Mrs Walcott said. "After all, it wasn't that much trouble. But I'm sure it won't happen again."

Catherine smiled. "I'm sure it won't." And she glanced toward Mr Walcott. "Incidentally, I was hoping Nathaniel could take care of my lawn one more time this year. I'm afraid it'll be the end of this week or the next before I can get somebody new. And I don't want it to get too high. It always looks so much for the worse when you try to mow it that way."

Mr Walcott nodded. "I'm sure he can make time one day soon. Wouldn't you say, Nathaniel?"

Nathaniel stepped back onto the curb, put'is hands'n'is pockets, nodded. "I can do it this evening if you want."

"Dear," Mrs Walcott said, "I'm afraid we will probably need your help down at the park, getting the decorations up and all of that. And it will probably take all evening, I'm afraid."

"No matter," Catherine said. "It can wait a few days. In fact, I'll probably see you both down there this evening, myself."

"Yes, well—"

"But listen to me going on," Catherine said. "I'm sure you're all busy. Don't let me hold you up."

"Yes," Mrs Walcott said. "There're only so many hours in the day, as they say."

Catherine smiled and nodded. "I hope to see you later then." And she passed, brown paper bag still against'er stomach, and left'em t'climb into their car.

"Maybe," Mrs Walcott said toward the back seat as they pulled

into the street. "Maybe you should go with your father today. You could show him around the office, dear."

"I thought you two were going down to help at the park."

"Oh, I'm sure we won't need him that much. There will probably be plenty of boys there to help out. Besides, I think it would do him good to go down to the office with you."

"It's not really a good day." He hand-over-handed the wheel as they came t'the intersection. "I spoke to Brian on the phone this morning and they want me to have a meeting with the council at noon."

"Well, he can go with you. It would be a good learning experience."

"I can't. It's a private meeting."

"What in the world for?"

"Brian wouldn't say."

"Well, I'm sure you can find something he needs to do."

"I don't see why he can't go down and help at the park."

"I just want to make his time as useful as possible," she said.

"I guess," her husband said, "you'll just have to figure that out. I've only just got time to drop the two of you and get back over to the office and pick up a few things and get to the meeting."

"Don't worry, dear," she said. "I'm sure we'll figure something productive out—"—She glanced over'er shoulder—"won't we?"

A faint breeze carried the scent of fresh-cut grass. The sun hung above an orange-tinged horizon and house shadows laid their peaks acenter the road. She swung'er dis-clasped handbag as she walked, a brochure jutting from't, which flapped against'er dress as she ascended the front steps. The rattle and tink of cutlery and glassware and china emanated from down the hall. She put'er handbag on'ts usual peg, but extracted the bulletin and carried't down the hall, turned and went into the living room and laid't on the coffee table.

"Oh," grandmother Walcott said from behind'er. "I thought that was you." She stood'n the doorway and dried'er hands on'er apron. "How did the cleaning up go?"

"Very well," Mrs Walcott said. "Although I'm afraid not very much turned out to be salvageable."

"Such a shame."

"Such a mess. It took hours to supervise gathering all those little bits of paper out of the bushes and the trees. But you know what they say. What has to be done has to be done."

"Yes," grandmother Walcott said. She glanced at the coffee table. "What is that?"

"Oh, Mrs Pearman was handing out bulletins to remind everyone to listen to the reverend tonight on the radio."

"That's good," grandmother Walcott said. "I have to admit I'd

already forgotten about it.” She shook’er head. “I just don’t know about myself sometimes. Sometimes I think it won’t be long before you and Harold have to move me over to Oak Street.”

“Well, I’m sure there will be a while before that happens,” Mrs Walcott said. “You know what they say about not crossing bridges.” She tugged’er glove. “Where’s Nathaniel?”

“Oh. We finished cleaning up all those old jars and canning rings and put them down in the cellar. So he went across the street to mow Catherine’s yard.”

“What?” She clutched one glove’n t’other. “When? Why did you let him do that?”

“I didn’t see any reason not to.”

But Mrs Walcott’d already turned and stepped by’er mother’n-law and into the hallway. “I didn’t see him when I came in.” At the door, she tugged a curtain aside. “And he’s not out there now.”

“He was earlier when I went to sweep off the front porch. He’s probably working in the back yard. Why? What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” She opened the door, took’er hat from’ts peg.

“You’re going out?”

“I thought I would go across the street a minute or two.” She worked’er glove back on. “Have the Prescotts called yet?”

“Yes. But they said they might be a little late. Something to do with the bank. I—”

“That sounds good,” Mrs Walcott said. “They can stay the evening and listen to the program here. That’ll work out fine.” And she perhaps nodded t’erself as she stepped onto the porch and’er thick heels clonked down the front steps.

Everything remained quiet as she pushed through the gate and started up Catherine’s walk. And remained so till she knocked. And remained so till she knocked again. She opened the screendoor and knocked on the inner door. Silence. She knocked again, waited. Silence. She stepped back, closed the screendoor. And she slowly descended the steps, stopped on the path, turned and struck off’t and walked through fresh-mowed grass, round the house. The mower sat beside the kitchen stoop.

She looked up when the screendoor opened. Nathaniel stepped out onto the stoop.

"What are you doing?"

Nathaniel stepped down. "Finishing the mowing."

"I thought I told you to help your grandmother."

"She didn't have anything else for me to do. And she said it would be alright."

He stood there, clothes sweat-damp, tinged with orange-red, pants cuffs and sneaker soles stained green.

"And was there grass in the kitchen as well?"

"That," Catherine said through the screendoor, then pushed't open, "would be ridiculous."

But Mrs Walcott concentrated on Nathaniel. "Then what were you doing inside?"

"I," Catherine said, "offered him something to drink. It's been a hot day and he's been working hard. So I figured he needed it. And besides, we wouldn't want him to get sick, would we?"

"You could have just gone back over to the house," his mother said.

"The faucet here works just as well," Catherine said.

"You," his mother said, "should go home and get cleaned up. We'll be having company in not too long." Nathaniel nodded and walked toward the mower. "And do tuck in your shirt," she said. "Just because you're working doesn't mean you should be slovenly." Then, after'e'd paused t'stuff'is shirt into'is pants: "Where's your belt?"

"I..." He glanced down at'is pants. "I left it at home. I didn't want it to get dirty working," he said. "Besides, my pants fit well enough without it."

"That's not the point," his mother said. She motioned. "Since you're done, just take the mower back to the garage. And go and get cleaned up"

He nodded and tilted the mower on'ts rear wheels and turned't and't squeak-squeak-squeaked as'e pushed't. And'e'dn't look up as'e passed'is mother, nor glance back before'e turned the corner. The squeak-squeak-squeak faded toward the street.

Finally, Mrs Walcott looked at Catherine. Her arms folded under'er chest so'er white gloves touched'er elbows.

"I guess I should thank you for letting him come over," Catherine said.

"Of course," Mrs Walcott said. "He won't be able to do it anymore.

He's going to be very busy. But I'm sure you'll manage to find someone else to take over."

"It's really too bad, though. He's done such a good job on everything so far."

"Things," Mrs Walcott said, "change, as they say."

"Yes. They do."

"I had figured we would have seen you down at the park this afternoon. Change your mind?"

"Yes," Catherine said. "I got home with the groceries and, you know how it is, one thing led to another, and I ended up busy all afternoon. I hope everything came off well."

"Fine," Mrs Walcott said. She turned and stepped toward the corner. "This," she said, "will be the last time."

"I thought we already discussed that."

"Really?" Mrs Walcott said. "What *are* we discussing?"

"You'll have to tell me."

"Good afternoon, Catherine."

"Evelyn."

After Mrs Walcott'd gone, Catherine looked through the mesh-wire at the fresh-mowed lawn. She reached behind'er self and fastened the last few buttons'n back of'er dress. Barefoot, she turned and walked toward the counter and re-capped the oil bottle and set't up'n a cabinet.

"So you start tomorrow," Mrs Prescott said t'Nathaniel. She looked over at where'e sat on the loveseat with Regina.

"Yes," his mother said. "He's all ready to go, isn't that right, Harold?"

His father nodded.

"What is it, dear? You've been absent all evening."

"Have I?"

She looked at'm.

"Sorry," he said.

"How did your meeting go today, dear? You never did say."

"It was fine."

"Did you see Councilman Reedland?"

"Hm?" Mr Walcott nodded. "Um, yes... He came in."

"I thought he was supposed to be in bed," Mrs Prescott said.

"The poor man," grandmother Walcott said, without looking up from'er knitting, "is tired I'm sure. He should rest."

"Anyway," Mrs Walcott said. "I'm sure you'll get him settled in nicely down at the office."

"Yes..." Mr Walcott seemed t'catch'mself drifting away. He looked back at the rest of the room. "Yes, I must admit the help will be appreciated. Though, I'm afraid I won't be able to be...very hands-on tomorrow. But Carol and Ellie should get him settled in nicely."

"Something brewing, Harry?" Mr Prescott adjusted one leg over t'other and rooted'n'is jacket pocket.

As Mr Prescott prepared'is pipe, Mrs Walcott glanced toward'er husband. Finally, she said, "The matches, dear."

He glanced up, nodded t'mself after a moment and stood and got

the container off the mantel. Mr Prescott struck one and held't t'is pipe. "Trouble down at the office?"

"No..." Mr Walcott shook'is head absently. "Just a bit...a surprising situation. An unexpected shortfall in expectation. You know how it goes."

"Quite," he said round'is pipe stem. But'e removed't t'speak further. "The last few days grandfather has been—"

From the hall, the grandfather clock wrrrrrrng'd and clk clk clk clk'd as't hit the hour and geared'ts chimes. And somber tones resounded from'ts oaken bowels.

Grandmother Walcott looked up, knitting needles poised. "Isn't it time for that program?" She glanced sidewise at the mantle clock.

"Yes, dear," Mrs Walcott said, and leaned across t'touch'er husband's forearm. "Turn on the radio."

He looked up at'er, blinked. But nodded and rose and crossed the room and opened the small cabinet there. The speaker popped when'e turned the knob and the indicator face lit a paper chart glued under the dial. Faint shshshshshsh noise inflated from behind a fabric-covered speaker grill as the tubes warmed while'e recrossed the room and took'is chair. Seemingly instinctively, all but'e and grandmother Walcott looked toward the yellow-lit indicator as shshshshshsh noise rushed into the room. Somewhere beneath't, a tinny voice warbled almost indiscernible. Then, without way of telling when't'd happened, the two flipped, and the shshshshshshsh noise faded t'a faint background hum. "...ladies and gentlemen. First let me thank everyone who has taken time to listen. I hope you are as eager as I to go on. So let us open with a prayer and begin..."

“I—”

“Shhhhh,” Genie said. “I’ike’ow she does this part.”

Azure and cobalt geometrics mated with opposing shadows. Coreman pulled the patrol car away from the curb. He'd've flicked-off the headlights earlier and'd've left'em off as'e drove. He glanced at the rearview mirror. Zeb wriggled, tried t'kick the door, yelled something behind's gag.

"Mind if I turn on the radio?" the man'n the front passenger seat said.

"Why?" Coreman kept's eyes fixed on the road.

"I'd hoped to hear the reverend's program tonight. Don't you remember?"

"Fine," Coreman said. He paused at the intersection and glanced down both blue-tinted streets. "Just don't turn it up too loud."

A click. And a warm yellow glow lit between the front seats.

"... problem of generation. The Book tells us little, directly, of the creation outside the realm of man. The races that rose and fell in the physical universe before that time can be likened to preparatory forces, like wind or water, that carve out the landscape in the image the Lord has set out to show men. But from whence do these forces arise? We must traverse through two sections before we encounter any reference to that which lay outside of the Rocket. In section three, part two, subsection two, it reads—this is after the Lord has commanded Ohme to travel upward through the Rocket on a pilgrimage: 'And lo Ohme the servant of the Lord descended and bore with him the image. And he held it before his family and spoke unto them. And he said, this is the map of those things which the Lord had heard the first man, Adam, call stars. Be it a sign unto you and a covenant that the promise of the Lord be fulfilled and that this shall be proof of thy kingdom

to come. And the family of Ohme heard this and were afraid.' We need not," the voice from the radio continued, "necessarily be told that the Lord created these stars, because all creation must *ultimately* originate from him. What I want to speak of are, what I will call, secondary causes. We are familiar with the concept, even if we do not recognize it at first. Any housewife who makes dinner for her family knows of a type of creation. So it is possible for a type of creation to take place within creation. But this is mere rearrangement. While it is from the domain of the Lord which originates true creation, creation from nothingness..."

"Can't find a fucking baseball game or something?" Zeb said. The spit-covered gag rested against his chin where he'd worked it out.

"Be quiet back there."

"Or at least some fucking rock'n'roll—"

"Be quiet."

"Fuck you, fucker."

"I said be quiet back there."

"...consider nothingness, and consider what I've said before. Nothingness, of course, is a requisite of creation. And we know that something can—*must*—come from nothingness, obviously, or we should not be here otherwise. But here is the important question I want you to consider—can something else come from nothingness? If it can once, then surely it can again. Hold that thought in your mind a moment." Hiss-static overpowered a short silence. "I want to speak to you a moment on something I'm sure many of you are aware of. Recently, there have been many mysterious happenings. Things have been damaged. Gone missing. And this has prompted many to lock and bar their doors and windows. And it comes to my attention that this...man has been apprehended. He is held right now by our town police—"

"Turn that up," Coreman said.

"...but from whence does this man come? And why should he do these things that damage our community? Why should he make us afraid in the very land the Lord granted our forebearers? More broadly we might ask, why do bad things happen at all? If the Lord is loving, why does he allow these things to come to pass over us? Let us take up The Book again. Section one, this time, sub-section three

of—excuse me—in part one. Let us skip to the end of this subsection. ‘So the Lord saw it was right and said from this day ye Ebonn shall be called Tameril, for it is your father’s son which hath struggled with the fearful and triumphed.’ Remember—”

“We’re here,” Coreman said. He flicked-on the headlights and illuminated yetn’t wired lampposts.

She stood by the radio. The only light's dial.

"... here we have the evidence—how someone can work for the Lord's plan but yet how it might appear as the opposite. That is the crucial point. And there are consequences for these actions. Contrary to what we might naturally think, deviation—though it must be accounted for in the Lord's plans overall—would result in an imbalance. And as we have learned before, you will remember, the potential for this imbalance must exist if free will is to exist. We feel it is there. And for us to feel it there and it not be would be cruelty. And the Lord could not commit that. This imbalance must therefore be corrected in the remainder of creation at some other time. But either the deviation must've been accounted for prior, in which case the whole would balance itself, and therefore we would be tempted to argue, have been installed by God. But this cannot be. God would not make these things. So therefore the only conclusion we can reach is that something in addition must be generated. Here we see how it is possible to bring forth creation from the void, the counterbalance against the deviation. So we must ask ourselves what we might do, even if unintentionally, to deviate from the Lord's pl—"

She clicked't off and light and noise faded t'static, then nothingness.

She walked through darkness toward'er bedroom, reached behind'erself and dis-buttoned'er dress.

“What does he mean by...deviation?” Mary-Celleste sat forward.

“Sssshh.” Her mother raised a finger.

“...no reason to think this deviation necessary. If the deviation were not to exist, we must reason, then its following correction must never be applied. There is a natural order to things. People are born. They are to grow. They are to marry. They are to raise children. The Lord gives us these patterns. If they are ignored, what can follow but disaster? What can follow but pain? What can follow but, inevitably, destruction? Therefore...”

Mrs Walcott nodded.

“... and does this not explain our recent predicaments? We have been struck where we are most vulnerable. It is our young people who are in the gravest danger. And it is they who when corrupted will corrupt those in the future in the same way. And creation must counterbalance these forces. This is what we must guard against.” The grandfather clock wrrrrrrng’d and clk clk clk clk’d’n anticipation of the hour. “Everyone, I know it’s late. And I want to thank you for having been here. We still have so much more that we need to discuss. But we must rest and contemplate—as Nebussa said to Jenny ‘in our most deepest heart of hearts’—these mysteries. So let us now pray...”

Static reigned after the station announcer signed off for the night. Mr Walcott rose and clicked-off the radio. And the lack of shshshshshsh noise lingered a moment longer.

"Well," Mrs Prescott said.

"Yes." Mr Prescott touched 'is pipe-stem t'is teeth. "What did you think, Harry?"

Mr Walcott shook 'is head.

"Well," Mrs Walcott said. "I for one think he's right." And she nodded. "I've always felt there were these... *wrong* things."

"What do you mean?" Regina said.

But Mrs Walcott shook 'er head.

"Well, ahmmmm." Mr Prescott leaned forward and tamped 'is pipe bowl into the dish on the coffee table. "I don't know about everyone else, but I think I'm beat. And it's getting pretty late."

"Yes," Mrs Prescott said. "And, Regina, it is past your bedtime." "Mother."

Mr Prescott stood and adjusted 'is jacket. "Really a fine dinner," he said, and took Mrs Walcott's hand.

"Yes," his wife said. "You will have to have dinner with us tomorrow night." She rose. "Regina, will you please get my bag." Regina smoothed 'er skirt and rose. Nathaniel rose, too, as they filtered into the hall. And 'e watched from the living room doorway as 'is mother and Mrs Prescott spoke 'n low voices. Mrs Prescott nodded. "Maybe. We'll see."

"Harriette," her husband said from the porch.

"Coming, dear." And she nodded again and touched Mrs Walcott's arm and looked over t'other woman's shoulder at Nathaniel. "Good evening, Nathaniel." And 'e nodded 'n reply.

"Harriette."

"Coming."

Mr Walcott closed the door as the Prescott's taillights disappeared into azure-illuminated night. He glanced at the golden-faced grandfather clock. Amidst night, its constant tick throbbed, the house's heartbeat.

“Metaphors and similes,” Li said.

“As’f yuh know what either those mean,” Ambeth said.

“Yuh bet.”

“With yuhr luck, I’d always bet gainst.”

Few businesses'd've been large enough or important enough t'warrant two secretaries. And one, Carol, pointed round that room where filing cabinets lined three walls, surrounded a large oaken table where a map'd been rolled out and held at the four corners by a coffee mug turned pencil holder, a stack of folders, a round glass paperweight with a bronze cat inside and a pair of typewriter spools. A small sheet-metal typewriter desk'd been pushed beside a wood desk along the fourth wall and pinched the wall clock's second tail against the wainscoting and blocked the outlet.

"These are for everything in progress. Then as projects are completed, they're moved over to the cabinets on that wall. And over here—potential projects, things that may or may not get moved into the in-progress category."

Nathaniel nodded absently. "And where do they go if they never get promoted to in-progress?"

"Oh. Nowhere. They go down to the incinerator."

She turned and motioned over the rolled-out map. "Each stage is marked with a shape on each plot. First there's a triangle. Then that's inscribed by a square. And finally a circle."

"One word of advice," she said. "When you start going in and out of the files alot, stuff your tie between your shirt buttons. Otherwise you'll get in a hurry and get strangled."

He nodded.

Ellen appeared'n the doorway, a stack of paper and manila folders'n both'er hands. She set'em on the desk atop the map and pulled'er notepad from'er skirt pocket and'er pencil from behind'er ear. "Morning, Nathaniel." She scribbled on the pad, tore off a sheet.

"Alright, everything on this plot's supposed to be put on hold." Carol took't, glanced at't, handed't t'Nathaniel.

"Why don't you practice looking this up. It's all alphabetical and subdivided."

"And—" Ellen said as'e turned away, slip'n-hand.

"It'll be in the in-progress," Carol said over'er shoulder.

"That has to be done first thing."

"Alright, put it on the spike."

"No, he says it *has* to be done first thing."

"Right now?"

"That's what he says."

"What for?"

"How am I supposed to know? That's just what he said to do."

Carol stepped toward the desk and the phone. And after she'd finished, Ellen stood over the desk, pad still'n-hand, still scribbling. "You listen to the reverend on the radio last night?"

Carol shuffled papers and folders. "Yeah."

"Well..." Ellen leaned forward. "He sounded about half like he was ready to move onto Oak Street, don't you think?"

Carol glanced over'er shoulder at Nathaniel and saw'm bent over an extended filing cabinet drawer and she looked at Ellen and shook'er head. Ellen shrugged, scribbled.

The phone rang.

Maureen raised'er hand when Mrs Thawcraft offered'er the tray. "No. No, thank you. I don't think I could stand to eat another."

"You've only had one."

"But I couldn't stand anything else." She sipped gingerly at'er tea. "But how do you keep them so crunchy?"

Mrs Thawcraft returned the tray t'the cart and eased into'er adiron-dack and lifted'er teacup and saucer from'ts arm. "The secret," she said, "is to leave them out in the air. They keep dry that way."

"Yes," one of the ladies said. "It's also a good way to make croutons for topping a casserole. All you have to do is tear a few slices of bread and put them in a pan on the table overnight. And that's it."

"I think you're all completely avoiding the subject," Mrs Walcott said. The conservatory resounded only with whatever not-easy sounds potted plants and shifting tea spoons'd manage. "We were talking about the reverend's new ideas."

"Well..." A woman set'er tea down and drummed'er fingers against'er adirondack. "I wasn't going to say anything. But it all seems strange to me. What does he keep going on about? Things coming out of nothing? Balances and counter-balances?" She shook'er head.

Another woman sipped'er tea and looked over'er cup's gold rim. "His father never talked about these things."

"Of course he didn't," Mrs Walcott said. "The reverend's just figured these things out. That's the whole point."

"You," Mrs Thawcraft said, "seem particularly taken with them."

"Well, obviously it does explain everything, doesn't it. Everything that's been going on these past few months."

T'other ladies sipped their tea.

Another woman nodded and rose and moved toward the tea service. "The Lord works things out in his own time. If we have to go running around worrying about what we're doing wrong, then when will there ever be an end to it?"

"I must admit..." someone said. "It doesn't seem like...a very nice idea."

"No," said Mrs Thawcraft. "I can't even say I'm going to listen to any more of these programs. I just don't see much point in it."

"But," Mrs Walcott said. "He's hardly started. You haven't even given him a chance."

"She could be right."

"And just a moment ago you were saying the opposite. I declare, you're worse than a child's teeter totter."

"I—"

"Ladies." Mrs Thawcraft stood and set'er cup and saucer on the cart. She smoothed'er dress and looked round at the bloom-and-frond-enshrouded adirondacks. "Would anyone care for some more tea?"

He yawned and looked down at 'is tie as 'e walked up Mainstreet. Cars passed and 'e looked up mechanically. Someone waved. He pulled a hand from 'is pocket and waved back. A light glowed within the hardware store. He opened the screendoor and stepped inside. Catherine appeared at the end of an aisle. "What can I do—" ... "Oh."

"Dad had to take the car on...something another that was important." He let the screendoor close behind'm. "So I was walking home." His dress shoe's hard-rubber heels'd've echoed on hardwood as 'e moved toward'er.

"Don't—" But'e'd already put 'is arm round'er waist and touched'er breast through'er dress and undergarments. Her face warmed. High'n the corner, that dark ovoid frame looked down. Maybe she'd just meant t'push'm away and'e'd slipped, or'd, in the moment, hadn't remembered how tender'is jaw'd've been, or'd reacted automatically. He jerked back. His shock-wide eyes fastened on'er and she reached t'touch'm. But'e lunged toward the back door and slammed through't. "Wait." And she followed'm and the screendoor slammed behind'er. "Nathaniel, stop." He stood with'is back t'er, faced stacks of empty and broken shipping crates. "Wait." She put a hand on'is shoulder. "Turn around." But'e'dn't. "Turn around." As'e turned, her hand brushed'is face. She touched'is cheek. "Did it hurt?"

"Just...surprised me."

"I'm sorry." She still touched'is face. "It's just... If I tell you to stop, you have to stop." She put'er other hand t'is face. "Do you understand? I have to trust you." And as'e nodded, her hands slid down onto'is shoulders. "You know," she said. "You look almost as

good in a tie as you do without anything at all.” And’er hands cascaded down’is arms and touched the backs of’is hands and guided’em onto’er hips.

“So...it’s okay now?”

She nodded. And she pulled’m against’er and rested’er head on’is shoulder. She said, “Just...never in the store, okay. We can’t...do anything in there.”

“Why?”

“Because,” she said, and pulled away from’m. “Do you have to be home very soon?”

“Not for a while.”

She walked t’the screendoor, opened’t. She looked over’er shoulder. “Are you coming?” And when she wound’er way back round the counter she reached beneath’t and produced a small brown paper bag. “Here.” She stepped from behind the counter and slipped’t into’is front shirt pocket.

“What’s this?”

“In case someone asks you why you came in here.”

“But what is it?”

“Cigarettes.”

“I can’t stand to smoke.”

“Well, maybe you’re learning. Now, go on. You go out first. I’ll close up and meet you in a little bit.”

“Where?”

“At the hall.”

“But—”

“Just go.”

And she almost pushed’m through the door. The bell clattered. The screendoor slammed behind’m. He turned without looking and—

“Watch it.” Ron partways-grinned. “Wouldn’t want to stain the new suit.” His own white shirt and black tie peeked between the not-fastened first top few buttons of’is green-but-brown-spotted coveralls. A pair of leather gloves hung limp from’is back pocket. “What’re you down here for?”

“Pack of cigarettes.”

“Ha. Just don’t hurl on my bike tire again.”

“What’re you down here for?”

“Pipe wrench. Busted one earlier. Some of us have to work our way up, you know.” Ron stepped by’m and pulled-open the screendoor. “Almost makes you want to be back in school, doesn’t it?” Ron shook’is head. “Nah. See you later. Hey—” He caught the closing door and shoved’is head out. “Any inside word on when the new houses are gonna be ready?”

Nathaniel shook’is head.

“Well, some useful friend you turned out to be. See you later. We’ll flip a coin to see who has dinner at whose house first.” He let the door close.

Nathaniel stood and looked through the store window. Eventually, before Ron’d’ve noticed, Nathaniel turned away and continue down the sidewalk. The paper bag crinkled’n’is pocket.

Something deep'n the control panel popped. And the operator tuned a dial and pressed'is fingers against'is headphones.

"Listen," the station manager said. He motioned with a clipboard as'e spoke. "I know what I said. But... I just don't know about this anymore." Connelly stood with paper and books held against'is thigh. "It's just... —Jerry, do you have to do that right now? Jerry—Jerry!"

The man under the headphones glanced up, pulled'em down around'is neck. "Still getting that spike. Weird. Sometimes it spikes. Sometimes it dr—"

"Son... Why don't you take a break."

"W—"

But the station manager jerked'is head toward the door. His son mouthed *oh* and pulled off'is headphones and dropped'em onto the board. He stood, tested'is legs, crossed the narrows between the two men and loped downstairs.

"Look..." The station manager turned, again, toward the reverend. "Look, it's not that I want to do it. It's... Look, are you sure about all this? You just seem a bit... Never mind." He waved'is clipboard. "Look, Reverend—Will—let's just get down to brass tacks. Okay? The feedback we've been getting isn't...so positive. And look, I... Like I say, it's not that I don't want to. It's just... Well, it's like this—this is a business and if I don't satisfy the listener, I don't satisfy my advertisers. It's as simple as that. And I'll just be honest, Will. People... People are beginning to talk. And I... Look, how about we go back to the once-a-week format. Everybody liked that. That worked well. So—I mean, you know... We can kind of give

you tonight to wrap things up however you want. Well, we're not looking to...you know..." He waved the clipboard. "It's just...you know...everybody's tired out these last few weeks and... I'm just saying...maybe you should take it easy a little whileAlright?" He leaned toward the door as Connelly turned and went downstairs. "Alright?" But when the station manager followed, he met's son at the head of the stairs.

"Problem?"

The station manager waved's clipboard. "Just see what you can do about that thing." And'e waved the clipboard as'e walked down the room. He stopped at the booth, looked through the glass, as'f'e expected wires and apparati⁸⁷ t'conjure something'n there.

“*Wut’d’e’spect?*” Li said.

Almost everyone groaned.

“’ey, I’m jus pointin out the obvious.”

“If’t’s so obvious,” Ambeth said, “why’d yuh find need t’men-
tion’t?”

“Somebody’s to.”

Groans.

Lights blared and 'is dress shoes clopped against hardwood when 'e jumped.

"It's really a shame it didn't get to be used, isn't it?" Catherine said as she walked across the open floor toward 'm.

"I thought they cleaned everything up."

She touched the back of 'is hand. "Everyone was more worried about cleaning up everything outside before it created a mess."

A gallery, rather than a second floor, occupied the building's upper half. And paper lanterns hung from rails woven through with pastel pink and blue and yellow paper ribbons.

She lifted 'is hand t'er waist. "It's a shame to waste it." The fingers of 'er other hand interwove with 'is. "Will you dance?"

"There's no music."

"I can hum something, if you need." And she started. Gently, she got 'm t'move with'er.

"I don't—"

But she shook'er head for 'm t'b'quiet and continued t'hum and rested'er cheek on 'is shoulder. Slowly, a paper lantern world orbited'em. Everything remained so still, so calm.

Paper lanterns rustled.

"Who's in here?"

The pair, so at ease, one's motion fluid into t'other's, stiffened and separated as 'f engines fed on over-rich mixtures forced their sudden-corroded joints t'motion.

"What are you two doing in here?" Coreman's hollow footsteps echoed as 'e crossed the empty hall.

"We—"

"Were dancing," Nathaniel said. Catherine glanced at'm from the corners of'er eyes.

"Dancing?" Coreman looked from one t't'other. "Why in the world would you be in here this time of day, dancing?"

"It's...sort of embarrassing," Nathaniel said. He slipped'is hands into'is pockets. "You know I'm getting married, right? Well...I hate to admit it, but I'm a terrible dancer. And Mrs Stowe said she'd help me practice. So..."

Coreman nodded, half t'mself. "Right." He looked over'is shoulder, as'f listening for something. "Just make sure you turn the lights out when you leave." Catherine nodded. "Well, then... Okay." And'e adjusted'is cap and turned and'is footsteps echoed and paper lanterns gently stirred as a door opened and closed.

"How did you think of that?" Catherine said.

"It's what came to mind."

"Well, you know what," she said. "Something's coming to my mind too." She took'is hand. "This way."

Together, their footsteps multiplied and rebounded as they passed chairs interspersed along a wall. And before'e'd respond, she flung'm round so'is back struck a support column and she pressed against'm and pressed'm into the column. And she forced'er hand behind'is belt and tangled with'is dress shirt.

"I can't...get these clothes messed up."

"Well," she said. "If you're not wearing them, how can they get messed up?"

Pressed together, his chest's expansion-contraction resonated through'ers.

"What if somebody else comes in?"

She stepped back, took'is hand and pulled'm along the wall. They passed the door and she struck the light switch. And she pulled'm through the dark and opened the storage closet and pulled'm inside and paused there till she'd found the light chain. "You worry too much," she said'n the dark. A single bulb flickered on, lit floor-t'ceiling cleaning supplies and random junk. But't'd've been roomy enough since all the chairs'd've been dispersed outside. "Wait a minute," she said. And she nudged past'm and opened the door and squeezed through. He looked out after'er, but ducked back when

she pushed through the door with a folding chair, which she set acen-
ter the closet. She sat and crossed'er ankles. "Well," she said. "Are
you going to take off those clothes before they get messed up?"

For a moment, a passerby might've glanced through the shop window and'd've thought a dress hung midair.

"Lovely," Mrs Walcott said.

"Yes, isn't it." Mrs Prescott lifted one cuff and let't fall.

The seamstress parted the curtain that separated shop from works and carried a small cardboard box'n both'er hands. A tape measure draped'er neck and'ts metal-capped ends jangled against'er skirt. "You can bring in Regina and we'll do the live fitting tomorrow if you want."

"Wonderful. What time?"

While they talked, Mrs Walcott turned and looked over the store, past the pearlescent-pink bed jacket'n the window.

"What are you looking at?" Mrs Prescott said, and looked over t'other woman's shoulder. "Isn't that Nathaniel?"

Hands'n'is pockets, he stood on the curb by the car and talked with Mr Prescott. The seamstress crossed t'the counter as the phone rang. "Ladies shop." And the Bakelite receiver clunked as she set't on the counter. "Is your husband still outside?"

Mrs Prescott turned. "Yes. Why?"

"There's a telephone call for him. From the bank."

Mrs Prescott sighed. "They would find him *here*." She stepped toward the door and opened't. "Oswald. Telephone for you." And when'e looked at'er blankly a moment, she said, "The bank."

He excused'mself from Nathaniel and entered the shop, lifted

the receiver after the seamstress motioned'm toward the counter. "Hello." And'e stood there a moment silently looking into the distance. "Alright. I'll be there in a few minutes." He hung up the phone.

"What was all that about?" Mrs Prescott said.

He shook'is head. "Sorry," he said. "They want me down at the bank."

"You can't mean now."

"He said now."

His wife motioned t'the boxes piled on the far counter. "And how are we supposed to get all these home?"

"I guess," he said. "They'll just have to wait until later. We can pick them up the same time as the wedding dress."

"Oswald, that just won't do."

"Well, I don't see what I can do about it."

"You—"

Mrs Walcott said, "The bank's just up the street. I'm sure you won't need the car to go that little distance." She turned and glanced through the window toward where Nathaniel stood absently under the shop's awning. She crossed t'the door. "Nathaniel, come here a moment, please." And when'e appeared'n the doorway, she continued, "You've been practicing driving with your father, haven't you?" He nodded. "Well, that solves everything, doesn't it then. Nathaniel can drive us home in your car. And Ozz can walk to the bank. Simple enough."

Mr Prescott shook'is head. "I don't..."

"No, she's right." His wife nodded. "It's the perfect idea."

"I—"

"Well," his wife said. "Go on and see what's so important. I'm sure he won't be kept waiting."

Mr Prescott glanced toward Nathaniel. "You sure you can handle it?"

"Of course he can," Mrs Walcott said.

Eventually, he nodded and helped'em t'the car with the packages. When'e'd gone a ways up the street, Mrs Prescott said'n an aside t'Mrs Walcott, "Gets to him, you know. Having a daughter and all, he's never had to worry about someone else driving the car." She faintly

smiled and shook'er head as they climbed'n. "Anyway..." she said. "It's so much easier, don't you think, to get a man's suit fitted?"

Mrs Walcott nodded. "But you know, they say there's a sameness to men's clothes. Maybe that makes it go faster."

Nathaniel leaned forward and depressed the ignition switch.

"Yes," Mrs Prescott said. "I suppose that's true."

"I've said it for a long time—haven't I, Evelyn—he's just getting too old to handle the bank's finances."

"Now, dear."

"I mean it," Mrs Prescott said. "He even sleeps in the attic."

"It's a bedroom. Not an attic."

"And hardly anyone ever sees him come out."

"He goes to church."

"And how does he eat?"

"The assistant brings something up before he goes home."

"You see," Mrs Prescott said. "The man's obsessed. If you ask me, he's probably not long for Oak Street."

"Harriette." He looked up at'er, but she just looked away and continued t'dip into'er soup. Silence'd've pervaded the dining room'fn't for faint spoon clatterings.

"No," Mrs Walcott said, after a moment. "No, I know what she means. There's a natural order to things—as the reverend says—and the old generation is supposed to make room for the newer. Otherwise, how would everything end up if everyone can't get along together?"

Mr Prescott touched the corners of'is mouth with'is napkin again. "Perhaps," he said, and glanced down the table. "Perhaps we should bring the newer generation into the discussion." He returned'is napkin t'is lap. "You two are awfully quiet tonight. How was the car? Did it handle alright?"

Mrs Walcott'd t'recount t'er husband the earlier evening's events.

Mr Walcott nodded, touched'is mustache with'is napkin. "He needs a little more practice to get things set, but I—"

“Harold,” his wife said, “what’s the time?”

He glanced across at’er, dark circles beneath’is eyes.

Mr Prescott produced’is pocket watch from’is vest. “It is almost time.”

“Although,” Mrs Prescott said. “I’m not sure the younger people should listen.”

“Why not?” her husband said.

“I just don’t think it would be a good idea.”

He glanced at Mr Walcott. “What do you think, Harry?”

“I have to admit...I’ve never given it much thought.”

“I’m sure there’s nothing wrong with it,” Mrs Walcott said.

Mrs Prescott glanced toward’er, then toward Mr Prescott. “Maybe they should go for a walk together. It’s a nice evening. A little after-dinner stroll would be good for them.”

“I don’t—”

But Regina’d already stood and offered’er hand. “Come on, Nathaniel. I’d rather go outside, anyway.” He’d stood, too, by that time and when’e’dn’t extend’is hand she reached and took’t.

“Well,” Mr Prescott said. “If you’re both sure.”

Regina nodded. “Come on, Nathaniel.”

A clock chimed the hour. Mr Prescott went and opened the cabinet as t’others found their seats. “I’m afraid it’ll take a minute to warm up,” he said.

No crickets sounded from thick hedge's depths. Nor'd fireflies
fling'emselves airborne and light.

"Isn't it a nice evening?" Regina said. She held 'is arm as they passed yellow-lighted windows. "You know, I go to get my dress fitted tomorrow."

"I've seen it."

"What?" Her hand tightened on 'is arm. "I thought the groom wasn't supposed to see it before the wedding."

"Nobody else seemed to mind."

Sullen and quiet, she'dn't release 'is arm. "Have you seen the house yet?" she said, after a while. "What did it look like? Is it nice?"

"It's a house."

"Of course," she went on as easily as f'e'dn't replied. "I'm sure we'll have kids in no time at all. And we'll get a much bigger house. And you'll be promoted in not too long, of course. When you have some control in the office, of course, I'm sure you could pull a few strings and such. I bet we could have a house even nicer than your parent's. Of course, mother says you can't be too showy too fast, especially when you're in a job like—"

"We should probably be heading back."

"Not yet." She touched'er other hand t'is arm. "I don't want to listen to that stupid old program. It... Are you listening to me? Nathaniel?"

"What?"

"Are you listening to me?"

"You hear that?" he said.

"What?"

"That." He cocked'is head. "It sounds like someone talking."

"I don't hear anything. Why would somebody be out talking?"

“Why are you?”

“Y—”

But’e walked on and because she’dn’t release’is arm she’d’ve been drawn along, aswell, till she asked, “Where are we going?”

“You said you wanted to go for a walk, didn’t you?”

“You know, Nathaniel Walcott, I don’t think you have all your marbles sometimes. If I didn’t know better I’d say you were ready for Oak—”

“Don’t you hear it now?”

“I... No. Let’s go back.”

An old man rose from’is rocking chair and bent over the railing and pointed’is pipe stem at’em. “What’re you two doing out this late?”

“Oh, hush.” His wife rocked back-and-forth and fanned’erself with a folded newspaper.

“Bah,” the old man said, and stuffed’is pipe into’is mouth and clenched’is teeth as’e spoke. “Make me spend a nice quiet evening listening to this.”

A yellow-illuminated dial burned from a mahogany case set on the porch between the two rockers and a cord’d’ve run back into the house and propped open the screendoor a smidge.

“Hush. I’m trying to listen.” She motioned with the paper. “Why don’t you two come up and listen, too.”

“No, thank you, Mrs Kettle,” Regina said, and tightened’er grip on Nathaniel’s arm. “We really have to be getting back. They’ll be wondering what happened to us.”

“Save yourself,” the old man said. Streetlamps’d’ve cast’n azure the curlicue smoke column risen from’is pipe bowl.

“... be fooled...” The radio warbled.

The old woman cleared’er throat.

The old man sighed and turned and leaned over the chair and struck the radio with’is palm.

“... deviate from the path, tragedy will follow. Perhaps what we have seen until now is only the warni—”

“Let’s go,” Regina said. And she squeezed and tugged’is arm.

“Wait,” he said.

“... ntil. If we then accept this counter-balancing agent, we have

to postulate greater deviation would give rise to greater necessities of equilibrium. So some events, entities, whatever we may term them, are greater than others. Her—”

“I said I want to leave.”

“Hold it.”

“... people, they... euth... theth nthe... the

The old woman cleared'er throat.

The old man smacked the radio again, but't only settled into emitting a high-pitched hum. And'e struck't again and that hum shrank t'oblivion and the lighted dial faded.

“Now see what you've done.”

“I didn't do anything.”

“Now what're we going to do?”

Regina pulled Nathaniel down the sidewalk. And the elderly couple's exchanges faded into the late hour. “I'm sure,” she said as they retraced their route. “I'm sure we won't be like *that* when we get old.”

Nathaniel straightened and his back popped. He rubbed his neck. Folders stacked atop a cabinet shifted and he stabilized them, then bent, again, over the open drawer.

"I'm telling you," Carol said. She leaned over the desk and tried to speak low. "He's gone right off his rocker. I mean, we're talking Oak Street and the whole thing. By a mile. And—"

The intercom buzzed. "*Ellen, will you please bring in those files before you go to lunch.*" She rose and lifted a stack from her desk and disappeared. Carol passed her handbag when she returned. And they huddled and whispered as they left.

Nathaniel glanced round the empty room, turned toward the filing cabinets.

Sometime later, the door opened and Mr Walcott poked his head in. "I thought you might like to get out a little. How do you feel about lunch at the diner?"

Nathaniel glanced over his shoulder.

"Don't worry about that. You can finish it up later." His father opened the door and motioned. "There's something I want you to take a look at down in the parking lot."

He climbed off the running board and moved back along the truck, climbed onto the rigging and dropped off a coiled hose and dragged't toward a blue and rusted tanker car. But the coupling rattled after'e'd locked't and'e jerked'is bandanna from'is back pocket and disconnected the coupling and wrapped't and shoved't back'n. He turned the valve. The hose drooped with new weight.

“Watch the float,” the driver called. “It’ll come up faster than you think.”

Ron nodded.

She squinted into noon-ish sun as she opened the kitchen door.
“Are you coming in for lunch?”

His bare knees ground red soil as’e worked a trowel back-and-forth
t’scrape away the least possible dirt.

“You hear me?”

“Coming,” he called. His broad-brimmed, straw hat cast speckled
shade over’is hands as’e scraped away ground darkened where sweat
beaded from the end of’is nose.

"Can I get you some more, dear?" Regina shook'er head, lifted'er cup from'er saucer and sipped. "Anyone else?" Mrs Thawcraft said. "No?" And she returned the pot t'the cart[†] and lifted'er cup and saucer and eased back into'er adirondack.

"I just don't understand how you can feel that way," Mrs Walcott said. Her cup and saucer rested on'er adirondack's arm and she stirred't absently. "It just seems so...so obvious."

But the only responses were the clink of spoons against cups and cups against china[‡] and the faint drawing of tea into mouths.

"Really," someone said. "I don't see why you take on about it so."

"Because," Mrs Walcott said. "Don't you see it explains everything?"

In the intervening silence, Mary-Celleste leaned toward the next adirondack. "Would you mind taking her a minute. I need to step out a moment."

"I'll hold her," Regina said.

"I don't want to burden you," Mary-Celleste said. And she shifted t'better lift'er sleeping daughter from'er lap.

"I can do it. Can't I, mother?"

"It will be fine," Mrs Prescott said. She smiled. "I'll keep an eye on—"

"Mother."

Mrs Prescott continued, "It will be good practice." Several other ladies smiled and nodded.

"Well..." Mary-Celleste rose and crossed toward the Prescotts. And as Regina set'er cup and saucer down, her mother moved'em t'er

own chair. "Gently," Mary-Celleste said as she lowered'er daughter into Regina's arms. "Like that."

Mrs Prescott leaned over. "Support the head with the crook of your arm, dear. Yes, that's it."

"A natural," Mrs Coreman said. Maureen sipped tea and glanced over, as well.

"Which reminds me," Mrs Coreman said. "Was it your son who was driving yesterday?" Mrs Walcott nodded, still absently stirred'er tea. "Well," Mrs Coreman said. "Let's hope he gets a little more practice before he has to drive out to the mountain."

Mrs Walcott glanced toward'er. But Mrs Thawcraft cleared'er throat. "No," Mrs Thawcraft said as Mary-Celleste passed into the house. "No, I think it's sad when someone as young as the reverend becomes...as it were." She sipped'er tea. "Stress perhaps. They say that can do it. Though, I'm sure he'll be better soon enough. Wouldn't you say?"

Mrs Falstaff shifted'n'er seat. "I'm really not supposed to say."

"Oh?" Mrs Prescott said. And she looked up from Regina and Allison. "Really, come now. You can tell us."

Thurbor carried a couple wooden cases down the sidewalk. He huffed and set'em both on the open wiener stand, moved the top-most t'the side and opened an ice-filled compartment and filled't with pop bottles. He dug through t'other crate and lined-up ketchup, mustard and relish bottles, dis-capped'em and up-ended'em into their respective canister compartments. He pulled a cutting board from a slot below, and a knife, and grabbed an onion.

Mrs Connelly opened the front door.

"Afternoon, Emma." Doctor Falstaff removed his hat, as did his son.
"Is Will home?"

She let out something that'd've almost been a sigh. She shook her head. "No, he's...over in the church. In the office."

Doctor Falstaff nodded. "Thank you, Emma."

"I could come with you."

"No," Falstaff said. He replaced his hat. "You'd better stay here, Emma. It will be better that way."

Low sun lit shop windows and rendered the bank clock a justn't-liquid-gold orb that seemingly'd've burgeoned on melting. And'e pushed'is hat brim down over'is eyes t'avoid a headache. The bell rang as'e opened the screendoor. "I came to pick up another pack of cigarettes," he said.

She leaned forward, elbows on the counter. "You seem to go through them awfully fast." She smiled. "Are you sure you're not overdoing it?"

He approached the counter. "Guess what," he said.

"What?"

"I got something new today."

"And what's that?"

"Guess."

She shook'er head. "I can't."

"It's parked up the street," he said. "And, you know, I had a thought."

"Which was?"

"Well, I got thinking, if somebody were to lie down in the back seat and cover up with a blanket, nobody would ever know they were there. So I could take somebody about...anywhere."

"And where are we going?"

"We? I just said *somebody*. I don't remember—" She lunged over the counter, but'e jumped back. "I also got to thinking, on the new street, there's quite a lot of things out there that need looking after. And after the work crews have gone home, that would be the perfect time to go out there and have a look around and make sure everything's okay. Don't you think?"

"Very civic minded of you." She straightened and rounded the counter and threaded into the store. Hands'n'is pockets, he turned

“What? Yes—fine.” She turned toward’m. “Let’s go.”

“Now?”

“Yes—now. Let’s go right now.”

“Where?”

“It doesn’t matter. A—”

dropped and grabbed the fireman's hat and tossed't'n after. "GET IN." The driver'd've tried t'yell over fire-crackle and engine noise. But Nathaniel'd've already been running and'd've called over'is shoulder'e'd a car. "WELL, GET IT OUTA HERE—" And the truck lurched as the driver dropped't into gear.

He ran across parallel parking spaces. Heavy tanker trucks roared up the street. Standing on a running board, arm hooked'n a mirror, Ron'dn't've'd time t'wave. Cars'd've jumped the curb farther down the street. And people'd've run'n-and-outa shops with boxes and who knows what else falling from their arms. Tolley ran up, wide eyed. "Fire extinguishers—we need fire extinguishers!"

"Back of the shop." Catherine pointed through the front windows. "Third aisle." But before she'd reach the door, he'd've flung back the screen and the bell'd've rang dully as't flew through the air and tonked against the sidewalk and rolled into the street. And'e'd've burst out with fire extinguishers under each arm and run toward the newspaper offices.

A scream. Catherine whirled. Mrs Greene ran down the street. "The shop—" And Catherine tried t'yell, but acrid smoke choked'er. She looked up with watery eyes and feet pounded toward'er. Nathaniel grabbed'er arm.

"We have to go."

Flame crackle seceded t'roar. Hotter wind swirled and scattered paper scraps and ash. The sky tinged black and midnight drew down on'em. Headlights cut the haze only just as the patrol car pulled caddy-cornered across the street. Coreman climbed out, called over the roof. "All non-fire department personnel—" He waved. "Everybody get out. Now." He ducked back into the patrol car. The roof light flashed. "Everybody—" Hot-spun wind'd've made't hard t'breathe. "What's that?" Nathaniel called over the din. Distant buildings submerged beneath liquid-fast orange-red and billowed blackness. "The ground—" Catherine shouted. Odin struggled and hissed and clawed'er arms. "Everybody back—" Coreman motioned as smoke enveloped'm. "Back." They parted round the car, ran under't, swept over the hood—and Coreman dived into the seat, slammed the door. And Nathaniel grabbed Catherine's waist and threw'm and'er back so they collided with the barrels'n front of the hardware store. He

kicked, stomped, as the swarm swelled over the curb, submerged the concrete sidewalk beneath undulating black fur and ropey twisting tales. Catherine screamed. She jerked. Blood ran'er arm. And Odin leaped headlong and landed'n the street.

"Odin!" She jerked, but Nathaniel flung'is arm across'er chest. The cat rolled and batted, overrun and swallowed up the moment after'e struck pavement.

Nathaniel jerked one of the brooms from the display barrels. "Stay here." And'e lunged toward the street, beat the ground. A circle opened round'm and small furry things squealed and sprawled through the air. After only moments, his arms'd've burned and deep ragged breaths of smoke'd've stripped'is throat raw. But'e beat the ground and jerked down and lifted the prostrate cat. But one-handed the broom'd've been as good as useless. Light blared over'm. Coreman turned the patrol car, squinted through a print-tracked windshield. Blood and fur ground between asphalt and tire treads and'd've left the street peppered'n congealed morass t'other creatures tore at. They leaped onto'is pants. Nathaniel kicked, struck with the broom. He lunged for the sidewalk, stepped on one, which squealed and twisted and almost took'm down. Boom. Flash. He jerked. Peppered pea-gravel and asphalt rained nearby. "HURRY!" The screendoor propped open against'er arm. She pulled the second trigger. Birdshot opened a hole'n the surge. She yelled again, broke the breach and pulled free the spent shells so fast she burnt'er fingers and dipped into'er skirt pocket for two more. She aimed down the curb, opened a hole'n the surge'e'd jump t'and make't t'the door. And she slammed't closed behind'm. "We..."—he coughed. "Can't stay her for long..." And'e bent and hacked till't must've seemed as'f'e might retch.

"Maybe we can get out the back." She cradled Odin.

"... mrrr..."

His fur'd peeled'n places. Blood trickled from one nostril and a chunk of'is nose'd gone.

Light flashed across the front windows and refracted through the interior. The patrol car jumped onto the curb. Nathaniel shoved open the screendoor. Coreman sprawled across the seats and shoved open the passenger door. "GET IN—" Nathaniel scrambled'n last,

slammed the door. "HOLD ON—" Coreman hand-over-handed the wheel and u-turned into the street and dropped the tires off the curb. And Catherine'd've'd t'jam a hand against the dashboardn't t'smash into't.

"Mrs Greene," Catherine said as Coreman gunned the engine. "She—"

Nothing but crackle and roar. And a shopfront down the street collapsed and fire-burnt timber splintered across asphalt and cinders struck the windshield. Coreman cut the wheel hard.

Up the spiral road, round and round the hill till high enough t'look down on everything. Even at night, there'd've been light enough. Flame-reflection played over oak leaves as they shifted'n the wind. Orange-red flickered'n their eyes.

“Mommmy mommmy.” A Little girl tugged a skirt'n the dark. “Mommy. What about our house, mommy?”

Kayla cradled Quetzalcoatl'n both hands. "Yuh'dn't do somethin like that, would yuh."

"*Squeak.*"

Kayla shook'er head. "This's why I'dn't like some versions of this story," she said. "They make rats seem...awful. They're'n't really that way. Once yuh get t'know'em."

Li snorted. "Mayben't that'ne." She opened'er waterbag and offered't t'Helena, but she shook'er head, so Li swigged and wiped'er mouth with the back of'er hand. "But put a few thousand of'em together and see wut'appens." She talked as she chewed a dried mushroom. "Besides, the'ole thin's so ridiculous and overtop."

The rest groaned.

"Well, come on, do yuns thin a buncha swarmin rats'd part like that round a shotgun blast?"

Ambeth tore a mushroom'n half and chewed. "Yuh ever seen one'r used one?"

"'ow the freak'm I supposed t'do that?"

"Then yuh know as much as any the rest of us."

Li ripped another mushroom with'er teeth.

"Besides," Helena said. "I like't that way. What's't matter?"

"Anythin matter t'yuh?"

"What I like."

Li snorted, swigged water after Ambeth'd passed back the bag.

He woke into darkness. Lampblack covered the cupola's windows. And'e'd've'd t'crawl off'is bed and push open the glass t'reveal afternoon. Soot-smear'd sheets lay'n a tangle. And the same mess stared back at'm'n the bathroom mirror. A black-grey tinge'd've remained'n the tub after't'd drained.

Silence'd've permeated the house. Above the stove hung a clothes-pinned note: 'Gone to help. Something to eat in the icebox. Grandmother.'

Charwood tinged the air. Noon-time'd've appeared as evening as'e crossed the street.

He opened the far screendoor and knocked, waited. She opened't'n'er robe. "Nobody's home," he said. "They've all gone downtown." She'dn't nod, didn't speak. "Can I come in?"

Close-up'er skin'd've appeared scrubbed and raw and soap scent'd've intermixed with smolder. "I don't know if I..."

"I just want to stay awhile," he said. "We...don't have to do anything."

She took'is fresh-washed hand'n'ers, led'm inside. And they went back into the bedroom and settled onto the bed with'er back t'him and'is arm across'er waist. Sometime later, she shifted outa'er robe and'e stood and removed'is clothes and they lay down'n the same position and'e reached across'er and touched'er hand.

Light danced through heat-fractures which'd've looked as'f they'd been jeweled spiders' webs¹³. Smoke obscured stars'n twilight. Flashlight beams along broken and scattered glass'd substituted. Coreman moved along the street. Bleary eyed, he blinked too often. Glass crackled underfoot. He looked up at a blackened lamppost.

"You're tired, Joe."

He started and cast the light round. A charred awning skeleton lay contorted on the sidewalk and over barrel hoops and blackened ax and godevil and hammer heads. And as'f'e'dn't raise'is arm, his light settled t'reveal a conical section of'er skirt. "You shouldn't go in there," he said. "They don't know what's structurally sound anymore."

"Okay, Joe."

He turned, turned back, as'f balanced on a Lazy Susan¹⁴⁹. "The fire department tried to save some things. I think they're supposed to be in a box somewhere."

"I'll look."

This time, he turned and walked up the street, swallowed into gloom.

She cast'er flashlight beam near where the door'd been, where thin screen wire lay curled and mostly disintegrated. A wire milk crate'd been set nearby. Next t't someone'd lugged the soot-marred cash register. And she squatted and shone'er flashlight into the box. She withdrew the ovoid frame. With the glass gone, the age-tinged picture'd no defense. She stood and stepped off the curb. Her light played over the crumpled building, where charred walls'd folded'n as a burnt cardboard box might, where smoke dregs still curled from collapsed trusses.

And she lobbed picture and frame through shattered windows,

in amongst burnt joists, charcoal, cardboard ash, piles of nails and hammer and shovel heads, shattered jars, blackened chicken wire. And after a moment, a flame licked briefly between darken recesses and blackened timber. But that'd've been from anything.

Tanker trucks passed as she walked up the street.

"Hello?" But the figure'n the darkness'dn't move as Catherine approached. Her flashlight'd've lit the woman's soot-streaked hair and dress. "Myra." Catherine touched'er arm. The woman turned as'f on a dolly, her face puffed-wet and slack.

"... everything's gone..."

"I know," Catherine said. She took'er by'er arm. The slightest touch'd've propelled'er along. "I'm sure they'll have something for you up here," she said.

"Gone."

"I know."

Her light splattered off jagged glass as they walked. A faint glow silhouetted church and steeple.

"It's back—" The woman tugged at Catherine's grasp. "It's burning again."

But Catherine held'er. "It's just the lights. The fire's out."

Bulbs used for late-year dances'd been strung between the church and nearby power poles. Sawhorse-plywood tables littered the parking lot, scattered with thermoses and sandwiches. Mr Thawcraft carried a cooler from a station wagon. His wife must've seen'em cross the street, because she pattered across the parking lot t'take Myra's other arm. "Come on, dear." She looked up and called t'er husband, "The folding chair." And Mr Thawcraft set't by the station wagon and they eased'er into't. But she just stared at the darkness beyond the parking lot. "I think we can handle it from here," Mrs Thawcraft said.

"What can I do?"

"I don't know..." Her husband passed'er a thermos and Mrs Thawcraft took'ts cup-cap and bent towards Myra. "Here, dear. Have a sip of this."

Catherine looked over the parking lot. Mrs Falstaff approached. "Looking for someone?"

"No," Catherine said. "What's going on?"

Mrs Falstaff shook'er head. "Not much. We're giving the men a

place to rest and something to eat." She rose t'tiptoe t'see over Catherine's shoulder. "Greg. Greg, over here." He passed between'em and knelt'n front of the woman'n the folding chair. "Where's your father?"

"Couple more cases of shock. Just down the road. Mrs Richards had an attack about an hour ago."

"Oh, Lord. Is she alright?"

"She's in bed. That's about all we can do for her right now." He tried t'get Myra t'follow'is finger with'er eyes. "Anymore burns?" He looked up at'is mother, who shook'er head. "Good. But we still need to have people stay alert for smoke inhalation." He stood. "She seems alright. Dad'll probably want to give her a sedative when he gets here."

"It looks like some more men are coming in," someone said.

"We could use some help with the sandwiches and coffee," Mrs Thawcraft said. And Catherine nodded.

Overhead, moths circled bare bulbs.

He opened one eye and gripped the steering wheel. Early sun shown through the print-tracked windshield and'e raised'is hand t'shield'is eyes. He pulled down the sunvisor. The driver side door was open and'e cleared'is throat and spat. He depressed the ignition. Nothing. He pressed again. The battery'dn't've'd enough t'make the starter motor guuuurg. He lifted the mic and depressed the call button habitually and'd've listened t'the deadness and'd've tried that a couple or three times before'e re-hooked't. He leaned'is head back against the seat.

After a while, he turned and looked through the open door. "What the..." And'e waited a moment, as'f t'b'sure't was really there t'hear. He stretched'is legs and climbed out and paused. He ducked back'n over the seat and grabbed'is cap from the dashboard and slammed the door.

Up the street, bells rang.

“Can we,” Genie said. “Can we skip the next part too?”

This's just me. But as I've been reading our journaller's entries, it strikes me how much this section reminds me of a couple different books. I've copies here but they're so old and worn and I'm afraid t'casually open'em so I'll've t'do most of this from memory. Both are likely by E. T. A. Midnight. I've asked someone else bout this and they agree. The one's titled *The Prisoner*. T'other's *The Tower*. Nathaniel'd easily b'the prince from *The Prisoner* and the caravaner's son from *The Tower*. Catherine'd b'the accused sorceress from *The Tower* and the rival queen from *The Prisoner*. Joe Coreman'd b'the paladin'n both. And the reverend'd b'the priest from the one and the vizier from t'other.

Other than the particulars, they're'n't so different:

Everyone gathers for the denouncement. The priest and vizier and Connelly emerge atop a set of steps so the whole crowd is taken aback by'is ragged appearance. Then the mother and queen gives testimony. And the paladin's drawn'n bout what'e might've seen, but't's is silence that's the true evidence for the crowd. And't's only under cover of the arch mage's exhausted collapse that the paladin's able t'spirit'er away t'a 'secret place' under the pretext of a police function. But while Falstaff ministers over councilman Reedland, other mages from the order follow and the paladin is forced beyond pretext and has t'actually confine'er t'the dungeon. So she gets locked'n the basement with the madman. And there's the frustrated prince, who eventually gets locked'n the tower because Mrs Walcott'd managed at some point without anyone's notice t'engage a handyman t'install a latch on the cupola's trapdoor. And while all that's happening, the priest pays a secret visit t'the basement after locating't through a set of divinations.

“It’s too bad Odin’s not around,” she said.

He paused. “Oh. The cat.” Then’e said, “You have a way out of this.”

“I know,” she said. “There’s a lot of [vermin] around, anymore. I find a shotgun works quite nicely.”

“I guess then it’s a good thing the Lord saw fit to relieve you of those in the fire.”

“Yuh wanna skip all the fun parts,” Li said.

“Yuh’ve an odd idea of fun.”

“Oh, come on,” Li said. “When’e’s tellin’er’ow she’s gonna’ave t’go away and’ow none’s gonna care’f she does and’n fact’ey’ll b’relieved, that’t’ll mean everythin can get back t’normal gain and bout’ow she’s an animal and blah blah and’ow The Book said: ‘I’ve made all these creepin thins fer yuh. Subdue’em,’ and’ow’e’s gonna do that t’er and’ow she needs t’b’staked out as a goat—”

“I take that back,” Ambeth said. “Yuh’re—”

“—and’ow animals’d only b’clothed’n the skin the Lord gave’em and blah blah till—‘WELCOME T’EAVEN. WELCOME T’EAVEN. WELCOME T’EAVEN.’—and Zeb’s screamin and the reverend near trips runnin upstairs and barely manages t’slam’n latch the door before she’n stop’m and catch’m.” Li whistled a short tune. “Now, *that’s* pretty funny.”

And the madman's didos always frighten off the priest or the vizier¹⁰⁹⁷.

But 'f yuh think bout 't, if I remember correctly, yuh'd boil down the structure of both *The Tower* and *The Prisoner* t'something yuh'd find 'n alotta Midnight's books. Such as how a young male protagonist always gets confined somewhere, but 't's never explained how'e gets free or how'e manages t'sneak past the priest's guard and get into the dungeon by a back way.

“Spare me,” Zeb said, “this fucking Mills and Boon shit.”

The night lay quiet as they anchored their hammocks on a bridge and lay back looking at stars.

“Tell somethin bout the policeman,” Genie said.

“What?”

“I’dn’t know. Somethin...after’e locks’er’n the basement, but fore the mob gathers at the house.”

“That’s oddly specific,” Ambeth said.

Genie shifted’n’er hammock. “Hm.”

She pulled aside the curtain and looked out the kitchen door as a car pulled under the shed. And turning back t'the sink, she wiped'er hands convulsively on'er apron. "What are you doing home so early?" she said when the back door opened. But instead of turning, she submerged another piece of soot-smear'd glassware'n soapy water. "Did you forget something?"

"I just need...to get away for a bit," Coreman said. And'e pulled a chair away from the table and sat. Back still t'him, she ferried glassware from one side of the counter, through soapy water, through rinse water'n t'other sink and onto a towel on the opposite side. "What are you doing?"

"Mrs Pringle needed some help cleaning some dishes. Her husband was able to rescue them from the store, but they're terribly dirty. So I said I would help her."

"Oh." He sat there a moment. "Do we have anything to drink in the icebox?"

"I don't think so," she said. "Just a pitcher of lemonade. But that's for taking over to Mrs Thawcraft's this afternoon. They—"

"Will they miss a small glass of it?"

"But it's for later."

"Fine. A glass of water would do."

"I'm kind of busy at the sink right now. And I want to get this done before too late."

"I..." He took a deep breath. "Is there anything to eat?"

"I...guess not," she said. "Just a cake that—"

"You have to take to Mrs Thawcraft's."

"Yes..." she said, and submerged more glassware. "Besides," she

said. "Why don't you eat wherever it is you usually eat this time of day."

"Where?"

"What?"

"Where do I usually eat this time of day?"

"I don't know," she said. "Wherever."

"Wherever is currently a smoldering ash heap. I guess I could cajole Frank into toasting something over the embers if I tried."

"You don't have to...sound...so vicious."

"And if I *feel* vicious?" He stood, shoved his chair back and toppled.

"Joe!" She spun, stared wide eyed, gripped sink and counter edge with wet hands.

"Sorry," he said. "This is insane." He looked down at the table. "This is not what I'm supposed to do. I'm not supposed to be locking people in basements. I—"

"Please," she said, and turned toward the sink again. "Let's not talk about this."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to."

"But it's wrong," he said.

"You didn't seem to have any bother with that other man."

"He was a stranger. I've known Catherine...all my life."

"..." She whirled. "They're right, aren't they? She's...she's...had some effect on you."

"What are you talking about?"

"They, they say something happened when you took her out into the desert."

"What?" He kicked the overturned chair. Her face blanked. And he turned and gripped the door handle so hard his knuckles discolored. "How would you even know?"

She blinked. "What..."

"How do you know I've changed? Do you know *who* I am?"

"What...what are you talking about? Of course I...of course I know who you are."

"Well I don't. And I've been married to you all these years and I don't even know what day you went to the market."

“Joe...” Tears welled at the corners of’er eyes and behind’er the sink started t’drizzle over the counter. “What’s happened to you? I’m Maureen.”

“And what does that mean?”

“Joe...”

He slammed the door. The patrol car roared. Soapy water drenched the back of’er skirt.

And no matter how hard'e tries, the priest's men always overtake
the paladin and the mob storms the dungeon.

Coreman sat'n the patrol car with the door open. Cars crowded onto what'd b'the lawn for a yetn't constructed house. Headlights'd've illuminated blue tarps and half-finished carpentry. Seemingly disembodied flashlights ran down the street. Connelly stood on the porch, illuminated by headlights. Coreman absently rested'is hand on'is still sore shoulder. The two men'd already disappeared into the shadows.

The radio belched static.

"Patrol."

"Patrol."

"Come in, patrol. Over."

"Come in, patrol."

"Patrol."

"Patrol, are you out there? Over."

"Patrol."

"Come in, patrol."

"Patrol. Come in. Over."

"P__"

He grabbed the mic and jammed the call button. "What?"

"Where are you? Over."

"I don't... know."

"Patrol. Are you alright out there? Over."

"Patrol?"

"Patrol. Answer. Over."

He slammed the door, depressed the call button. "What's going on?"

"Joe? What's wrong? Over."

Coreman depressed the call button. "This is patrol. What's the situation? Over."

Pause.

"You need to get to Councilman Reedland's residence. They need traffic management and crowd control. Over."

"What's going on? Over."

"The councilman's dead," dispatch said. "Over."

And the chief mage or whatever always hangs'mself'n'is cell or private chamber. And'n all the stories, it's a major turning point for the priest, or equivalent.

“I hope the fuck was worth it.”

“Quiet,” she said. And she’d said’t too many times already.

“Are you okay?” Nathaniel said.

“Fine,” she said.

Silence.

“Do you regret it?”

Her hand kneaded’is shoulder. “What are we going to do when we get... wherever?”

“Two things,” Nathaniel said. “What we have to.” And’e slipped a hand around’er waist. “And what we want to.”

“Fucking Puuuuhleeeeeeease.”

“Quiet,” Catherine said.

“Fuck this,” Zeb said, and started from the trees and into the back yard and scrambled over a black cast-iron fence’n the dark.

“Stop! Where are you going?”

“To get something to fucking eat.”

“He’s going to get caught.”

And the curtained back door window lit with a suddenness that made’em wince.

Nathaniel ran from the trees. “Stay here—if they come—run—” And’e straddled the fence at a cross-bar between [fleur-de-lis], slipped on freshly watered grass and overturned the birdbath. He stumbled up and something ripped behind’m. Catherine tugged at’er skirt and a chunk hung there on the fence.

“Are you hurt?”

He rubbed’is elbow, but shook’is head.

She took’m by’is other arm, whispered, “Come on.”

“GOD FUCKING DAMN IF I DIDN’T FUCKING KNOW YOU’D HAVE TO BE FUCKING ONE OF THEM!”

Glass burst and tinked against the back stoop. A plate shattered against a paving stone. Glass cracked beneath their sneakers as Catherine jerked open the door.

"YOU!" An old woman, a bent over stick-figure clothed'n scrap flesh, propped'erself up at the end of a long, narrow kitchen. "YOU!" Her voice'd've rattled out as f'er vocal cords'd petrified and crystalized. She snatched another blue-patterned plate from beside the sink

Zeb ducked. Blue-patterned porcelain shattered against the wall. "DON'T FUCKING SURPRISE ME." He ducked again. "YOU ALWAYS WERE A FUCKING FRIGID BITCH."

"WHAT WOULD YOU KNOW—"

"I FUCKING TOLD YOU HOW IT WAS GOING TO END, FUCKING DIDN'T I—"

"GO TO HELL!"

"WE'RE ALREADY FUCKING THERE, BITCH."

Heavy footsteps trumbled downstairs and into t'other room. And the nurse, wide eyed, wrapped'n a bathrobe, burst into the kitchen. Such outbursts must've been a normal occurrence, because'er attention focused on the old woman. "FUCK YOU," the old woman screamed over the nurse's shoulder.

"FUCK YOU IN THE ASS."

The nurse whirled.

"I ALWAYS THOUGHT YOU WERE A CLOSET FAGGOT!"

The nurse stammered. "Who...are you?"

"YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING!" The old woman reached for another plate.

"AT LEAST I DIDN'T FUCKING TURN MY ASEXUALITY INTO SOME FUCKING HIGHER THAN THOU RELIGIOUS FUCKING NOBLE CALLING."

"ATHEIST!"

"FEUDALISTIC CORPORATE FUCKING PAWN."

"YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING!"

"I KNOW IT'S *ALL COME'A CRUMBLIN' DOWN*." And'e danced and singsonged. "THE SNAKE'S IN EDEN AND THE SNAKE'S A PENIS."

"STOP IT." Porcelain shattered against wallpaper.

"THE NOBLE FUCKING ENDEAVOR—SHOT TO FUCKING

HELL. AIN'T YOU HEARD—GOD AND J R R BRISTOL HAVE ABANDONED YOU.”

Another plate sailed over the nurse's head. And she turned and scrambled through the doorway.

Nathaniel lunged. “She's going for the phone.” And'e ducked flying plates and bowls, pushed by Zeb as'e danced, dodged and laughed.

“ATHEIST!”

“OH OH BETTER WATCH THOSE FUCKING BAD IDEAS. WHAT'S THE MATTER SOMETHING WRONG WITH YOUR FUCKING BIO-NARRATIVE SHOTS? CAN'T FUCKING CONTAMINATE THEM, CAN WE?” He flared'is fingers, waved'is hands. “THE FUCKING PRIMEVAL CAUSE RATTLES DOWN THE FUCKING—HA!” He stopped, spat on the tile. “OH AND FUCK LET'S HAVE THE FUCKING RICH FUCKER SAVE US WHILE FUCKING WE'RE AT IT. I ALREADY FUCKING SAW THIS FUCKING MOVIE.”

“IT'S NOTHING TO DO WITH YOU!”

“YOU MADE THAT VERY FUCKING CLEAR. WHEN YOU FUCKING BROKE UP WITH ME—IN A FUCKING TEXT.”

“YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HERE!”

“WELL TOO FUCKING BAD.”

“YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HERE!”

“SAID THAT ALREADY YOU FUCKING TWAT.”

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE!?”

“WHAT WAS I FUCKING SUPPOSED TO DO—STARVE WITH THE FUCKING MASSES—OR DON'T YOU FUCKING REMEMBER—OF COURSE YOU WERE PROBABLY BEING FUCKING PUMPED FULL'A SHIT AND FUCKING HALFWAY TO FUCKING *PARADISE* SO WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU CARE? WHO THE FUCK ELSE DO YOU THINK BUT IMAGINEERS COULD FUCKING BUILD A FUCKING PLANET FROM SCRATCH—”

“HYPOCRITE!”

“WELL *SORRY* I'M NOT FUCKING FILTHY FUCKING RICH WITH MY OWN FUCKING SELF-INCLOSED FUCKING HERMIT FUCKING HERMETIC FUCKING AUTOMATED FUCKING ECOSYSTEM.”

Nathaniel stepped back into the kitchen, tossed the phone into

the sink. “We have to get out of here. She ran down the street. Everybody’ll be here in a minute.”

“SEE—” —Zeb pointed— “—WITNESS THE FUCKING FALL—”

“BASTARD!”

“CUNT.”

“Quiet,” Catherine said, and grabbed Zeb’s arm. “We’re going. Now.”

“FUCKING ASK YOURSELF WHY YOU EVEN FUCKING REMEMBER ME,” he said as she dragged’m through the den. “FUCKING MEMORY SUPPRESSORS AND FUCKING BIO-NARRATIVE ENFORCERS AREN’T PLAYING SO FUCKING NICE WITH THE FUCKING LIFE EXTENSIONS ARE TH—” He shouted as Catherine pulled’m through the front door: “ENJOY THE FUCKING OLD FOLKS HOME—BITCH—”

Windows lit down and across the street. The nurse’s jalopy chugged as Nathaniel backed’t down the driveway. Porchlights illuminated robed figures. Behind’em, the old woman appeared’n the doorway. And Zeb forced’is head and shoulders through the rolled-down rear window as Nathaniel shifted gears and the car chugged forward, and’e extended both’is middle fingers. “FUCK YOU, FUCKEEEERRRRR-RS.”

They laughed.

Gasped and struggled t'breathe.

"Yuh see..." Genie said. "...yuh..." She breathed deep. "Yuh do the voices so well." And she calmed as she lay there with one leg over the side of'er hammock. "That's why yuh'll win."

Morning air lay still just before dawn. He sat with his hands on the steering wheel. A whistle traveled on the breeze. He climbed out of the patrol car and combed his fingers back through his hair and slipped on his cap and started toward the platform. A tanker truck'd already parked at the far end and a figure cloaked in semidarkness climbed the rigging as Coreman walked down the platform. "Morning," he said.

Ron looked up. "Officer."

Coreman glanced toward the light still far down the tracks. "Just call me Joe." And after a moment he said, "Surprised to see anyone out this morning. After last night...everything seems...I don't know the word."

"Catatonic," Ron said as he readied the couplings.

"What does that mean?"

"It's something I once heard the doctor talk about. I think it means something like sleep or...paralyzed, maybe."

"Maybe," Coreman said. "It doesn't seem to have affected you."

"The town doesn't run without gas."

"I guess not."

"You think someone might try to get on the train," Ron said. "Don't you?"

Coreman looked back from where he'd been attentive to that distant, approaching light. Car doors slammed. And when he'd looked round, three or four men'd mounted the platform. The station manager stepped out, glanced down at his watch in what light filtered through the open doorway before he reached inside and picked a clipboard from a hook and walked out on the platform. "Something I should know about?" the station manager said as Coreman approached.

Coreman shook'is head. He looked toward the men scattering across the platform. He approached one.

"Morning," Coreman said. "Taking the train out this morning?"

The man shook'is head.

"It's early," Coreman said.

But the man'dn't respond.

"Well, take care." Coreman nodded, turned away, slipped'is hands into'is pockets as'e walked along the platform.

The train whistle sounded.

Air brakes hissed. Steam puff obscured the platform. Truck drivers woke and rolled-down their windows and spat, cleared their throats, turned over their engines. Ron dragged'is hookups into place. Coreman glanced up and down the train's length. Only a few cars'd've been destined for that station and both ends'd've remained obscured by dark and distance. The station manager opened a boxcar and pushed'n a handtruck. Coreman moved down the platform. He glanced over'is shoulder as footsteps tracked'is.

"We should check the cars," one of the men said, in a low voice.

Coreman turned'is head t'follow their movements, but remained still.

The station manager wheeled a stack of crates onto the platform, left the handtruck and moved t'close the boxcar door and replace the lock-pin. Ron dis-coupled and signaled t'the station manager. And the station manager crossed the platform and flicked the switch that shifted the nightlight from red t'blue. The engineer pulled the whistle'n reply. Cars shuddered as their brakes released. Ahead, wheels spun'n place, collected heat and friction.

"Hey!" one of the men called from the rear end of the train.

"HEY! YOU!" Coreman ran toward the engine. "STOP!"

The station manager glanced up, hovered'is pencil over'is clipboard. The men hesitated, glanced round, but Coreman'd've run so hard, shouted so loud, they'dn't'ven't followed. But one must've turned or seen something from the corner of'is eye. "THEY'RE AT THE OTHER END OF THE TRAIN!"

“I’dn’t wanna’ear that part,” Genie said.

Andn’t even Li challenged’er on that.

Silently, they stood from where they’d rested cross-legged’n the shade of their hats and they refastened their packs and pulled them over their shoulders and continued’n silence.

This's just me. But the paladin always loses the gambit. And'n any version they always spot'em. And the paladin always dies. It doesn't matter'f't's beneath a train or a stampede, or whatever else. It's always the same.

Ever noticed that?

There'd've been nowhere t'escape to. Orange-red landscaped passed, but the distant mountains'd've seemed fixed. Speedwind and natural blew between open boxcar doors, scattered straw. She leaned against the door and looked out. Salt-encrustations flaked from round'er eyes.

At one end of the car, Nathaniel's head drooped against'is chest. His foot twitched. He looked up. Sweat trickled down'is neck and soaked into'is sweat-damp shirt, which clung t'him as'e stood.

"Maybe you should sit down awhile," he said.

"I've sat long enough. I'm tired of it."

"I just thought—"

"What—" She looked over'er shoulder, eyes closer t'blood-red than the color of the fast-moving landscape beyond.

[The train] stopped t'load a truck and saved'em the need t'jump. A narrow [road] led down into the camp: mudbrick buildings, gas and water tanks, distant languid windmills. Thin powerlines teed from the main run that paralleled the tracks and instead followed the road down t'the buildings. Poles stretched between two mudbrick walls t'make a shed. Sunlight striped the pock-marked and rusted truck beneath. A low mudbrick storage building sat'n the distance piled with musty, close-packed, old root vegetables, but burlap sacks aplenty for bedding. Zeb sat, legs folded under'mself, and opened one of the bags, bit repeatedly into a wrinkled turnip before'e started t'chew.

Evening drifted'n. The train'd long disappeared into the horizon. Nathaniel stood with'is shoulder against the doorway.

"I fucking hope the pussy was worth it," Zeb said.

A faint [bulb?] burned overhead.

Nathaniel'dn't've turned. "What do cats have to do with anything?"

Zeb choked, coughed turnip bits across hard-packed floor, fell back onto burlap laughing.

Nathaniel glanced back at'm, turned and walked into the evening. Someone'd left a canteen at the bunkhouse and'e dis-capped't and took a swig. Darkened orange-red horizon'd almost ceded t'blackness and stars. Dusk-shadowed windmills barely moved, seemed possessed of no purpose at all. And warm breeze fluttered a distant ghost. Gravel and sand crunched too loud underfoot. And when'e stopped and looked back, the electric-yellow-filled doorway'd've become a speck.

"Need something to drink?"

She accepted the canteen'n the dark. And'n moonlight, she tilted back'er head.

"Thank you."

When she returned't, he clasped'er hand.

"Please," she said, "don't." And'er voice sounded far and away.

He released'er hand. After a while'e said, "We should get some sleep."

"You go ahead." After a while: "I found a mattress in the bunkhouse. I think I'll sleep in there."

"It's cooler—"

"I'll sleep in the bunkhouse."

There'd been a reason that truck'd remained. And t'd've taken both Nathaniel and Zeb and a railroad jack t'fit the spare tire. Nathaniel tossed the tire iron into the bed. "We need to find something to stretch over the sideboards so we can have some cover in the daytime."

"What," Zeb said, "am I supposed to know where the fuck it is? Am I a fucking dog? Fetch."

"What's a dog?"

"Fuck you, you ignorant dipshit."

"Just go find something."

"Find it your fucking self. You think I give a fuck if you're not getting laid?" He turned, hands'n'is pockets, and walked out from under the slat-shaded garage.

Distant windmills remained still and wavered from behind languid heat.

He wandered out into the shade cast beneath a water tank.

"Your fucking boyfriend's getting all backed up, you know."

"Quiet."

He scowled. "Quit fucking saying that."

She'dn't look back at'm. "Then quit saying those things."

"I'll say whatever I fucking want. Like you fucking know what anything means half the fucking time anyway." She'dn't reply.

"Fucking mopedy moping fuck," he continued. "Oh so fucking sad. Wa wa wa. It's not like anyone ever gave a rat's ass about how many died every fucking day in the W—— slums. Oh, yes, move the fucking sweatshops back in-country, thank you very fucking much

here let me kiss your fucking cock before you fuck us all in our fucking asses. Gobble gobble gobble. Progress of history my fucking ass. New World—great. Round up all those fucking poor mentally ill bastards off the streets and lock them down in the holds and anyone who survives dump em on the shores of the fucking promised fucking land and say did you really think the fucking trip was free—Ha—sign this fucking paper into indentured servitude and pay us back for giving you this fucking wonderful gift—or else. Between the fucking religious wackos—the money hungry vampiric psychopaths—and the fucking mentally fucking ill poor—the NorAmeriCo fucking founding population constitutes the fucking most concentrated instance of mental fucking illness in fucking history—no fucking wonder we’re all so fucking screwed. And try spending months in a fucking packed spaceship shitting in a fucking zero-g toilet—the fucking European poor had it better—at least they could fucking cut the arms and legs off a fucking corpse and shove it through a fucking porthole—what would we’ve done if we fucking had to? God, I know you don’t fucking exist. And I know you fucking hate me. But you can be a real fucking bitch sometimes. But you either fucked up or are outa luck, because your main man’s a fucking psychotic psychopathic rich asshole—but he’s an asshole that has to prove a point, am I fucking right? Of course all gods are a reflection, right? So long as you fucking exist everything’s fucking permitted, isn’t it? *God tells me to fuck you all in the fucking ass.* Thank fucking god. But digging around in the genome to eliminate the very fucking *definition* of life—even fucking god doesn’t have that much fucking money. R—”

“What are you going on about?”

Zeb looked up, blinked. “Fuck... What?” Blinkled. “I wasn’t fucking talking to you.” He extended his middle finger. “I’m working on my fucking book—” And he turned and walked into the sun with his wrist held high so he’d speak into his watch.

and moths fluttered against bare bulbs. Nathaniel lifted another musty sack of root vegetables into the truck bed. His shoulder'd've burned from long winding a pump t'fill a water barrel.

"Suicide," Zeb said as'e wandered through.

"You got any better idea?"

But the give-and-take'd become mechanical, meaningless'n'ts repetition.

The train whistle sounded'n the distance. He'd've gone t'cut off the lights till't'd passed.

Later, he wiped his hands as he stepped into the bunkhouse. “We should be ready to go tomorrow,” he said.

Stained padding bulged from a thin pinstriped mattress.

She didn’t reply.

He turned and went out.

touched'er for the first time since they'd climbed into the boxcar, when'e helped'er into the truck. Predawn glow haloed the distant railroad bed. He'd've watched through the windshield as dawn transmuted an approaching phantasm t'matter. He climbed outa the truck cab. Zeb'd've said, "Where the fuck's he—" —then added when Catherine climbed out—"Where the fuck're you going?" But they'd've just left'm there'n the truck cab. Nathaniel and Ron stopped some distance apart, as'f still not-sure of t'other's existence.

"I came out to check the gas tanks," Ron said. "We service out here." As'f some explanation were needed.

"You came alone?"

"Was there any reason not to?"

Silence.

"Your grandmother's pretty messed up, you know? Some people think you might be dead."

Nathaniel glanced at the ground a moment. "Will you tell her I'm alright."

"Would it mean anything?"

Silence.

And't seems as'f there'd b'more. Or maybe neither Nathaniel, nor Catherine when she came up behind'm, asked bout Coreman. Or'f they'd asked, maybe'e'dn't've told'em. Maybe there wasn't anything t'tell? Maybe Nathaniel'd've asked'm t'come with'em. And Ron'd've refused with something along the lines of: 'You know, if you'd asked me that question a few weeks ago, everything might be different.' Or Maybe Nathaniel'dn't ask because'e already knew the answer. Could'e already've sensed the change'n both'em? Would't've meant anything?

"Just go," Ron said. "Please." But why'd'e've pushed'm away? Did'e already think the only hope of getting anything back was t'cut away what'd been thought t'b'spoiled?

"Are you going to tell them where we are?" Nathaniel'd called as Ron passed'em and adjusted'is hat and backpack and walked toward the rusted gas tanks.

Ron called back, "Do you know where you are?"

He'd've been a distant figure by the bunk house as they passed over the tracks and descended the grade on the far side.

A knee-high white picket fence circumscribed the markers and only the Coremans stood inside. Mr Coreman'n's blue dress uniform. His wife'n blue dress and hat pulled down over'er eyes. Maureen, blue shawl draped over'er shoulders and pulled over'er head and wrapped over'er face so'ts tassels jigged'n the light breeze, just sat there.

A nearby dirt pile, which'd've been so dark and fresh earlier that morning, had dried t'the same pale orange-red as the greater landscape.

The Coremans turned. Mr Coreman held the gate. They walked back t'the patrol car. Few of those who'd gathered beyond the white picket fence remained. Tillman'd removed'is jacket and't hung hot and limp over'is wrist where't extended from'is pants pocket. "Anyway," he said. "I have a theory there's something in the soil that dissolves the bones. That's why we can't find any. Of course..." He slipped two fingers into'is collar and tugged. "Of course, it might not affect human bones. Only Martian."

Hershey's vehicle, then empty, pulled away.

Ron and another man approached after the Coremans'd gone. And Ron hung'is dress coat over the fence and dis-buttoned'is cuffs and rolled up'is sleeves and took one of the shovels. Dirt pattered against wood.

"Figured we'd be doing that to you," Tillman said. "Didn't think we'd get you out of that bank even if it burned to the ground."

Silence. The breeze shifted Mr Prescott's thin white hair.

"Abe," Tillman said. "You alright?"

Mr Prescott looked back at the town, put a hand on Tillman's shoulder. "Maybe...just homesick," he said. He looked back at the cemetery, turned and started toward town.

"Need a ride?"

But Mr Prescott'dn't seem t'hear'm. He

road: a faint outline that seemed t'continually generate from a short distance ahead. Ditches and steep hills sometimes t'the sides. Boulders. Nathaniel shifted gears and turned up an incline. Catherine sat forward, rubbed'er eyes as they came up onto a broad plain edged'n distant heatwaver.

"How long has it been?" she said.

"Since you went to sleep? Maybe two hours."

"We're going awfully slow, aren't we?"

He grit'is teeth. "This old Martian rode's hard to make out. I—"

"Utility road," Zeb said. Scrunched, his knees rested against the dash and'is head leaned back against the seat so'is Adam's apple protruded as'f t'burst from'is grizzled neck. "Fucking utility road, moron."

"Quiet."

"We might have a bigger problem," Nathaniel said. He motioned through the dust-covered windshield. A thick leather belt crossed the hood and buckled on the far side [in lieu] of a latch. Steam, almost imperceptible under midday sun, curled between seams.

"Did we bring enough water for the radiator?" Catherine opened'er collar. Air'dn't seem t'move between the rolled-down windows. Sweat trickled from'er damp hairline, down'er neck.

"Some," he said.

"Be lucky if the janitors find our fucking bones."

"Quiet."

"The truth and nothing but the fucking truth, so help me the god that doesn't exist and who's an eternal bitch. Sorry for the inconvenience, my ass."

Nathaniel glanced across the seat, at Catherine. "Is he alright?" "Fucking fantastic. Better dying through fucking chemistry." Eyes still closed, he dis-zipped a pocket and produced a foil-backed blister pack. "None for you. You have to be at least a fucking hundred-twenty-one years old and—" —he raised 'is hand t'the cab's roof—" —at least this fucking tall to take this ride." The pack crunched and crinkled as 'e stuffed 't back into 'is pocket. "At least I'm gonna fucking die in virtual air-conditioning."

Catherine motioned for Nathaniel t'ignore'm. "Let him sleep." And she peered through the dust-covered windshield. [And?]

"I'll check it when we stop," Nathaniel said. He stretched 'is neck, removed a hand from the wheel and rubbed 't, rubbed an eye.

⁶¹⁴ ‘Some things seem to have gotten out of order.’ 3rd Journey Under the Fourteenth, As Recorded By The Scribe Juri, #c112_3fab_67ca_712ff_ad41.)

stars still shone when'e climbed outa the truck bed. In the cab, Zeb still lay'n that same pretzel-twisted position. Nathaniel turned, surveyed a moonslight-silvered predawn world. A white dress wavered'n faint breeze, phosphorescent'n the distance.

He walked out t'er, remained distant and t'one side. "You scared me for a minute."

"Sorry," she said.

“I think it’s a fence—” He pushed the brake. Steam poured from beneath the truck’s rusted hood and something hissed. He jerked the parking brake as’e climbed out. Catherine scooted across the seat and followed. They pressed near the hood, but the steam forced’em back as’e raised’t. And’t fell.

He screamed, turned. Steam and engine heat washed against the back of’is sweat-damp shirt.

“It must have a fucking hole.”

She laughed, tried t’cover’er mouth with’er hand, but too late.

“IT’S FUNNY—”

“I’m sorry,” she said. Her smile’d faded, and even’f’d’ve been as purely mechanical as the laugh’d likely been, something bout’er face must’ve made’er seem more relaxed than before. “It’s just... Nathaniel?”

High sun washed down over’m, rendered’m seemingly translucent, obliterated into the landscape, as’f extraneous bit-after-bit boiled away and’e into light sublimated.

“Nathaniel!”

His arm struck the rusted, steel bumper as’e crumpled. She jerked toward’m, knelt, and’er shadow covered’is face. She touched’is discolored lips, grabbed’is shoulder. “Nathaniel.” And when she ran round the cab and leaned’n the open door and yelled for Zeb t’wake, he’dn’t even mumble, head still back, Adam’s apple still yet ready t’burst forth. And she’d t’try and drag’m’erself. “Come on—stand up.” She managed t’get’m onto’is knees, but’is body buckled. And she dropped the tailgate and arranged’m’n the shade beneath before she climbed into the truck bed and drug out a fistful of burlap sacks

and a canteen. She touched 'is face with the backs of 'er fingers, tore a piece of 'er skirt and tipped the canteen into 't and pressed 't 't 'is mouth, ran 't along 'is face, re-wetted 't. His throat undulated. She re-wetted 't. "Sip this." And she touched the cloth 't 'is mouth again. "Can you lift your head?" She wadded a burlap sack as a headrest. His eyes opened. "Here," she said, and offered the canteen. "Just sip." After a moment, she pulled 't away. "Not too much. Wait a minute or two. Just take it slow." She touched the backs of 'er fingers 't 'is forehead. "How much have you drunk today?" But 'e shook 'is head. "How much?" But 'e remained silent. And she offered 'm the canteen again. "How much?" But 'e just lay back against the burlap and a few water beads trickled from 'is mouth and left mud trails. Finally, she said, "How long have you been putting it in the radiator?" He 'dn't reply. "It's what you've been doing with yours, isn't it?"

He nodded, looked as 'f 'e 'd wished 'e 'dn't, and she raised the canteen.

"You should know better," she said.

He looked up at the rusted tailgate as she removed the canteen. "I ...messed everything up."

"Shush, what you need to do right now is rest."

"I'm sorry for what I did to you."

"Did to me..." she said. "Nathaniel Walcott—sometimes you make me want to slap you. I ran a store *on my own* since before you came down from the mountain. And I'll tell you something—I was taking off my clothes and doing things long before you came along. And you would never have even gotten your pants off if I hadn't practically dragged them. You're slow, you know that? And I'm quite capable of getting myself into my own messes. For your information, I can even get myself killed without your help. So...fuck you."

Ever-so-faintly 'is discolored lips formed a preliminary smile.

"Here," she said. "But just sip. Do you think you can stand? We should get you up out of this dust and into the truck." But 'e 'dn't move, didn't shake 'is head. "Rest a bit," she said. And she offered 'm the canteen.

There's another loose-leaf sheet folded between pages. But the handwriting's different.

closed'is eyes. "It's been lonely," he said. "Like you were a million miles away even while you were right next to me."

"Sssh. Don't try to talk so much."

"I felt so good these [...] Better than I had in my whole life."

"Am I going to have to tell *you* to be quiet too?"

Dryly, he laughed. "I guess we could always borrow a couple of his pills. He wouldn't notice."

"Sssh," she said, and rested'er hand along the side of'is face. "I'm afraid," she said, her voice low. "Everything hurts. And I'm afraid to do anything that could make it stop hurting. It doesn't feel like it should be right to feel good anymore." She caressed'is face. "Do you understand?"

He breathed softly, eyes closed, already asleep.

I wonder'f this's a page somebody's copied from a Midnight book?

A brown-white tabby wandered up the aisle and disappeared between seats. Prescott looked out onto sun-washed landscape. As the train'd gained speed, the immediate ground'd've blurred, but distant formations'd've remained fixed as ever they'd've appeared. And'e'dn't've looked away as the car door opened, nor when someone sat beside'm.

"What's this all about?" Connelly shifted'n'is seat, adjusted'is clothes, wiped sweat from the side of'is face, breathed hard as'f'e'd'd t'run t'catch the train on time.

"Do you still have the note?" Prescott said.

"Why?"

Prescott extended'is open palm. "Give it to me."

Connelly shifted, dug into'is pants pocket and withdrew a crumpled envelope.

"Habit," Prescott said, and slipped the envelope into'is inside jacket pocket. "You learn to keep secrets and soon enough it's like riding a bicycle or breathing. You don't even have to bother knowing you do it." He still looked out the window, hadn't looked away the whole time.

Connelly waited'n silence, finally said, "You said this was important. You said it had to do with everything that's happened."

Silence.

"No," Prescott said.

Connelly shifted, glanced round the car.

The tabby wandered down the aisle and stopped at their seats, as'f t'check their tickets, but instead stepped over both men's shoes. Connelly motioned with'is hand, then'is foot. But the tabby only glanced

at'm, then lept into Prescott's lap. And Prescott held out'is hand and she rubbed'er head against'is palm. "Are you one of Isis's grandkittens or a great grandkitten? Or is it great great great grandkittens by now?" He said, seemingly t'Connelly, but without looking up: "It's my fault. I think I probably, deep down, recognized what was going on. But I thought I could make everything okay. I thought I could keep it all on track." A pause. "But...when you know you're breathing, trying to breathe, you only end up gasping and choking ...and not being able to breathe at all." He sighed. "My son..." he said. "We were different. When NorAmeriCo went into the first Israeli War...registered... They were the same age, you know—but, of course, you don't. Both even in a uniform. Do you think that's a sign? And I thought... We gave so many hair and tissue and blood and semen samples... Why couldn't something have happened?" He turned from the window, looked blankly ahead. The cat'd settled onto'is lap and'd've seemed t've slept. Prescott lifted'er, stood and leaned forward t'deposit'er on the next seat. "Mgggr." And she climbed the seat and hung on by'er claws and looked over at'em.

"But to answer your question," Prescott said. And'e turned and looked at the reverend. "I just wanted to see your face when you know this is all going to end."

Connelly slowly stood, rested'is hand on a seatback as'e stepped into the aisle.

Prescott's bloodshot, red-rimmed eyes fixed on'm. "This is all going to end. I should have done it a long time ago. Maybe I can still save a few people's lives."

Connelly started t'speak—

"YOU ARE NOT REAL!"

Prescott's hands clenched. His jaw tightened. Connelly'dn't've'd time t'react before hands tightened around'is throat. "Just let God forgive me for what I let you try to do." The tabby hissed. Somehow, the two stumbled as they struggled. Connelly regained'is footing. Blood pooled round the rivet that anchored a seat, glinted on that same seat's curved cast-iron arm, stained thin, white hair and spread over vibrating floorboards.

[When he:] opened his eyes, he saw his hand and hers. He looked down at his sneakers as if they were something dis-related to him, then out onto the orange-red landscape framed beyond the truck bed. "What time is it?" His voice tumbled from his desiccated mouth.

"Morning," she said. "Here. Drink."

His stomach knotted round the influx.

She rooted in a burlap sack and produced a wrinkled turnip. "Here. Eat this. You're going to need it."

"What's the point?"

"I'll slap you if you don't watch it," she said.

He glanced at her. "I believe you would." He gnawed whitening, faded purple skin.

"I've been thinking," she said.

"What about?" But his reply'd've sounded too mechanical, a stimulus response.

"Pipe fittings."

He glanced toward her.

"I must've ordered trainloads of them over the years. And I don't want to know how many truckloads of pipe."

"So?"

"So, they're always rusting out and having to be replaced. Wherever they have livestock, they can't always use aqueducts. Sooner or later it has to be pumped uphill. I've sold them the pumps. Or it's long-distance and will evaporate too much. Something."

"I don't follow."

"That fence out there isn't to keep *us* out. With the droughts the past few years, they've had to order more and more hay in the summer

because the grass is so thin. And they bring them in from the range and keep them in closer fenced-in areas to feed and water them.”

He shook his head. “We don’t have enough water to take the truck far.”

“If you’ll listen,” she said. “All we have to do is get the truck over there. Water can’t be far.”

He shook his head. “The radiator’s dry. It’d take everything we’ve got to get there.”

“You got a better idea?”

Turnip chunk’n’s mouth, he laughed. And coughed t’keep from choking.

A heifer nosed up t'em experimentally as they submerged their canteens. Late afternoon sun glinted from the trough. Cows twitched their ears and watched'em from beneath shade sheds.

"I didn't realize they were so big," she said.

"What?"

"Cows."

"You've never seen a cow before?"

"Pictures and things," she said. "Girls never went on field trips to the farms when I was young."

"Why should they?" he'd said as they walked.

Ahead, Zeb's scarecrow frame appeared from round the truck hood. "Looks like he's awake."

Zeb stood looking blankly down, mouth agape. A gentle sigh mixed among water-splash, followed by a zipper's zzzzz. Absently, as if he didn't see anything beyond arm's length, he rooted'n one pocket then t'other till he'd produced a blister pack and popped one direct into his mouth and—he moved'n slow-motion as Nathaniel grabbed the packet, flung't, and't twirled and caught and sawed wind and flashed and flickered and disappeared into and onto the landscape. Zeb still moved as if he'd snatch't from his hand and after several moments finally stared blankly out on the landscape. Slowly, he looked over his shoulder. "... fuck... you..."

more different handwriting

He stared t’Nathaniel’s left. “... fuck...you...”

“Go get in the truck and get some sleep,” Nathaniel said.

Zeb swayed, still stared just off t’Nathaniel’s left. “... fuck...you...”
But after a moment, he ambled toward the cab.

“I don’t think he can do it himself,” Catherine said. And she took t’other canteen as Nathaniel brushed’t from’is shoulder and went and helped Zeb outa the dirt and pushed’m into the seat.

“... fuck...you...” Zeb said through the rolled-down window. But’is head leaned back against the seat and’is Adam’s apple threatened t’burst through’is grizzled skin and bobbed as’e snored and drool trickled over’is thin, cracked lips.

At the back of the truck, Catherine set the canteens on the tailgate. “Why did you do that?”

Nathaniel boosted’mself into the truck bed, bent and offered’er a hand. “I figure,” he said. “I figure the only chance we’ll have is to trade off driving round the clock. We can’t give it a chance to leak out when we stop for the night.”

Framed from the truck bed, reddened sun liquefied and ran along the world’s terminator. And they closed their eyes and faintly sighed after the hours’t’d taken’em t’walk t’and from the watering lot.

“We should take a look at it tomorrow,” she said. Eyes closed, the back of’er head rested against the truck cab. “Maybe there’s something we can do to slow it up.”

“Worth a shot, I guess.”

“Anyway,” she said, after a while. “We should try and get some sleep.”

“Yeah.”

She mumbled.

“What?”

“You smell like sweat,” she said. Barely a mumble.

Half-asleep, he said, “I only smell burlap and gas.”

She mumbled.

“What?”

“... it smells...good...”

Sometime'n the night'e'd settled against'er, his face against'er shoulder. Their sweat-damped clothes stuck t'their skin.

"It's morning," she said.

"I know."

Silence. Pre-morning gloom ceded t'gathering sun, all framed above the tailgate.

"We have to get up," she said.

"I know."

Zeb's head rested against the seat where'e'd slid beneath the dash. He slept eyes open, head twisted upward as'e perpetually stared at the cab roof. Spit'd dried along the corners of'is mouth, crusted'n'is coarse, shallow beard.

Nathaniel looked through the rolled-down window as Catherine put the backs of'er fingers against'is wrinkled and spotted scalp. "Is he alive?"

"Cold," she said.

"As in..."

She looked up and through the rolled-down window. "He's still breathing."

"How long do you think it takes that stuff to wear off?"

Catherine shook'er head.

Nathaniel massaged'is jaw as'e drove through the fence where they'd taken out a couple rails. "Why did you have gum in your pocket?"

Catherine shrugged. "It must've been in there since..." She looked through the dust-filmed windshield. "I just like a stick every once in a while. I must've forgotten about it."

Nathaniel glanced toward the floorboard, where Zeb snored, still wide eyed, curled'n on'mself[†]. "We're betting our lives it and the tape holds, you know."

"Be careful of the cow."

Nathaniel poked'is head through the rolled-down window. "Get away." He honked. The cow looked up at'm, twitched an ear. He honked. Finally, he pulled round'er. She turned'er head and looked at'em as they continued out t'b'swallowed into that same heatwaver that liquified the broader landscape.

[†] It would be tempting to use the term 'fetal position' here, but Bloomenthaal recommends against it. (See *Poetics Astrica*, Vol. 1, 749.1.6.)

Afternoon horizon'd yetn't faded t'red. Most of the cows'd've wandered from beneath shade sheds and scattered toward the hay dumps, though a few'd've took time t'peruse among what thin grass there'd been. Variegated sun eked toward the horizon line, dipped crimson at bottom, though still yellow at crown and those multi-colors reflected'n the water trough, broke and jostled and flowed back into each and t'other as Catherine dipped a rag and opened'er collar. Water trickled down'er forearms, dripped from'er elbows, sprinkled thin grass which clustered at the trough's base and routed into cracked ground. Her shoes sat beside the trough and she raised'er foot onto'ts concrete edge, dipped the rag, pulled back'er skirt. By then, Nathaniel'd finished with the water tank, capped't tight and'd climbed down from the truck bed and leaned against the tailgate as'e watched.

She looked back at'm. Then she bent and lifted'er shoes and walked barefoot through thin grass and over hardpan. And she put the still wet rag'n'is hand and set'er shoes on the tailgate. After a moment, she looked round at'm. "Well," she said, "go on."

The rag leaked between'is fingers and dribbled the ground, sopped against'is jeans as'e crossed t'the trough. Dust scattered down from'is hair as'e pulled off'is shirt. And'e tossed't into the water. Red-orange dust caked'is arms and face but'd've ended'n seemingly crisp lines past'is elbows and round'is neck and must've made'm seem a strange assemblage of disparate parts.

He'd just closed'is eyes and rubbed the rag over'is face a couple times before'e jumped. Catherine laughed. And'e jerked round and

water streamed into 'is eyes. "Hey—" The cow who'd stuck'er nose'n the small of 'is back looked up at 'm and made a noise.

"I think she likes you," Catherine said. "Or maybe she just doesn't like you getting her water all dirty."

"Well—she can just get used to it. Shoo."

She repeated the same noise, but turned and ambled towards a shed, stopped halfway there, turned and looked back at 'm. And she stood there and watched 'm till 'e'd finished and 'd pulled 'is shirt from the water and rung't out and draped't over 'is shoulder and started toward the truck. And Catherine laughed.

The sun'd passed from variegated roses and crimsons t'liquid blood and flowed along a burnt-out horizon by the time they'd climbed into the truck bed. Nathaniel slipped 'is shirt over one of the sideboards t'dry. He helped Catherine onto the tailgate.

She lay back on musty burlap'n the dark.

At some point, his cheek pushed past'er open collar and rested against'er bare neck.

Wind blew. Cow ears whoosh-wiggled as they looked into the truck bed. Moons passed overhead. Three, maybe seven, fireflies launched from sparse grass.

't wasn't

wasn't't

woke and lay there and listened t'him breathe till'e stirred. A cow stood'n the distance and blocked the early morning sun. She looked back at'em, framed by blood-dawn.

"Are you awake?"

He hmm'd against'er neck.

"I've been thinking," she said. "I don't think..." Zeb's snores carried through the cab. "I don't think he's going to be able to drive."

Nathaniel moved against'er.

"I was thinking you should show me how."

"Hm?" He pulled back, rubbed'is eyes, looked up at'er.

"If you teach me how to drive, I can help."

He sat back against the truck bed and rubbed'is roughened cheeks. "I don't think—"

"Why not?"

He rubbed the back of'is neck. "I've never seen a woman drive."

"You never saw a woman without clothes either."

After a moment, he shrugged, pulled'is shirt off the sideboard and slipped't on and't lay stiffly over'm.

They climbed down. Zeb still lay curled beneath the dash, didn't stir as they climbed'n and Nathaniel slammed the rusted, old door, or when the engine turned over and belched black foul from the stack. Cows looked up, made noises'n their direction as'e turned the truck. Catherine said they'd stop on t'other side and replace the rails.

Dust rose behind'em as they cut across the landscape toward the service road, tinged clear sky. She watched'm as'e drove. And when'e noticed, he started t'explain why'e'd what. And they went on for a while till she said, "Let me try."

"Now?"

"Better now," she said. "That way I'll be ready to do it some when you're tired later."

He shook his head, but stopped and they climbed out and back'n with'm'n the middle. "Alright," he said. "Use the same foot for the gas and brake. Don't try to use one for one and the other for the other."

"Got it."

The truck started forward, jerked. "Gently," he said as they curved round a boulder and she braked. Zeb bounced'n the floorboards and his eyes remained open but blank. They started up a low hill. And metal ground metal as she tried t'work the clutch. "Take your foot off it now."

"Oh," she said. "That's the sound it makes when you do it."

"Yeah, well... Why don't you pull over up here and we'll swap back. That's enough practice for right now."

"How far do you think we've gone?"

"Don't know."

Hands still on the wheel, she said, "Here." And she dropped the truck into park. "We don't need to get out. Just slide this way." And she slid over his lap and slid into the driver seat. "There."

"Yeah," he said, and cleared his throat and fumbled for the stick and shifted'n his seat.

The sun swung overhead, obliterated the notion of shadow. They crested a hill and the machine's internals chugged as he dropped into a lower gear t'roll down the far side. Catherine leaned over Zeb t'see through the rolled-down window. "Isn't that the railway?" She pointed t'a straight black line'n the distance.

"Yeah... I think so."

"How far away do you think it is?"

He hand-over-handed the wheel t'skirt a boulder cluster and turn along a steep ditch. And as they dropped into a declivity, the horizon'd've swallowed those two thin converging lines. "I don't know. Things can be farther away than they seem out here sometimes."

"Fuck you..."

They both looked down. A bloodshot eye peered at'em.

Even with both moons, they'dn't've driven at night, as the iridescent landscape'd've [hidden?] the service road's fragile contours. They looked out on't from the truck bed.

chunged as'e shifted t'climb the berm. And the suspension creaked and they rattled side-t'side as they humpety-bumped over the tracks. Zeb rolled'n the floorboards. "Fucking watch it." The rear tires bumped over t'other track and they rolled downslope.

"Do you want something to drink?" Catherine braced'er self against the dash, looked below the seat.

"Fuck you."

"It shouldn't be far now," Nathaniel said. He guided the truck back onto the service road. "It only takes a day or so from here." He glanced through the rolled-down window. "No sign of the train?"

Catherine leaned t'see through t'other window. She shook'er head.

"If we can get far enough we'll be out of—"

"Are you going to fucking stop—or am I just going to fucking shit my pants?"

"What?"

Catherine rested'er hand on Nathaniel's shoulder. "We all could probably use a short break." She peered through the dust-covered windshield. "It curves around a hill up there, doesn't it? We can stop there and not be seen."

Even before they'd stopped, Zeb clawed'is way up and opened the door, tumbled out. The gearbox chunged as Nathaniel quickly shifted. "You alright?"

But Zeb just waved a middle finger as'e struggled up and ambled off, weaved across rocky ground.

Nathaniel shook'is head. "Where's the canteen? I'll fill it."

When'e returned from the truck bed, the rubber taste of the siphon hose still'n'is mouth, he set the canteen'n the empty cab. A shadow

dashed the ground and retreated behind a vertical arrow-shaped rock slab. He followed. That stone and two others might've formed a rough blind, beyond which Catherine squatted with'er skirt pulled up over'er waist. She glanced up from the pea-gravel-littered ground. "Shoo."

Back beside the truck, his face still burned. It took effort t'get started and by the time'e'd buttoned'is pants she'd already emerged from the rocks. She glanced around the cab, as'f t'check for Zeb, and said, "Spy."

He half-turned away. "Where do you think he's gotten to?"

The rails might've looked as'f they'd been carved from mirror-shined obsidian and might've seemed t'disappear where infinite azure sky met blood-red ground. Maybe the sun appeared as a two-dimensional yellow-painted disk that looked as'f't might fall down on'm'f the wind blew too hard. "Insects," Zeb'd've said t'mself as'e squatted on the ravine's edge with'is shorts around'is ankles. "Aren't any fucking flesh-eating insects here to carve you up. Or carrion birds to carry you the fuck away. Maybe if there were fucking ants they'd carry you away a hunk a' fucking time. Fucking think? Fucking gut bacteria gonna eat you from the fucking inside out." As'e watched, maybe the cadaver sprouted grass and mushrooms. Flesh eaten by fungus t'bone. Green-fur-covered bone. Photosynthesis. Genetic mutation. Purple sprigs. Purple spreads t'consume green. Survival of the fittest. Green spots. Equilibriums come and go. Species arise, contest, evolve, reproduce, die, continue... till acid reactions, digestive enzymes... wind and dust wore away the remain's last vestiges and what life clung t'survival's narrow precipice winked out with'ts wellspring environment. Only a faint white stain'd've remained on orange-red ground. "Then again," Zeb'd've said as'e stood and tugged-up'is shorts. "Maybe you'll just become a mummy." And time'd've reversed, rebuilt bones and muscle and skin from nothingness. Paused. Zoomed ahead, again. A Different track. Desiccated skin turned t'parchment. Mouths, eyes, nostrils, anus... withered ragged holes. Joints bulged through tight-pulled vellum. Eons. The same. Until dust. Zeb ambled toward the road.

The invisible lady'n the porcelain dress'd've led'm back.

This's just me. But no matter what anyone says, a story bout what someone saw while on something doesn't make't true. None's ever managed t'dig up so much as even one intermediary form.

“Poppycock,” Li said.

“What’s the matter?”

“’e jus’*appened* t’come across’ere the reverend’d thrown the body from the train? Come on.”

Ambeth accepted the waterbag and re-capped’t. “Sometimes thins just’appen.”

“Switch places,” she said. “I’ll drive for a while.”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not.”

He slumped over the wheel. “Just give me a minute or two.”

“Scoot over,” she said. “Now.”

“I—”

“Don’t fucking scream—” Zeb lay’n the floorboards, shivered, pressed’is hands over’is ears.

“Do you need something to cover up with?”

“Are you fucking *trying* to kill me?”

“Ignore him,” Nathaniel said.

“And you,” she said. “Move.”

blotted stars, stone fingers jammed up through the ground, reaching
for sky

“About fucking time,” Zeb said. The truck’s working headlight splashed over a long, low mudbrick wall. His fingers trembled as’e pointed. “Park up there.” Slowing, she turned the truck caddy-cornered amongst t’other vehicles. Zeb grasped for the door latch, missed, finally caught’t, almost too weak t’push’t open, and tumbled t’the ground. But by the time Nathaniel’d leaned out and across the seat, he’d stumbled up, held one arm with t’other and staggered off under pole-mounted lights and disappeared among blue trailers.

Catherine climbed outa the cab. A night breeze fluttered nearby tarps.

A flashlight beam struck oblong along the ground, played over’em as Nathaniel climbed from the cab. And someone said, “You can’t park there.”

“It’dn’t make sense,” Li said.
Almost everyone groaned.
Li continued anyway. “’ow long were they out’n the desert?”
“What’s that matter?”
“They’dn’t’ve gone that long on one tanka gas.”
“How far yuh thin yuh can get on one?”
“N’t that far.”
“Yuh’dn’t know that.”
“Maybe,” Genie said. “Maybe they’d some extra’n back of the truck.”
“Long nuf t’sart t’get’ver someone’s death?” Li said.
The rest remained silent.

They'd've sat silent as'e'd approached the rostrum. Even before that, the only sounds'd been their footsteps, their movement as they shuffled between pews. He'd've rested'is hands on the rostrum as'f't were all that held'm up. And'e'd've stood there and stared down at note-bare, polished wood. And when'e'd've looked up, he'd've met tired, haggard eyes, eyes fatigued from lack of sleep and, worse, the wrong kind.

"These," he'd've said into the waiting, "have been hard days..." Allison'd've looked up from'er mother's arms, looked up'n seeming awe that that totalising silence'd been broken, turned'er head as'f't'locate this miraculous disturbance. "We have suffered many losses..." Mrs Coreman'd've sat'n blue, next t'er husband, who'd've still worn the same many-day-wrinkled dress uniform. "Many good people are no longer going to share this life with us." Maureen'd've dipped'er face into a handkerchief, looked up from't with still wet-rimmed eyes. "The courses of lives have been altered." A vacancy'd've sat open by Mrs Walcott. "But there is hope. There is hope in that *we* remain. And because of *that*, we cannot say the Lord does not *still* have some plan for us." Ron'd've stood'n backmost of the pews, by the doors. "But we have to say that things..." Connolly'd've looked round the room. "Things from this point forward can never be the same."

Sheryl's arm [goose]-fleshed as she stepped into the air-conditioned trailer.

"I fucking told you—"

"Close the door," she said, and put'er palm against'er desk t'brace'erself as she put toe t'heal and forced off'er boots.

Zeb scowled, slammed the door, careful t'use the arm that'dn't've'd a fluidation bag strapped t't. "Even the fucking nazis—who fucking shot people for unsanctioned fucking—never got a handle on the fucking problem. And that sanctimonious f—"

"Not my problem."

"Well, it's somebody's fucking problem. It's—"

"Nobody's," she said. He opened'is mouth—"Things have changed since you left."

"They've decided the fucking Martians are lizard people? Or—let me fucking guess—he's bought the rights to Futurology and we're going t—"

"Shut it."

"Aw, have I offended some personal fucking sensibility, you politically correct p—"

"God, I liked it better when you were dead." She kicked'er ball away and dropped into a chair. "You should check your newsfeed."

"Corporate fucking sewer."

"If you did you'd know he's dead."

"Fucking hallelujah." He raised and waved the handn't attached t'the arm with a fluidation bag strapped t't, or maybe that'd've been just some kind of residual tremor.

"You know what," she said, "why don't you just fuck off and go back to wandering around in the desert. I don't need your shit right now."

“Aww, problems?”

“Nope. Not a one. In fact, I’m fresh out of them for a long time. Because, along with everything else you don’t bother to know, you don’t know that as of this morning, every fucking thing went into probate. So...” She held’er hands over’er desk. “Waste water runoff. Not my problem anymore. Overzealous Greenhouse effect. Not my problem anymore. Miners. Not my problem anymore. Employees printing off counterfeit local currency. Not my problem anymore.” And she slapped’er palms on the glass desk surface and leaned forward. “As of this morning, there is *no* project until this whole shit storm clears the courts. And we’ll be lucky if any of us are even alive when that happens. So I’d say you’d better shut your filthy trap and get your shit ready and hope that when we get down to the elevator the courts rule something on the right of way before we all starve to death—what’s so damn funny?”

He choked, sputtered, managed, “So...when’s the big reveal?”

“The what?”

“When do they all find out what the fuck’s been going on this whole time?”

“Not my problem.”

His head flung back as’e laughed.

“God, I liked it better when you were dead.”

“I’m fucking sure.”

“Get out of here and get your stuff. It’s probably still in your locker. We’re moving out today.”

“What the fuck do I care?”

“You can’t be—”

“Fucking crazy—remember?”

“What’re you going to do?”

“Finish my fucking book.”

“Book?”

“I’m going to fucking spill every one of fucking J R R Bristol’s fucking secrets about this fucking planet and—”

“Get sued into the next millennium, Procopius.”

“What’re they going to fucking do? Send me to hell? I’m already fucking dead.”

“And with your luck, he bought the afterlife.”

He flipped'er off, turned toward the door. Warm night air spilled'n.
"You can't just bring people into camp and dump them," she said.
"Thought they weren't your fucking problem. Why don't you just fucking go home and leave the natives to it?"
"I'm not some goddamn monster. I—"
"—another fucking—"
"—someone who needs a job—just like you."
"Just following orders."
"You sanctimonious fucking asshole."
"Ha!" He stepped down onto the trailer's corrugated metal steps.
For whatever reason, she moved toward the door. "Did they really figure out how to do it by themselves? All on their own. Those two."
"Fucking jealous you didn't get to him first?"
"Fuck you."
"Haul your fucking middle-aged cunt somewhere fucking else—"
She put'er hand against the jam and leaned out and jerked the door closed.

Nathaniel jerked his head up from where he lay across a blue-plastic table.

"Sorry," the young woman said. Wrapped in a blue apron and hair net, she seemed to try and smile. But by the time he'd sense enough to say 'thank you' or anything else, she'd already started across the commissary. He looked over. Catherine already picked at her tray with a blue-plastic spork.

"The cutlery leave something to be desired," she said, and speared an over-yellow lump that she might've thought'd been eggs. She glanced at him. "You should eat something."

"How long have I been asleep?"

"A little while. They have some more coffee if you want. It's just over there."

Coffee and sour-paper-cup taste and sleepiness must've melded in his mouth, because he leaned over and spat.

The commissary slowly filled as he fought the plastic utensil bag and finally pulled his pocket knife and slit the packaging. People pushed blue-plastic trays along polished steel bars. Overhead, the blue tent top fluttered in morning breeze and tugged at its tie-downs. Maybe Zilog or Tracy wandered in from between almost but not quite intersecting, seemingly decayed mudbrick walls. Whispered conversations wafted with the wind. Eyes darted from food to phones. Maybe the hair on the back of Catherine's neck prickled. She might've looked up and eyes'd've darted away. More than once, she'd've glanced down at her dirt-stained self and dress, till she finally pushed the near empty blue-plastic tray away.

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "I'm going to go back to the truck."

“Why?”

“I’m tired.”

He stood as she started away, dropped his fork and picked out the last sausage-esque roll with his fingers and followed. Dust mixed with food grease and gritted in his mouth and he wiped his fingers on his pants as they walked.

She stopped in the shadow of a tarp-covered mudbrick wall. After a moment, she turned. “What do you think happens now?”

Silence.

Yells.

They looked down the length of the wall. Both walked to the end, turned and went into the parking lot. Nathaniel pointed. “There.” A row of tractors, giant grey-tan pillbugs that they must’ve seemed, sat in-line.

“*Authorization denied.*”

He’d’ve changed in the night, better shorts, boots, would’ve had a backpack hooked over one shoulder, probably even shaved. He waved a phone in front of the tractor’s door.

“*Access denied.*”

He kicked it. “Fucking open.”

“*Access denied.*”

And as Catherine and Nathaniel approached, blue-uniformed security personnel appeared round a corner. “Sir, step away from the vehicle.”

“Fuck you, Green.” Taller than the one, Zeb looked down, his face the epitome of contempt. “Go drag your faggot ass somewhere else.”

“I told you you were dead,” Sheryl said as she emerged behind them. She motioned to the uniformed men. “It’s fine. I’ve got it.”

“You sure about that?” The other still gritted his teeth as he looked up at Zeb.

Sheryl nodded. “There’s no use wasting time on this.”

Nathaniel leaned toward Catherine, whispered, “I’ve seen her before. She was out here—”

Sheryl walked over to them. “Hi.” She offered her hand. “I’m Sheryl Thyne. I’m projects manager here.” Seemingly involuntarily, she might’ve glanced down then up at Catherine, likely quicker than anyone’d’ve been able to notice, even herself.

“Just unlock the fucking tractor,” Zeb said. “And I’ll get out of your fucking hair and you can do whatever the fuck you want.”

“Where are we going?” Nathaniel said.

“To hell with you. I’m getting as fucking far away as I can. And then some.”

“We had a deal!”

“Fuck it.”

“Why,” Sheryl said. She smiled. “I’m surprised at you, Zeb. Why am I not surprised?”

“Fuck you.”

Still smiling, she turned toward Catherine. “I’m afraid you won’t be able to stay here.” And as Catherine’s face clouded, she added, “But as it just so happens, Zeb here is going someplace I think you might find very convenient.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

Sheryl glanced over her shoulder, still smiled, turned, again, toward Catherine and Nathaniel. “I’m sure he’d be happy to take you along.”

“Fuck you!”

Sheryl looked down at the tablet she’d’ve’d’n’er hand. “Please state your names.” They must’ve done so with no little perplexity as Sheryl just continued t’tap the tablet without looking up. “Fantastic.”

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“Me?” She’dn’t look up as she skimmed’er finger over the screen. “Nothing.” She held’t up, aiming’t at both of’em and a shutter sound going off. Nothing at all.” She lowered’t and tapped the screen a few times and finally swiped’t. “Alright. There you go.”

“W—”

She glanced toward Zeb. “I’m hiring a couple more unpaid interns. Apparently, I’m authorized to do that even without a budget.” She turned t’Catherine, motioned t’the tractor with’er tablet. “I’d offer you a phone, but we can’t spare any. But I’m sure Zeb would be happy to share his.”

“F—”

“Quiet. Dead. Remember? Anyway, he should be able to walk you through all the protocols, etcetera.”

“Bitch.”

Sheryl turned t’him. “Well, I have to have some company loyalty,

don't I? I can't just let people in to vandalize company resources. I mean, there're enough supplies down there to last more than two hundred people almost twenty years. No, I have to be responsible."

"F—"

"Incidentally, you'll have to drop off at the landing. I don't have time for it to go the long way round. But I'm sure you can figure out things from there."

"F—"

"Careful," Sheryl said. "You can always walk." He opened his mouth. But she raised a finger. "Remember, never fuck with this bitch. Got it? Good. Now, let's make this the last time we see each other. Okay?"

Zeb's jaw'd've twitched.

“There it goes,” Nathaniel said. In the distance, the tractor disappeared amid variegated landscape.

“Yes,” Catherine said. “And not a moment too soon.” She lifted her backpack and adjusted its straps over her shoulders.

“Why?” Nathaniel shouldered his own backpack.

“I was just getting used to driving.”

“Are you two fucking coming or not?” Zeb tried to lift the roll on his own, struggled, dragged it, dropped it, had to wait for Nathaniel, and he grumbled all the way over the canyon rim and down the switchbacks. Slate-blue water snaked along the canyon bottom, sandwiched between bamboo thickets. “Fucking watch it—don’t drop it and get a hole in it.” Stone sloped to water’s edge and Zeb squatted there over the bundle.

Catherine stood and looked out on the water, watched tiny bamboo leaves flicker in the wind. “It’s beautiful.”

“Fucking poison is what it fucking is.”

Even then, the bamboo closest to the water’d’ve yellowed. Gold-brown leaves flicked onto the slate-blue ribbon to be borne away.

“Does it only grow near rivers?”

“Fucking renewable fucking scaffolding—fucking office-chair ass-glued fucking fucknits—fucking ideas—don’t fucking touch that—don’t fucking inflate it here.”

Catherine wandered toward water’s edge. And Nathaniel followed.

“Oh, sure. Stand there and be fucking useless.” Zeb threw up his hands as he walked round the bundle, dropped his backpack and dis-tied the oars and extended them. “Fucking leave me to do fucking everything.”

Darkness fell into the canyon. She sat on a rock outcrop over the water, looked back as yellow-white light diffused round'er, scattered a hazy glow over darkened water. "Turn it off."

Nathaniel looked down, fiddled with the lamp till't clicked-off, and as'is eyes adjusted, he eased down.

"It's nice, isn't it," she said.

"I don't get why we can't drink it," he said. His eyes probably'd yetn't adjusted, so little yet'd've been revealed'n the darkness.

"It's nice to look at, anyway."

Bamboo leaves rustled.

Nathaniel said, "What do you think this place is like we're going to?"

After a moment: "I don't know what to think."

Up the canyon, another lamp glowed, blinked as Zeb eclipsed't, as'f t'pantomime a shadow theatre for no audience.

"Do you think he'll try to leave without us?"

She shook'er head.

Zeb's curses filled intermittent silences.

"You know," Catherine said. "It's not like I imagined it would be."

"What did you imagine?"

"I can't remember anymore." She sighed. "Maybe I never imagined anything at all. Only thought I did."

"Is that bad?"

"No." And she put'er hand over'is. "The world's just different than I thought, that's all. And it just doesn't seem to end."

"Maybe it doesn't," he said. "Maybe it just goes on forever." Stars

hung'n a ragged strip between the sides of the canyon, reflected'n the slow-moving surface below and'd've rendered't almost impossible t'know one end of the world from t'other. "Do you think the Lord doesn't like us anymore?"

Obsidian water moved deeper into the night and tried t'carry the stars away, but they remained on their own reflected paths. "I can't believe he would make things that feel good and tell us we can't have them."

"Maybe he's alone," Nathaniel said. "It's always *he*, isn't it? Has anyone ever talked about anyone else? So maybe he doesn't get what it's like to be with somebody else."

"You shouldn't say things like that," she said. But she lightly laughed, anyway.

He laughed too. And'e stood. "Come on." They'd've still held each other's hand. "We should get some sleep." She glanced back at that obsidian surface, pulled herself up. "I found a good place." And lifting the lamp, butn't turning't on, they moved through the grove. Their backpacks lay along a small trampled clearing covered'n bamboo leaves. He set the lantern by the rolled-out sleeping bags they'd taken from the tractor.

"It'll do," she said. And still ahold of'is hand, she turned and pressed against'm and lowered'er cheek against'is neck. "I don't want to feel bad anymore." And she put'er arm round'm and rested'er hand on the back of'is neck. "But I'm afraid if I don't..."

"It's okay."

"No," she said. "It's not. When we were together, everything else just...went away." She slipped'er hand from'is grasp, worked't under'is shirt and rested'er palm against'is stomach. "And I'm ready for everything to go away again."

And she pulled'is shirt over'is head and eventually'e knelt and tugged'er undergarments down round'er legs and'er grey-speckled pubic hair hung diffused'n silver moonlight and starlight just at eye level.

"Too bad we didn't bring any oil."

And she'd drawn'm up. "I think we can make do." And she'd spat into'er hand.

And'n the end, she eased herself forward from where she'd

pressed'erself against'is raised thigh, eased down against'm so'er
breasts crushed against'is hot chest and the still warm liquid lobbed
across'is stomach stickily coated'ers.

Bamboo rustled round'em. Small leaves floated through starlight,
rained over their sweat-damp bodies. The moons reflected above and
below.

They lay there.

"I keep having a terrible thought," he said.

"What?"

He stroked'er buttocks, ran'is fingers over'er breasts where they were crushed against'is chest. "One of the guys told this story once. And something reminded me of it."

"Hm?" Their voices resonated through t'other's chest.

"You remember the bulls?"

"The ones with the horns?"

"Yeah."

"What about them?"

"They get hard like me. Then they climbed on the cow and put it in them."

Silence. "Why would they do that?"

They lay there.

"Do you... Do you mean you want to try that?"

"It was just a thought. I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

She pulled'erself up and glued-dried sweat and semen ripped from their skin with a ticklish rustle. "Sometimes," she said, "I put my fingers inside." And she touched'is heated, partially engorged erection. "What do you think we would have to do?"

Mouth slightly agape, he shook'is head. "I...don't know. I guess..." His brows furrowed'n intense concentration and she almost laughed. "Maybe if you were on your hands and knees and I—"

She shook'er head. And maybe'e seemed bout t'say something, but she shook'er head again. "But maybe..." And she shifted'er other leg over'is other leg so she straddled'is hips. "Maybe it would work this way." And she poised over'm and reached down and grasped'is

erection. “Are you sure?” He nodded. And’is gaze focused on the gap between their crotches.

She lowered’erself. And’is tip passed through’er hair, but went too far and slipped along’er buttocks, so she’d t’raise’erself and reach between’em and guide’t back and route his tip between’er lips till’t slipped’n. Under’er, he breathed shallow and hard. And just as’e seemed bout t’speak, she held’er breath and sank till’er buttocks mated against’is hips.

His hands gripped’er thighs till’er flesh protruded between’is fingers. And she moved’er hips, maybe t’rise again, but’e thrust up, emitted a strangled cry, eyes screwed shut. And’e collapsed against the leaf bed. But’e shuddered when she bent against’m, whispered, “... please...” as what remained of’is sensitive erection moved inside’er.

“Ssssh...” And she lay against’m and intertwined’er fingers’n’is hair.

And’e slipped outa’er. “Was it...” He opened’is eyes. “Was it like that for you?”

She smiled. “It was...good,” she said. And she laid’er cheek against’is neck. “It’ll be something else we can do when we get bored.” By then, both their fluids’d’ve begun t’crystallize and mat and glue their hair and skin together again.

Breeze over

Sweat-beaded skin

Water

Darkness

Stars

Wind through

Bamboo

They paddled. Bamboo shores'd've long given way t'sheer canyon walls. Canyon rims lay blood-bathed'n late evening as they drifted through twilight below. Then the canyon opened. They drifted into an apparently ancient impact crater. In'ts midst, water or wind'd seemingly carved round a less-ancient upthrust or thrown-over land-mass. And they might've been forgiven for mistaking't for a butte. And [...]

“Do you see it?” Nathaniel said.

Catherine pushed up'er hat brim.

“Steer for the fucking docks. The fucking docks.”

Zeb pointed, but, for the moment, they sat still and watched as setting sun licked towers and spires blood-red and black and set the caldera aglow.

As'f the world [burnt?].

“What’s that mean?” Kayla said.

“[Blood?] means [blood?],” Li said. She snorted and adjusted’er pack straps over’er shoulders.

“Look.” Genie pointed t’a series of multi-colored cats chalked on a nearby wall. “That’s the smallest’nes yet. Yuns thin’t means somethin?”

“We’d b’close,” Ambeth said.

Mara nodded.

Li pointed t’a bridge between two towers. “Let’s get’igher.”

And up there, Helena pointed. “What’s that?”

“Where?”

“Over there. Over there.”

Genie said, “Is that’t?”