



The

Secret History

OF

Mars



VOL. II



DFHall



Once, a young child asked God why bad things happen.

God did not reply.

God never replies anyway [since there are no more phones].

—Story reportedly from the 8th.
(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

BOOK III

INTERVIEW
(CONTINUED)

INTERVIEWER

What are some of the difficulties involved when translating a work such as this?

MARSDEN

Well, there are many, obviously.

INTERVIEWER

Give us an example.

MARSDEN

Regional dialects. That's a big one.

INTERVIEWER

How so, specifically to this work?

MARSDEN

Yes. The language itself is heavily contracted. That is, it uses contractions to a far greater degree than present-day English. It's something like French was in that regard. Yes, use that. Or it could say in the way that certain now-extinct English dialects were.

INTERVIEWER

What problems did this introduce?

MARSDEN

Mainly how to represent these frequent contractions in present-day English while still being able to keep the text flowing.

INTERVIEWER

It seems that ambiguity would sometimes be a problem in such a situation.

MARSDEN

It could. But if it is, I think it's a problem we managed to overcome.

INTERVIEWER

Was there anything else about the language that presented difficulty?

MARSDEN

Yes. One of the problems was that the language has no 'un'. That is, it does. But as I understand it, that is—I'll try to explain this. When they use the prefix 'un', they mean it in a much more restricted sense than we do.

INTERVIEWER

How so?

MARSDEN

You see, it's used as, the term, I believe, is an excess of its vital substance, or something like that. That is to say, they might say—some of our editing team uses this example—they might say 'undead' and they seem to mean it very much like we would, that is, something that has an excess of life, it's alive beyond when it should be. Yes, something like that.

INTERVIEWER

So if you were to say 'unheard' in that language?

MARSDEN

It would refer to something that everyone already implicitly knows, yes.

INTERVIEWER

How did this complicate things?

MARSDEN

Well, obviously, in present-day English, we use the 'un' prefix—unlocked, for instance—in ways that don't make sense to think about that way, right. So we had to figure out English equivalents of words that might otherwise be rather ungainly if copied, translated literally, that is.

INTERVIEWER

Does this language have any direct connection to contemporary English?

MARSDEN

There is some speculation that it is a descendant of English.

INTERVIEWER

Professor Thompson from your editorial board has likened its relationship to contemporary English in the same way contemporary English can be likened to Old English.

MARSDEN

You could say that.

“We’re late!”

“Told yuns,” Li said.

They pushed through a crowd and down an alleyway and into a square. Someone’n flowing robes sat’n one corner beneath sparse shade and several sat round.

“No,” Ambeth said. “Everybody’s just gettin warmed up.”

“What’re we gonna do?” Genie said.

“First,” Mara said, “we’d better find someplace t’sleep.” She looked over the crowds.

“Crap,” Li said. “Might well ask fer water’n the desert.”

“Can yuh *try* and’ve a positive attitude?” Ambeth said.

“Well, I’m *positive* we’re gonna’ave t’go ’oo knows where t’find noplacethat’s empty. Or climb all the way t’the top of’oo the’eck knows wut.”

Mara said, “Might aswell get started.”

Our journaller makes no mention of what this person'n the corner was saying, but't's possible whe (I've cast a die again) could've been telling a story something like

An overhead fan stirred languid heat through the office. His chair's mechanism squeaked as he leaned back. Papers scattered across his desk seemingly as if wind-blown. He laid his pencil atop them. He rolled his chair back and stood. Hands'n his pockets, he went and looked through a window. The office door stood open. He pushed through the screendoor. A dozen or twice or three times as many white-painted tanks stretched row-wise beside the small building and painfully reflected early afternoon sun. Hands'n his pockets, he walked along the porch. At the end, atop the steps, a young man barely older than himself played solitaire'n the shade. The young man looked up. Ron looked back over the tanks. "Why don't you take the rest of the day off," he said.

"You sure?"

"Yeah," Ron said. "There's not going to be anything coming in today."

The young man gathered his cards, slipped them into his front shirt pocket. He reached for his hat. "Another hot one."

"Yeah."

The young man paused, toyed with his hat. "Well, see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

The young man walked out along the road and past the tanks. Ron stood there with his hands'n his pockets and watched heatwaver swallow him.

A train whistled going opposite on the tracks. He pulled t' the crossing and watched as cars flickered by. Low sunlight peeked between open boxcar doors. He sat a moment and watched the last car shrink into the distance. Coated'n yellow-gold haze, the town grew from the washed-out horizon as dirt roads transitioned t' asphalt. He pulled'is hatbrim down against low sun as'e wound through town. Finally, he parked beneath the slant shed at the end of the driveway. His hat remained pulled down over'is eyes when'e opened the front door and walked into the living room.

The light was on'n the kitchen. Ron slipped-off'is jacket and stopped'n the doorway, his hat still pushed down over'is eyes. "What's for dinner?"

"It will be ready in a minute," she said.

He walked back toward'is bedroom and laid'is jacket across the comforter and sat on the bed and lay back and so the mattress pushed'is hat farther up then down'is face.

"Are you coming?"

He sat up, dropped'is hat on'is jacket.

The dining area sat adjacent t' the living room, both rooms divided only by air. He took'is seat opposite'ers. Except for cutlery clink, they ate'n silence a long time.

Finally, she said, "You were home early today."

"Yeah." He chewed. "Sent Derek home a little after noon. No use in both of us hanging around with nothing to do."

"But you're still going to pay him," she said.

"Of course."

"So instead of getting paid for sitting around and doing nothing, he's going to get paid for going off and doing who knows what."

"It's not his fault there's nothing to haul."

"And it's not your fault, either. But do they pay you when that's the case?"

Ron chewed'n silence.

"I won't say any more about it," she said. "If you don't care, I don't care."

The next day'e came home with'is hat brim pushed down over'is eyes just as't'd been the day before⁶¹⁹. He stopped'n the kitchen doorway. Empty. But the light remained on.

"Go get ready," she said.

He looked over'is shoulder. She stood dressed'n something nice and looked up from sorting through'er pocketbook. "What's going on?"

"I told you," she said. "Don't you remember? We were invited for dinner."

"Hmm."

"So hurry up and get ready. We don't want to be late." She snapped-shut'er pocketbook. "Did you get the car washed?"

"No."

"Wonderful," she said. "We get to arrive in something that looks as good as one of those junkers they leave out there in the desert."

"I'll have it washed tomorrow."

"Tomorrow isn't today, is it?" She walked into the living room and sighed and adjusted'er gloves. "Go get ready. We don't want to be late, on top of it all."

⁶¹⁹ According to Bloomenthal, it is possible this phrasing could also refer to both 'the day before' and 'or maybe it had been a different day' simultaneously. (Poetics Astrica, Vol. 3, 176.33.8.)

They drove down Mainstreet. The sun set behind the town council building and burned gold. In the distance, the building seemed beyond black, null, sucked into void. As they approached the intersection, mere shadow draped't.

"They should do something about that," Beatrice said.

"Hm? What?"

"When are they ever going to get the rest of these shops cleaned up?" As f t've some excuse t'look away, she adjusted'er gloves. "And these vacant lots. They're an eyesore."

He turned the car. "Lotta people are hard up right now."

"Do you have to talk that way?" She adjusted'er gloves. "Well, it's not like they haven't had time. It's been *years*."

"Everybody does what they can."

"If somebody doesn't do something," she said. "This town's going to blow away on the wind."

He'dn't reply.

“’ope yuh weren’t plannin on privacy,” Li said.

Voices crashed round and between’em as they threaded narrow walkways between packs and hammocks and those sitting on the floor. Cats flitted between their legs.

Mara said “Where’s some space?”

Someone pointed. They moved toward a corner.

“It seems,” Kayla said, “It seems we spend all our time hangin and dis-hangin hammocks.” She dropped’er pack, checked’er bag. Quetzalcoatl poked’is nose from beneath’ts flap, squeezed’is head through, and’t must’ve seemed the rest of’m’d follow, because Kayla touched’is nose with’er palm. “No, no, no. Not now. Stay inside.”

“Better watch’t,” Li said. A cat passed nearby. “Or’e’s gonna b’dinner.”

“Let’s just get set,” Mara said.

“Hi.” They all looked over. A speckled-haired woman smiled. She waved. She smiled. “Where’re yens from?”

“The third,” Ambeth said.

“Oh, wow. Yee’ve come a long way. I’ve always wanted t’see the third.” Somebody whistled. She looked over’er shoulder. “I’ve gotta gonn now.”

Li watched’er thread across the room.

“Don’t get any ideas,” Ambeth said.

“Wasn’t thinkin nothin.”

“That’s the problem.”

“Y—”

“Yuh think we can find somethin t’eat?” Helena said.

"No," Li said, and dropped'er pack into'er hung hammock. "All these people're eatin air and drinkin water, same as plants."

Mara pulled a satchel from deeper'n'er bag. She opened't and ran'er fingers over the small doilies inside.

"Better watch't," Li said. "This ain't the third."

Mara glanced up. She tied-off'er satchel.

"Does that..." Genie'd been bout t'roll up'er traveling hat and't flopped down and almost hid'er. In a low voice: "should we worry bout the rest of our stuff?"

Li rolled'er eyes.

"None steals a hat or a hammock," Ambeth said. "Else they'd get the same they'd get'f they'd done't'n the third."

"So make sure yuh get the right'ammock when yuh stumble'n," Li said. "Somebody else mightn't b'as forgivin as me."

Ambeth said, "Definitely isn't nobody takin yuhrs."

"Alright," Mara said. And she slipped'er satchel strap over'er head and onto'er shoulder. "Let's go see'f we can get something t'eat."

They'd asked and'd been pointed in a direction. Crowds squeezed through narrow alleyways. Bamboo smoke⁴⁴ and foodscnt carried with'em.

"There's so many," Genie said. "Are they all'ere t'tell stories?"

"Impossible," Li said, and shoved'er through an archway. "Come on, move fore we get compressed."

Helena sniffed. "Oh, everythin smells so good."

"And wait till yuh see'ow much they want'n trade," Li said.

Helena glanced at'er, but said nothing.

Ambeth pointed. "Let's try up there."

Hot coals licked at'em as they passed. Black, twisted charcoal-coated lumps hung impaled on bamboo skewers. "Better keep'is nose inside," Li said.

Kayla stared a moment, eeked when she must've recognized the tails wound round those bamboo skewers. Quetzalcoatl sniffed, squeaked, and Kayla moved'er hand as'f t'cover'is eyes and pushed'm back into'er satchel. "They eat...rats down'ere?"

⁴⁴ According to Bloomenthaal, this word usually seems to refer to a specific seven kinds of smoke. (Poetics Astrica, Vol. 1, 169.19.2.)

Li snickered. "Wut's the matter? yuh eat fish."

"Yah, but..." She looked ahead t'Mara and Ambeth. "We're n't gonna've t'eat that, are we?"

Mara motioned ahead. "Let's try up there."

A bald-headed old man sat cross-legged'n a corner on contiguous-laid blankets, ensconced behind many bamboo bowls, some probably no larger than the palm of a small hand, some maybe as large as a traveling hat. Mara pointed. "How much?" He looked past'em, silent.

"Come on," Li said, after a few moments. "Let's find somethin else."

That bald-headed old man still looked on silently, eyes faintly watery.

"He's been waiting for yuns."

They turned. A young man broke from the crowd with a rolled blanket beneath one arm and deftly stepped between bowls till'e stood beside that bald-headed old man.

"Why—" Genie started, but Li elbowed'er.

Mara said, "We've never met, I don't think."

"N'yet," that young man said. And'e turned and stood'is blanket'n the corner.

"Yuh, yuh said'e's been waitin," Genie said. "'ow did'e know t'wait fer us then?"

"He'd a vision."

Genie said, "A vision?"

"He'd a vision that yuns'd come."

"Nice," Li said. She motioned'er head t'Mara for'em t'go.

Genie said, "What'd'e see?"

"Nothin," Li said. "Look at'm, he's been starin'nto the sun too long."

"Did'e really see the future?" Genie said.

That young man nodded. "He says'e's honored by yuns's presence."

"I'dn't'ear anythin."

"That's cause'e'dn't say nothin," Li said. "Come on, let's go."

But none of'em moved. That bald-headed old man remained still and stared seemingly past'em, just as'e'd the whole time. "He says please, sit. Yuns'll b'tired after yuhr long journey. And hungry. He offers everything yuh see before yuns."

“Yah,” Li said. “Fer wut trade?”

“He asks only for one small doily. A doily with seven great outer struts and three inner.”

Genie said, “How’d yuh know we brought doilies t’trade?” She winced as Li thwacked’er arm.

“Cause,” Li said. “Yuh’ve got third written all over yuh. And anyone knows wut thidders’ll trade out this far.” She turned toward that younger man and that bald-headed old man. “Even a blind man’d see that.”

“How much for a small doily?” Mara said.

“As much’s yuns need as many days as yuns’re’ere.”

“That,” Ambeth said. “Don’t make sense asa trade.”

“No,” Li said. “There’s some kinda trick.”

Mara shook’er head. “Explain.”

“He only asks two other things.”

“’a—told yuh.”

“He asks each of the seven travelers from’is vision t’tie a small buncha their hair t’each of the doily’s seven outer struts.”

“I’dn’t’ear’m askin nothin,” Li said. And she glared at that younger man. “What section’re yuh from? This some sort of magic freakery?”

“Why?” Mara said.

“He’d a vision.”

Silence. Crowd noise washed over’em. Mara glanced at t’others. “Well?”

Li said, “Yuh’re’n’t gonna trust’m?”

“What’s t’other thing?” Mara said.

“He asks yuns eat’ere and take nothing away with yuns.”

Li said, “Yuh can’t b’considerin this.”

“Whyn’t?”

Li threw up’er hands. Mara glanced at t’others. “Well?”

Ambeth shrugged.

“It smells good,” Helena said.

Kayla said, “Well...”

And that young man said, “And’e says that the rat may partake aswell.”

Kayla looked up, glanced down t’ssee’f Quetzalcoatl’s nose

protruded from'er bag. It'dn't. She looked up, glanced toward Mara. "Kay."

Genie nodded.

There's no marks about what our journaller'd, but she must've answered yah.

Li rolled'er eyes.

Mara dug into'er satchel and nodded t'Ambeth. Ambeth squatted and dis-sheathed the knife she carried strapped t'er calf. She twirled'er hair between'er thumb and forefinger and cut't free. Mara squatted and spread a doily on the blanket, accepted Ambeth's knife, pinched some of'er hair, sliced't and passed the knife on. Kayla did't for Genie. Someone offered the knife t'Li. "Yuh've t'b'freakin kiddin." But Ambeth said, "It'sn't gonna hurt yuh." And Helena said, "Come on, everythin smells so good. Let's eat." Li groaned, rolled'er eyes, but accepted the knife. "Crap, I can't believe I'm doin this." When Mara'd finished, seven fresh-harvested bundles laid⁴⁸¹ tied with bow-knots all round the doily. She lifted't and offered't across that bald-headed old man's many bowls. He still stared vaguely beyond'em as that younger man accepted't and placed't at the older's feet. That young man motioned. "Please, he begs yuns sit."

They'd, except for Li. And t'others glanced up at'er.

"Gaaaah." She shook'er head and sat.

That young man leaned forward and proffered a bowl. "These birds were caught just this morning. The spices come from yuhr own section. Though, yuns might find'em arranged differently."

Honey sauces coated their fingertips as they nibbled and rent tiny bird flesh.

"Mmmm," Helena said. "T's good."

"Course," Kayla said, and sucked'er thumb clean, "after dried fish so long..."

That young man offered the bowl t'Li. But she shook'er head.

"Yuh'd try some." Genie licked'er fingertips.

Li grunted.

That young man faintly smiled. "He says t'say'e understands and of course takes no offense."

"Fer a man 'oo never opens'is mouth," Li said, "he says a freakin lot."

That young man shrugged. He offered another bowl. "He's been waiting for yuns a long time."

"Is that why'e looks like a pile of wrinkles?"

"Cut't," Ambeth said between bites. "Eat somethin and yuh'll feel better."

"When'd'e..." Genie paused. "When'd'e've'is, uh, vision?"

"Sometime ago. When'sn't important."

Li snorted.

That young man offered another bowl. "He's something'e'd like t'tell yuns'f yuns'd care t'listen while yuns eat."

"There's some kind of catch," Li said.

But Mara nodded. She rested'er forearms on'er knees so'er dirtied fingers pointed skyward.

That young man breathed deep, sat with'is eyes closed a moment. "I remember when I first saw the city. Not that I hadn't many times before. But as we departed the tractor it seemed to me as if it somehow became realer because I knew I would probably never see Earth again—"

"Wait," Li said. "Yuh'ren't that old."

"But'e's," that young man said. "I only speak'is words."

"Let'm go on," Kayla said. She opened'er bag and offered a morsel t'Quetzalcoatl, who grabbed't'n both paws and squeaked.

"Yah," Genie said. "I'ke t'listen while I eat."

Li sighed.

That young man paused. He sighed. "I knew I would probably never see Earth again. But it had been such a long time it seemed at times I could hardly remember anything specific about it. And what I did remember I wanted as much to forget as anything. The... But that isn't important. I remember Zilog standing there, hands in his pockets, looking at it as we left the tractor. Someone, I think it was Mae, but maybe someone else, ragged him about just standing there while we all tried to haul inflatable rafts down into the basin. I can't remember what I thought at the time, but now I think he must have been saddened by the dome. It wouldn't have seemed like clear plastic would have affected much. Only years later when I finally saw the sunset undiffused over the towers did I understand the loss he must have felt. It had only ever been meant to be a temporary structure as

far as we knew, but had become, in effect, permanent, as if someone had left the wires and green screen in a movie. But it helped us, that's what I think the rest of us thought, that it would keep the wind out, it was useful. That's all I think I could see then as we inflated the rafts and carried our things down. I think someone said to think of it like going to live in a theme park. That always seemed wrong to me. But I never knew why. But the whole thing was almost too idealic. The few of us. As much free space as we could stand. Supplies that would have lasted our small group hundreds of years. Someone used to say, I cannot remember who, the life extensions would make us go crazy after a while, anyway. So we wouldn't need more than a few hundred years worth. It was... It was a she... I think, who said it. I cannot remember what happened to her... But the whole thing was almost too idealic. The few of us. Maybe more free space than we could stand. Supplies that would have lasted our small group hundreds of years. 'All this stone,' I remember someone saying to Zilog. Maybe it had been me. 'All this stone and rooms built from stone, it's been built by us, yet it's as if we have gone back in time and become cave dwellers again.' I remember somebody laughing, saying something about there being two or three versions of a caveman diet in the foodstocks. Zilog was the most physically imposing individual I had ever met. Not just his height or width, but the wholeness of him. It was as if his physical being were the expression of the magnitude of his intellectual self. He was an aesthetic genius. Only years later when I finally saw the sunset undiffused over the towers did I understand. The city was so empty and quiet. I remember, I think, I once said that must be what it felt like after a war or something. Zilog said something to me. I cannot remember what. He walked off afterwards. And Mae said... She said... I cannot remember. I never thought about him being a child during the wars. I never watched any of the documentaries but what they had us do in school. I don't remember any children in those. Everything was supposed to be so smart. It was supposed to fly in with pinpoint laser accuracy faster than any human could do it. Just wham and the bad guy falls without a sound or anything. I remember... I cannot remember her name. She was a doctor. She liked to sunbathe topless. I'd go down on her sometimes. We couldn't... Hmmm... I said to Mae one day, or someone said, 'I think I'm going crazy.

Sometimes I see shadows but there isn't anybody there. I yell and no one answers, and when I go after them, they're gone.' Mae had only looked at us the way she always did. She was always professional. We joked about ghosts. Ghosts haunting a city that had never been populated, the descendants of all those who had never been. I think we laughed and took our lights and searched catacombs for bones we would never find. In the dark, sometimes the doctor would go down on me. I used to sit with my phone for hours. We still had satellites then, I think. We must have. Sometimes we texted each other across the city. It was so beautiful and so boring. I think someone said it was going to be like living in a theme park. And Zilog began to disappear days at a time. Sometimes some of us followed him, but lost him among the underground passages. They say he knew every step in the city by name and number. I believed them. We tried to make something of a life. A stretched tarp and some tables became our commissary. We found it important to eat together. The vast emptiness made it seem as if some past war had taken place or that maybe we haunted them, that maybe we disturbed the rest of all those who had never existed. Maybe that was worse than disturbing the dead. The dead could have only so much vengeance. They knew what it was to live and could not begrudge us for that. But those that had never existed, what could they have known of anything we felt? We would be nothing but the reminders of everything they could never have been. I had gone out somewhere to take a dump. I cannot remember where. There were so many places for it. Mae was right with what she said later. But Zilog had been smart. Smarter than anyone else. He was an aesthetic genius. He was the most physically imposing individual I had ever met. Not just his height or width, but the wholeness of him. It was as if his physical being were the expression of the magnitude of his intellectual self. And we followed him, but we could never figure out where he went. We gave up. Someone used to fish off the pier. He would just lay out there with a pole propped between his legs and a bob floating on the water. Or... Maybe he didn't. Maybe it was the doctor who laid down there and sunbathed topless. I used to sit and read the news on my phone. It was funny how usenet had to be reborn to make an interplanetary internet work. There used to be rumors of people sent out past the end of the solar

system. They would have had to read the news the same way I did. We always knew the legal battle would be long. Trade secrets kept us from knowing any details. But we knew it had to be going on. Some people ask is God dead? I think one time I said, 'which one?' But I have forgotten what that means. Maybe I didn't ever know. Wind would leak through the canyon and under the dome. Sometimes, at night, the breeze made noises through empty windows. Sometimes I had dreams... Masked Martians danced to pipe tunes so ethereal and eerie. Firelight reflected from their painted skins. Their eyes shone like jewels beneath their masks. Their smokes rose up forever to obscure the moons. Sometimes I would wake shaking and could still hear that ethereal music. And I was sure all those who had never existed would come again. The dust settled in the awaiting of their return. I remember... I think... Mae sometimes gave someone some pills. Maybe it was me. Sometimes I slept better than others. A few of us paddled our rafts upstream and brought back bamboo. One night we built a fire so as to have some light besides our flashlights and phones. We were all alone in the city. And only our ghosts kept us company. But I don't think any of us had thought that, really, our ghosts would come to greet us. But eventually they had to."

That young man sat quiet. He opened his eyes, faintly smiled. "He says that's all for today. He doesn't want to keep yuns more than he'd."

Mara and the rest sat in silence.

"But return tonight, as per our agreement. And he wishes yuns well."

That young man bent to rearrange empty bowls and to cover those yet not so as Mara and the others rose. That bald-headed old man still just looked watery-eyed into the distance.

"Shoot," Genie said as they passed into an alley and she looked over her shoulder. "I's gonna ask'm, since he'd a vision, if he'd tell f Mara's gonna win or not."

"Yuh're really somethin'," Li said, "aren't yuh?" And she sucked her fingertips clean one more time.

As they walked, they must've passed through the same square as earlier, or perhaps the robed figure'd moved t'some other corner. People still'd've sat round, but mayben't those same ones as before.³⁸¹

³⁸¹ According to Bloomenthaal, this phrase could mean both 'not as many' or 'maybe more'. (Poetics Astrica, Vol. 3, 3.67.4.)

“What do you think of the beans?”

Ron looked up, jarred from silence. “Fine.” He shifted his fork. “Is there something particular I should notice about them?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Ralph said. “She always gets nervous when company’s over. One of the benefits of owning a grocery is taking home half-spoiled produce and eating the losses.”

“Ralph.”

He shook his head. “I just haven’t gotten her convinced that’s just what grocer’s families have done since the Rocket landed.” He forked several and brought them to his mouth, reached for his napkin as juice dribbled down his chin.

“Ralph.”

“Excuse me.” He draped his napkin across his lap again. “They say things should be looking up if we don’t get another storm this year. To tell you the truth, I’ll be looking forward to getting in some strawberries again. Might have to go ahead and mark some of them as spoiled as soon as they come in. Of course, with gas like it is, there’s no telling what it’s going to cost. They always blame everything on the price of gas, you know.”

“Ralph.”

Ron absently shook his head. “Holding it as low as I can. Down south and out west, from what I hear, they’re already up to past twice that.”

“Well, you know,” Ralph said, “that’s just something I never understood. Out there in the west, with all of what they grow out there, you’d think, if anyplace, gas would be nothing.”

“Gotta make it from something,” Ron said.

"Well, I don't know. Sometimes I think it's all about squeezing as much money out of us as they can."

"Ralph."

"I'm just saying. Of course, I always figured a certain kinship with the gas business, anyway. I mean, what's gas but food in a different form, right?"

"Would anyone like dessert?"

"So long as it isn't motor oil." Ralph laughed.

Both women carried plates into the kitchen.

Ralph sat back'n'is chair, tried t'jam'is tongue-tip between two teeth. "You seen what's going on on Backstreet?"

"Some."

Ralph shook'is head, tongue still between two teeth. "Jim Taggart's doing, you know."

"What is it?"

"Got me. He's been putting together the men to work on it, too, all himself. Might as well change his name at the rate he's going." He shifted'n'is seat. "You ever hear anything about them? The older ones, I mean. Not, you know who."

Ron shook'is head.

"Of course, hmmmm." Ralph sucked'is teeth and shook'is head. "I'm telling you, the Walcotts—"

"Ralph!" His wife stood there with a small dish'n each hand. Beatrice appeared behind'er with the same.

"Ah." He shook'is head. "What's the big deal? It's just a name. There isn't nothing gonna come out of a name." He glanced at Ron as one or t'other set a dessert plate before'm. "Am I right?"

Beatrice cleared'er throat. "Marilyn, have you heard they're planning on putting on a play at the school in a couple weeks?"

"No," Marilyn said as she sat.

"We were thinking about going, isn't that right, dear?"

"Hmm?" Ron glanced up. "I guess so."

"Maybe we could all go together," Beatrice said.

"Ah." Ralph shook'is head as'e lifted'is spoon. "What's the point in going and watching other people's kids, anyway?"

Marilyn slipped from'er seat and moved toward the hallway. Beatrice glanced at Ron. Then she followed.

Ralph watched'em go as'e ate. "What was that all about?"

Ron set down'is spoon.

"Something wrong?"

Ron shook'is head. "Tired," he said. "Takes my appetite sometimes."

Ralph nodded as'e ate. "Yeah, I know how that goes."

“I’d never thought there’d’ve been so many people,” Genie said. A fountain set acenter a packed square. “I’m thirsty.”

“Yuh thin?” Li said.

“Oh, shutup,” Ambeth said. “That food made me thirsty too.”

A group sat on fountain’s edge as they approached. One said, “Who’re you?”

“’Oo,” Li said, “wants t’know?”

“Where are yuh from?” another said.

“None of yuhr business. I’d suggest yuh move.”

One said, “A thirder.”

“Whies shoulds wees?” another said.

“I’d kick yuhr tail from’ne enda this square t’t’other.”

“What’s...” Genie said, under’er breath. “What’s goin on?”

“And yous thinks yours cans does’ts?”

“More than nuf and twice over.”

“Wells, yous mights justs’ve tuse proves thats.”

“As I recall, I’ve done’t fore.”

“Yous’s memory’s always beens craps.”

“I’ope yuh don’t mean this excuse fer wut yuh call a gang’s gonna’elp yuh.”

Mara cleared’er throat. “Are yuns gonna let us by orn’t?”

“Yuh can’t block water,” Ambeth said.

Li raised’er hand for silence. “Oh, they’re’n’t blockin nowise. Are yuns?”

“Yous knows whats theys says bouts overs-confidences.”

Li laughed. “Yuh freakin’ sound as’f yuh’ere Nathaniel’s mother’erself.”

T'other woman cleared'er throat, stood. "I'ms freakins sick of yous's insults. You wants somethins tuse drinks. Hows 'bout Ise drowns yous."

"If yuh thin yuh can."

"Hold't—" Mara said.

But both'd moved toward each other too fast, threw their arms round t'other. "Freakin crap," Li said. Arm round t'other woman's waist, she turned and looked at Mara and the rest. "Everyone meet Lizbeth. She's from the sixth, so yuns'll've t'cut'er a little slack fer b'n loco."

"Said byse a wishes-washes."

Li shrugged. "I'm more interested'n survivin."

"Ise'll tells yours," Lizbeth said. "Thisses person rights'eres, pretended tuse bese a prophets sose wells, *Ise* thoughts shese was gonna flog *mese*."

"Saved yuhr ass, didn't't?" Li rolled'er eyes. "The only person I know crazy nuf t'waltz'nto their section—on purpose."

"Heys—you weres theres tuse."

"Jus t'keep yuhr ass outa the fire."

"As Ise remembers'ts—"

"Wutever," Li said. She motioned t'the rest and introduced'em. Lizbeth motioned'em toward the fountain.

After they'd washed their hands and cupped'em t'drink, Genie said, "Yuh really went into the seventeenth?" She rubbed the back of'er hand along'er chin as water dribbled off'er face.

"Thoughts twas a good idea ats the times."

"Oh, yah," Li said. She shook'er head. "Wut're yuh doin all the way out'ere fer this?"

"Whies shouldsn'ts Ise bese?"

"Oh, let me see, 'ow many times've yuh called't all poppycock—maybe only as much as twice as many grains of sand as there're'n the desert?"

"Onlies'fs yous believes anies of's't's trues," Lizbeth said. "Besides, I'ms babysittins thisses storyteller. You knows hows halves of's'ems ares."

Mara'd just finished rinsing'er hands. She'dn't look up.

Li laughed.

“What’res yours outs’eres fors?” Lizbeth said.

“Oh, us?” Li said. “We’re out’ere fer the poppycock.”

“Don’t you want to go to school?”

Allison shook’er head.

“You’d better finish your breakfast.”

Allison shook’er head.

Mary-Celleste seemed bout t’say something, but Jeff entered. “Jeff.” She cleared’er throat. “Your robe.”

He looked down at’mself. Languidly, he pulled’t together and tied a lazy knot.

“There’s some coffee on the stove.”

He rubbed’is face as’e got a mug down from the cabinet.

“Are you going to go into work today?”

“Why would you ask that?” He set the coffee pot back on the stove, but’dn’t turn.

“I— ”

He turned. “Well?”

Mary-Celleste shook’er head. “I was just wondering.”

“Well you can stop.” He sipped— “Gah—this’s hot.”

“It just came off the stove.”

“Uhhhhhhh.” He touched’is hand t’is lips.

“Sorry.”

He dropped’is mug into the sink. “Don’t apologize.” He walked out.

After a moment, Mary-Celleste looked across at’er daughter again. “You’d better eat.” Allison shook’er head. “How are you going to grow up to be big without eating?”

Jeff still’d on’is robe when’e entered the kitchen again. Mary-Celleste looked up at’m. He jerked’ts belt into a lazy knot again.

He got down another mug from the cabinet. Mary-Celleste turned toward Allison. "You have to eat now."

Allison shook'er head.

"EAT!"

Mother and daughter jerked.

"DO YOU THINK I PAY FOR..." Jeff breathed. "Do you think I pay for food just so it can be wasted?" Allison's eyes'd've gone big and liquid. "Don't look at me. Eat."

"Jeff—"

"I said eat."

Tears rolled. Mary-Celleste pushed back'er chair and rounded the table and touched a clean napkin t'er daughter's cheeks. "Now," she said. "You don't want to look like this your first day of school, do you?" And Mary-Celleste seemed t'try and smile. "Why don't you go wash your face. Alright?" Allison nodded. "And put on your shoes. You remember how to tie them, right?" Allison nodded. "Alright. Go on."

When Allison'd gone, Mary-Celleste turned. After a few moments silence, Jeff cleared'is throat. "I don't want to have this discussion again." He turned and lifted'is coffee mug.

"I saved something in the icebox for your breakfast," she said. "I'll be back in a little while."

"Where're you going?"

"School starts today."

He looked at'er through coffee steam. "And all the other mothers are just going to walk along, huh."

"Stop it."

"And all the little children are going to play together—"

"Jeff—"

"One big happy town. Where every—"

"STOP IT."

"DON'T RAISE YOUR VOICE TO ME. I'M STILL HEAD OF THIS HOUSE." His hand shook. Coffee dribbled and splattered on tile.

She remained still. "Do you need me to bring anything back?"

He set'is mug'n the sink. "No."

"Will you be alright while I'm—"

“DO I LOOK LIKE A CHILD?”

“No, Jeff.”

“That’s because I don’t.”

“Yes, Jeff.”

“Remember that.”

Mary-Celleste turned toward the living room.

“You remember that.”

“Alright, Jeff.”

“When yuns think’t’ll start?”

“It’ll start when’t starts,” Ambeth said.

“What’fn’t everybody’s’ere?”

“It’ll start when’t starts.”

Mary-Celleste held'er daughter's hand as they walked. "It's pretty, isn't it?" She pointed as they stopped and rested. Sun gathered'tself into a bronze orb from the liquid red spread over distant mountains. A cat crossed the street'n front of'em, paused and looked back. "Say hi," Mary-Celleste said. And she waved. Allison waved'er whole arm. They paused for'er t'catch'er breath as they ascended schoolhouse hill. "Do you want me to carry you?" Allison shook'er head. Children shouted and rounded the schoolhouse. Mothers clustered near the steps called after'em. They rounded the oak tree. One of'ts limbs lay on the ground, splintered and peeled, but still attached t'the broader trunk. Someone'd removed the swing. The women looked up as they approached.

"Good morning, Mrs Holdfast." Mary-Celleste nodded. "Mrs Johnson. Mrs Jameson."

Allison's hand slipped from'er grasp. Mary-Celleste looked down, half-turned t'find'er hiding behind'er skirt. "Now, what kind of way is that to be? Where are your manners, young lady?" Mary-Celleste turned, again, toward the ladies. "She's a little shy sometimes, I'm afraid."

"Children..." Mrs Holtcraft appeared atop the steps. "Ch... Oh." Her hair fell down'n sprigs over the side of'er face and she fought t'gather't up again as she stepped down toward the ladies. "Yes... We were just about to start." Two boys ran past. "Boys..." She cleared'er throat, clenched-dis-clenched'er hands. "Everything's new, of course," she said, and seemed t'smile. "Of course, they'll learn." Older children'd already started toward the steps. "Yes..." Mrs Holtcraft cleared'er throat. "Why doesn't someone ring the

bell?" She looked overhead. "And then everybody inside. Everybody..." Her head cocked and she leaned over as'f t'see round Mary-Celleste. "Is someone there?" Mary-Celleste looked back, stepped aside, but Allison clutched'er skirt.

Mary-Celleste dropped onto'er haunches and rested'er hand on'er daughter's arm. "Time to go," she said.

Allison shook'er head.

"Don't worry. You're going to have a good time."

The last young boys trumbled by Mrs Holtcraft and up the steps. "Don't run, boys." Their mothers called, then they moved as'f lead'd been poured into their shoes.

"I'll be here when you get out," Mary-Celleste said. "Okay."

Allison shook'er head.

"You don't want to make mommy sad, do you?"

Allison shook'er head.

"Well, if you go to school, you can draw mommy a nice picture. That would make me happy. Don't you want to do something nice for mommy?"

Allison'dn't reply, but slowly released'er mother's skirt. Mrs Holtcraft took'er hand.

"Have a good day."

Allison looked back as Mrs Holtcraft led'er up the steps.

“Yuh know’ere whe’s from?” Genie said. She’dn’t point, but glanced at the robed figure that’d’ve remained’n a distant corner as they passed through a square.

Lizabeth followed’er look. “Has tuse bese froms the tenths,” she said.

“Necessariln’t,” Ambeth said.

“Whose’ds bothers tuse wears thats muches otherwises?”

“Anybody. Just ’cause.”

Lizabeth laughed. “Yours shoulds gets outs mores. The world’s nots the sames asa bunchas stories.”

Ambeth glanced at Mara, but Mara just shook’er head.

The few working streetlamps punctuated darkness rather than dispelled't and rendered the windshield phthalo blue. He turned-on the wipers. Dry rubber arched back-and-forth over dust-impregnated glass.

"We should think about getting a new car," Beatrice said.

"Why?"

"Because this thing is positively ancient."

"It still works."

Beatrice sighed. "They're doing a lot of new things these days, you know? I've been looking at the catalog. They say there's all kinds of things getting ready to come up from the south."

"I like this car," he said. "It gets good traction when not on pavement."

Beatrice'dn't reply.

They turned onto a brighter-lit street.

"I'm gonna leave early tomorrow," he said. "So don't worry about anything for breakfast."

"Where are you going?"

"Some of the tanks need painting. I want to get started early, while it's still cool. I'll pick up something to eat later."

"Why do you have to do that?"

"Because if they rust through, our money evaporates."

"You pay him and he does nothing. You're in charge. You're not supposed to do these kinds of things. You're supposed to delegate."

"I'm hoping there's a shipment tomorrow. So Derek will be busy enough."

"I should've just married a handyman."

“Maybe.”

Silence engulfed'em as they turned onto the next street. Fewer streetlamps burned. At the far end, part of a house remained blackened from all that time before. Beatrice looked away. “We need somebody to do something about these things.”

“If what Ralph says is correct, sounds as if Jim’s turning into a regular Walcott.”

“Don’t say that name.”

He remained silent.

“It’s the habit,” she said. “You can’t get in the habit of saying things like that. What if you’d made that comment in public?”

“Maybe people need to say more things in public.”

Silence.

“How was Marilyn?”

“You know...” Beatrice sighed. “It’s just that time. A telegram will come. She’ll be fine.”

“Hm.”

“What does that mean?”

“It doesn’t mean anything.”

Silence.

“I suppose you’ll be getting home late.”

“Depends on how long everything takes, I guess.”

“Just take some spare clothes with you,” she said. “Don’t drive home covered in paint drippings. You never know who you might meet.”

“Anything else?”

Silence.

Genie pointed. "What're they doin over there?"

"Looks like maybe somebody's practicin," Helena said.

Kayla shifted'er bag over'er shoulder, looked down and poked Quetzalcoatl back'n. "Oh, let's go see. Maybe they're tellin something interestin."

Lizabeth snorted. "Yahs." She glanced toward Li. "Hows bouts wese takes offs. Theys'lls bese fines withouts yuses a littles whiles."

Li glanced at the rest. "Alright."

Mara said, "We'll expect yuh at the hammocks by dark."

Lizabeth laughed. "Ohs, don'ts worries. Wese'lls bese backs'ns times tuse makes sures yours don'ts gets'ns anies troubles."

Ambeth watched'em leave, laughing arm'n-arm. "I thought yuh'd never manage t'find someone more aggravatin than Li," she said.

Mara shook'er head.

"I'dn't know," Helena said. "At least Li'sn't so fulla'erself."

"Mosta the time."

They laughed.

"Come on," Genie said. "I wanna'ear what's goin on."

the giants.

They came down from the sky.

“I think’e’s talkin bout Ceili and Argile,” Genie whispered.

Someone's scribbled over the next few pages. Some of't's scratched out and marked over, but I can't tell'f that's something our journaler'd, or someone else. Part of't looks as'f't's a picture of a cat. It's hard t'say. But I think I know the version of the legend she's recounting, or something nearnuf.

So a long time ago but not a really long time ago but not anything close to now, all babies came down from the mountain. Soon t'b'parents took the train out along a great loop of track to a small station where they would dis-load their car. Then they'd drive out to and up the mountain as far as they could. Then walk from there.

But, once, something different happened.

Once, the Starmen descended. And one of the Star People fell in love with a woman. And when they fell in love a baby appeared inside her. And because two people cannot occupy the same body, the Starmen had to separate them. Except, before they could, one child had become two. And it might have gone on like this forever had the Starmen not stopped it. So they separated them. And there was a woman and two boys.

But the two boys were giants. That is because they were part of the Starmen.

And giants went forth in the world, producing as they had been produced. So we know that when two bodies must eventually separate, that child is of the giants and the Starmen.

“Yewere frum the third, urn’t yins?” someone said. And when Genie nodded: “Oh, uv always wanted t’ssee the third. Dey say she stands utop the tallest building and rises the sun uvery mornin. Is ut true?”

“Well...”

“And dey say’e rides a storm uvery time’e comms back.”

“Um...”

“Huv yew uver been’n the hall of black mirrors? Dey say dey suck out yewer soul.”

“I...” Genie said. “I’dn’t know.”

“I thought yew said yewere frum the third.”

“I am.”

Someone whistled. Genie glanced round t’ssee Ambeth motion from across the way. “Oh, I’ve t’go.”

“Are yew sure yewere frum the third? I dunt think yewere frum the third.”

“What’s the matter?” Genie said.

“Nothin,” Ambeth said. “We just wanted t’get started back so we’d get somethin t’eat before’t gets too dark.”

“Oh.”

“Who’ere yuh talkin to?”

Genie looked over’er shoulder. “I’dn’t know.”

“Well, let’s go.”

“’as Li come back yet?” Genie said as they walked.

“Yetn’t.”

“But she’s gonna miss the food.”

“That’s up t’er.”

High towers burnt bloody and black come evening, same as always. Rust-tinged air settled into bloom between walls. People emerged from underground passages bearing candles.

Genie said “What’s goin on down there?”

“No idea,” Mara said. “Maybe we can find somebody who knows, later.”

“Look!” Genie pointed.

“Freakin.”

They all stopped.¹⁴

Ahead, masks reflected candlelight and blood evening. Darkened eye-sockets seemed filled with primeval void.

“I thought,” Genie whispered. “I thought they never left the city center.”

“Well, obviously they do,” Kayla said. “Freakin, look at that.”

Flanked by candlebearers, masked figures disappeared into distant gloom.

“Yuh think...” Helena glanced at Mara. “Yuh think they’re’ere t’tell or t’listen.”

“I thought they never spoke.”

Mara shook’er head.

¹⁴ The contemporary English use of ‘froze’ would better imply the immediacy and rigidity that seems to be indicated here. Although if the descriptions of those structures seemingly identified in fragment #1495303.32 are reliable, there seems to have been some mention of underground arrangements that might have been used in the manufacture of some sort of ice, so in some sense it might not be as anachronistic a description as some have argued. The second Gateway Edition does use this nomenclature.

“Yuh’veer meet one?” Ambeth said.

“Not’n person.”

“Maybe we’d try and find somebody...” Helena said. “Figure out what’s goin on.”

“I’dn’t know,” Kayla said. “I’dn’t know’f there’s any figurin out ...if they’re round.”

“Reïncarnates,” Genie said. “Real, live reïncarnates.”

Finally, Mara said, “We’d better move. It’s gonna get between dark and moonrise.”

“Are we goin that way?” Helena said.

Mara shook’er head. “We’ll go round this way.”

Everyone nodded t’that.

“Jeff?” Mary-Celleste stepped inside and closed the front door. The house remained quiet. “Jeff?” She glanced into the kitchen as she passed. Down the hall, the bathroom door remained open. Medicine smell wafted out. She touched the doorknob as if to close it, but instead went on and opened the small window above the tub. Hot morning air struck her face. She closed the bathroom door on her way out. Jeff’s door remained half open. She gently pushed it. “Jeff?” Sheets lay twisted half off the bed. Even from the doorway they’d’ve looked stained. Mary-Celleste looked back down the hall. She entered the living room. For a moment, she stood as if not looking at anything at all, then looked round herself, paused at the phone. She dis-cradled it. Shshshshshsh noise touched her ear. Pops and crackles. Silence. A faint buzz. “Hello? Sarah?” The line hummed. “Sarah?”

“Oh, yes, Sarah.”

“No, this is Mary-Celleste Holdfast.”

“Yes. Sarah, did my husband make any calls this morning?”

“No. No, I understand. I was just wondering.”

“No. That’s alright. I was just wondering if you could...”

“Oh, okay. No, that will be fine.”

“No, I understand you’re busy. I’ll callback later.”

The line popped and hissed till she’d put it down.

The house’d’ve seemed very quiet.

Very quiet.

Candles flickered within deeper glooms.

"I wish there're more fires," Genie said.

"We're too far'n the interior," Ambeth said. "Nobody wants t'haul pellets'n this far just for that."

"I heard there's a huge pool as big as a...but really big," Helena said, "At the city's center. And they've got't all filled with fish. But'dn't eat any of'em. Yuns think't's true?"

"Never seen't."

"They say nobody'ver comes back," Helena said.

"They say alotta thins." Ambeth glanced at Mara'n the dimness. "What yuh think?"

Mara shook'er head.

"They say t'get through the wall yuh've t'know a magic password then a door opens up right outa the stone."

"Apparently they say alotta thins," Ambeth said.

"Hmph, yuh turnin into Li now?"

Genie said, "Where yuh thin she's?" And she glanced round at the surrounding darkness.

"She's wherever she's," Mara said. She pointed ahead. "We turn up here."

"We're lucky somebody brought pellets'n for cookin'," Ambeth said. "Yuh remember the fifteenth?"

"Hm." Mara nodded.

"What," Genie said. "What'appened'n the fifteenth?"

"They'dn't cook anythin."

"*Nothin?*"

"No," Kayla said. "I've heard bout that. They sun dry't all. Vegetable. Fish. Yuh name't. They like t'let the fish set out'n this kinda marinade for weeks or sometimes months'n the open air." It'd've been hard t'tell'f she shivered under cover of dimness.

"That sounds awful."

"Just b'glad yuh never'd t'eat't."

Helena said, "Why yuh wanna bring that up before supper?"

"She was talkin bout fish. And...I just thought of't."

"Well, I just wanna've somethin t'eat without havin t'talk bout sun marinades and who knows what else."

"Li's right, yuh're always hungry."

"Maybe. But at least I'm honest bout't."

"Can we talk bout somebody else for a change," Kayla said.

"*Squeak.*"

"What was that?"

"It was just Q," Kayla said. "He must've smelt somethin. Maybe we're gettin close."

"In case yuns're wonderin," Helena said, "t'other sound was my stomach."

"Yah, we know that." Ambeth shook'er head. "Yuh know what, we're just'ere, and I think I'm already sick of't."

"It'sn't that bad," Kayla said.

"Maybe." Ambeth sighed. She said t'Mara, "I'dn't wanna sound like Li but..."

"There's a light up there."

The robed figure'd've remained'n wher corner. Someone'd've lit a couple small candles. But only a few'd've sat round. But otherwise that square'd've sat empty.

Sun reflected from fresh paint and blinded'm. Ron adjusted'is hat, leaned round a tank at the sound of distant engine noise. A dustplume[†] grew from the distance.

A car door slammed. "ANYBODY HERE?"

Ron set down'is paint bucket and walked from behind a tank. The man whistled. He turned away from the building and toward Ron. "Crimeny," Taggart said. "What in the world have you been doing?"

"Painting the tanks."

Taggart shook'is head. "I guess, so long as it keeps you busy, right?"

"Something I can do for you?"

Jim glanced round over the single building, over the grid-aligned tanks. "Nobody else out here?"

"There's supposed to be a tanker come in on the next train. Derek's got the truck out."

"Mm." Hands'n'is pockets, Taggart glanced round, again. "I'll tell yuh," he said, "it's not what you can do for me. It's what I can do for you." Ron'dn't reply. "Take these tanks, for instance. How many you got? Two dozen? Three? How long is it gonna take you to paint all those? One a day? Maybe?"

"Is there a point to this?"

"Like I said, it's what I can do for you."

"How's that?"

[†] Bloomenthaal maintains that, contrary to popular belief, there are not more than a hundred different words for types of dust and sand storms. (*Poetics Astrica*, Vol. 7, 271.9.1.)

"Imagine you could get those tanks painted in a week. Five days."

"And how's that?"

"Well, I don't know if you've heard but I've got kind of a work crew going these days. Trying to get a handle on some of this stuff that's been put off too long now." He glanced over his shoulder, back towards town. "Gotta start getting things back on track."

"I've heard," Ron said. "Not really your line of work, usually, is it? I would've figured your father would be close enough to retiring from the council."

"Well, he is soon enough. Another year or so. But that's okay. In fact, this's all part of that."

"How so?"

"Oh, it's all set up by the council. Paid. I'm just administrating it. Dad just didn't wanna take it on, being so close to the end. He figured since I'm going to have to run it, I might as well start on the ground floor, as it were." He glanced over his shoulder again. "Yap, we're gonna get everything back up and going. Better than it ever was. Gotta do something about the whole problem, you know. All these transients, you know. Drifting through off farms and the such. Too many good men been outa work too long. Bad for the soul."

Ron stood with a hand'n's pocket, brush'n t'other. He looked off t'the side, as'f'e'd seen something out there'n the desert. "I'll just have to tell you, I can't think about paying any more men until I hear how this year's crop's turned out. So—"

Taggart laughed. "You don't get it," he said. "You're not having to pay a dime."

"How do you figure?"

"I just said it's all paid. The council. I'll ride a few men out here, they'll get the job done, and that'll be it. Nothing to it."

"Don't make much sense."

"Makes perfect sense," Taggart said. "You just gotta have the long view."

"And I suppose you have that."

Taggart nodded. "We're gonna revitalize. That's what we're gonna do. Revitalize. And after that, who knows?" Taggart smiled. "What do you say?"

Ron shook his head. "I'll have to think about it."

“Might not want to think too long. Plenty to be done around here.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Gonna be better than it ever was.”

“Hm.” Ron still had his paint brush in hand. “You ever think about the past, Jim?”

“All the time.”

Ron nodded. “Want to come in for something? All I’ve got is water.”

“No, thanks. Gotta get going.” He patted the top of his car. “Things to do. Things to get done. You know how it goes.”

“Yeah,” Ron said. He stepped back as the car turned, watched a dustplume drift into a cross breeze.

But they'dn't've'd time t'stop and listen, even though Genie'd've asked. So they'd've left wher t'continue wher story, however't went.

This is just me. I keep thinking how our journaller is oddly silent during all this. Thus far I can't identify anything she seems t've said'erself. Maybe she never said much of anything. Maybe the particulars are subsumed'n more compressed passages. Or maybe they're'n some of the missing pages. I wonder. I wanna think she must've been a very quiet person, maybe always walking around with'er book'n-hand, or at minimum, in a bag over'er shoulder. And I'd like t'think of'er as having long dark hair. I've found several strands of black or maybe dark-chestnut hair'n'er journal. But I've also found a few of every other color. However, that being the case, I think I can pick whichever one I want. What else can I tell? Her handwriting's small. I don't know what that means. Some people say handwriting means alot and that yuh can tell almost everything bout a person from't. I wonder what they'd say bout me? It's always been too big and loopy, like this. I wish't was as neat as some of the books Dave copied. If I'd write as neat as that... That's part of the problem with our journaller sometimes. She writes almost as badly as me. And sometimes I can't quite decipher the words. Most of'em I can get just by following along the flow of the passage, but sometimes I've just gotta make't make sense. She must've trimmed'er pens alot t'keep'em writing so small. And she manages very fine cross-strokes, but't's hard t'discern sometimes'f she's cross-stroking letters or crossing out a whole word. I just've t'flow along with'er passages and try t'discern some order.

He'd changed before'e drove back t'town, though'is tie hung loose round'is not-buttoned collar. Brown grass peaked between trees and skeletal azalea bushes as'e passed the park. He parked along Mainstreet, angled'is hatbrim against late-afternoon sun as'e stepped from'is car. He'd left'is jacket. Cacophony arose from a vacant lot ahead where weeds tried t'make headway against bare dirt but'd gained little ground. A building cast enough shade for those congregated t'hide'n.

"I'm telling you, I never seen anything like it."

"I don't know. Too many new-fangled things, I think, sometimes."

Everything of every kind must've been tied onto the truck parked there. And the man that drove't hung off the tailgate with'is arm through a metal loop fastened t'the sideboards. "Better get one while you can. Popular. Be gone by the next time I'm here, I'm sure."

"You think they work?" an old man said.

"Guaranteed." The truckster worked the thing's springs and levers. "They get in that and—wham—bang—no gettin' out. Don't ever have to worry about 'em again."

The old man hem-hawed, grumbled, but finally pulled one of'is hands from'is pockets with a few bills between'is fingers. "I'll take it."

"Won't regret it, sir. Won't regret it." And'e snatched those bills and slapped the device into the old man's hand. "Who else? These won't last long at these prices. W—evening, Mr Gas Man. Pleasure to see you again. What can I do you for?"

The old man showed Ron'is new contraption. "They say it catches the little things. Something new. What do you think?"

Ron shook'is head. "Don't know what to tell you." He looked up at the truckster. "You got a couple gallons of paint?"

"Yes, sir. Whatever you need, I've got it." He disappeared, yelled from deeper within the covered truck bed. "What color you want?" "White."

The truckster set two buckets on the tailgate. "Got one. Other'll have to be pink."

And when'e quoted the price, Ron said, "Up from last time."

The truckster shrugged. "Last I got on this trip. Competition. Sure there'd be somebody else out there to want it."

"Hm." Ron produced his wallet.

Gathered old men'd chattered among'emselves that whole time. One slapped Ron's shoulder as'e lifted the paint cans from the tailgate. "Way it goes, don't it."¹²³ And the old man shook his head. "Come down here to get Henrietta a frying pan—" —he lifted a cast-iron skillet— "—Double what they were last week, can you believe it?"

Ron stood there with a paint can weighing down each arm. "I don't guess I have to," he said. He glanced over his shoulder as the truckster dickered with someone else. "What we really need is a true hardware store again."

The old man shrugged. "Good luck with that. I hear..." And'e glanced round, leaned closer. "The way I hear it, the council's been holding up on something. There's been a couple offers to take over a couple plots on Mainstreet where they've reverted."

"I hadn't heard they'd reverted."

"Yeah, didn't you know? Thompson signed his back over last week. He's gone out east somewhere. Gave up on rebuilding."

"Hm."

"I'll tell you something else, I heard..." And'e glanced round. "Parsons is in trouble."

"How?"

"I don't know. That's just what I've heard."

"How's that?" somebody said, and moved toward Ron and t'other old man.

"Parsons," the old man said. "You hear anything about him?"

¹²³ According to Bloomenthal, there seems to be two common variants of this statement, one inquiring for affirmation, the other reiterating a socially accepted common fact. (Principles In Psychodynamic Reprisal, Vol. 13, January, p. 136.)

“ Ah, what’s to hear?”

“YOU’RE A NO GOOD CHEAT IS WHAT!”

Everyone looked toward the truck.

“ And you’re impeding scientific progress—you know that?” Mr Tillman said.

The truckster looked down at’m from back of the truck bed. “Look, old man, buy it or don’t. I’ve got business all over. If you don’t, somebody else will.”

“ All used and ain’t worth spit,” Tillman said. “Already rusted to pieces.”

The truckster dumped a handful of garden implements into a box. “Then don’t buy em. Plenty of others who’ll want em. Everywhere.”

Mr Tillman stuffed’is hands’n’is pockets, jerked round and marched across the lot, kicked dust on’is way t’the sidewalk. He stopped, pointed. “JUST WAIT AND SEE.”

Old men laughed. One slapped Ron’s shoulder. “Way it goes, don’t it.”

Candlelight flickered through upper windows.

"Squeak."

"We're definitely gettin close now," Helena said. "I think I can smell somethin."

"I think that's comin through the windows," Ambeth said.

"No, we're almost there. I recognize this way. It'd b'just ahead."

"There's a light," Mara said.

"Squeak."

"Yuh'd better tie that thin down," Ambeth said. "Just so none gets any ideas bout a quick snack."

"That'sn't true," Kayla said. "Yuh're just tryin t'say what Li'd."

"She may b'a pain," Ambeth said. "But she's right. Yuh'd better keep yuhr bag on yuh when yuh sleep tonight."

Before Kayla'd reply, they emerged through a passage and Helena pointed. "See." A small candle flickered'n evening breeze and illuminated that bald-headed old man. "I'dn't think'e's moved so much as a finger." That young man opened'is eyes as they approached, smiled, offered'is hand.

"Please," he said, "he begs yuns sit. It's late. And yuns must b'hungry." He leaned forward t'dis-cover bowls.

"Oh, yes," Genie said. And she dropped t'er knees, sniffed. "Are there any more birds left?" She smiled as that young man passed'er a bowl. And she passed't t'Helena.

"Yuhr other number's found a friend," that young man said.

Genie looked up. "How'd yuh know that?" Sauce glued'er lips and they smacked apart at each word.

"He'd a vision."

"And," Ambeth said as she sat, "how far do these visions go?"

"As far's they need." That young man bent forward and offered a bowl. "Please, eat."

Mara accepted the bowl from Ambeth.

This's just me. But I've been thinking bout the deal they made with that bald-headed old man. And I think'f I read't right, it'sn't completely as nonsensical as't appears. It's all bout value. Just because we don't particularly think something's worth't doesn't mean someone else mightn't. That's just how trading works. I think anyone who spends any time at all trading knows that, at least that's what people who do alotta trading tell me. One of these days, maybe I'll get together some stuff and write a book on the subject of trading and value.

That young man sat cross-legged, eyes closed. Helena's and Genie's sticky lips smacked as they ate and sucked their fingers. "He'd like t'continue," that young man said. "If yuns're ready."

The rest let Helena and Genie nod for'em.

"I cannot remember how long until the vacation ended. There was only so much we could do to occupy ourselves. Once we had established ourselves, our life had gone on much the same day to day. I read the news until I believed I knew the algorithms that generated it by heart. We tried to follow Zilog and perpetually lost ourselves in his labyrinthine darkneses. I believe he knew it all so well he could have walked it after having been blinded. One day I began to chase down foil wrappers that fluttered through the city, leftover from our meals. I remember sometimes I think Tracy scoffed at it. But later it became a game. Those of us who played it tallied our scores every evening. Though, after a few weeks, we were at a loss for ideas as to what the losers should have to do. And even Allan became bored with it. At least, I think I remember it was Allan. Maybe Dave... No, it couldn't have been Dave. No. I remember once Allan made some sort of jab at him and Dave sulked away from us for days. Mae wasn't happy. A lot of us weren't happy with Allan sometimes. I remember he was real old fashion. You were either straight or gay or lying to yourself. Or... Maybe that was a quote from a book. Or a magazine article. Or a post somewhere. Maybe a meme. But it sounds like something Allan could have said. Or something someone would have said he had said and everyone would have believed he said. But I think he said it. Maybe not in those words. Allan could be like that sometimes. One time, several times, actually, he and somebody else, maybe it had

been Tracy, or one of the chemistry-minded people, they had figured out how to ferment some fruity-powdered food stocks, along with a few other things, I think. But after a while, even getting drunk can be more work than it's worth. One day I even helped Tracy get her fish over to the city. Nothing but carrying buckets down to the water. It was almost as bad unloading them and hauling them up the steps. I think I once asked her where she was going to get enough water to grow them in. They were only guppies then. But I don't think she answered. Actually, I think she told me to shut up and haul my ass off somewhere else if I couldn't do anything but complain at a little work. When I was a kid, I think I once saw in a documentary how a fish would grow based on how large a container they were in. That's why goldfish that got out into the wild could get as big as a dog. I left her wiring up solar panels to the oxygenators. Sometimes I would go down and watch them, watch the little fish go round in the bucket like they thought it was a really small ocean, while bubbles fizzed up through the water. I think sometimes I might have had too many fermented fruit powders when I did. One time I woke up in the middle of the evening with my skin feeling like leather. I think there might have been a little drool puddle on the paving stones, also. Maybe it had already evaporated. Sometimes we used to go looking for Zeb. Sometimes when we were using our phones he would popup on our contact lists, so he had to be within fifty or sixty miles. Or at least I think it was miles. Or maybe we just renamed metric to miles so that everyone would be happy. But Zeb was never happy except when he was being unhappy, everybody said. Maybe he had been underground, because as soon as it would appear it would flash away. Some people said it was just a bug. I used to go down and watch the fish go round and round. I don't know where Dave went. And we had given up trying to follow Zilog. Some people said he could have walked around the city with both his eyes burnt out. I don't think anyone ever said why it was his eyes would end-up burnt out. Or maybe they said he would go blind from spending so much time down in darkness. Once, I saw a documentary about animals that spent their whole lives living in caves. They tended to be colorless and have white eyes...I think ...at least, they had white eyes, I remember that. But that was just everyone being stupid. We didn't have much else of anything to do. I

used to go down on this woman sometimes, but I cannot remember her name. We only ever saw Zilog in the evenings. Back then low sun turned dark against the dome's internal supports. It was like looking up at a kind of planetarium as the stars came out. 'And a grid was rendered across space and time,' I think, somebody said. Maybe they didn't. It wasn't until later that I knew the loss Zilog must have felt. He would always have a little pile of foil packets in front of him on the table. We took turns cleaning everything up. Sometimes we argued over it. It was something to do. I remember Allan making the mistake of saying—it had to have been Allan, I don't know anybody else who would have done it—he made the mistake of saying how we could create our own science fictional sexual utopia. We thought we were going to have to pull the two of them apart. They didn't actually fight, of course. Zilog would have torn his arm off as easily as a bear might. Or maybe not. And Mae got mad. And Dave was there too. I think everybody got mad one way or the other. Tracy went off to feed her fish. But nobody could really say why, I don't think. Maybe I just don't remember it enough but... No, there was just really no reason for it. Or there were too many reasons. I mean, it was so many different things and really nothing at all. I don't know why. One day I was walking and looking at my phone, trying to see if I could pick up Zeb, when I almost tripped over Dave on some stairs. He had been typing a long time. When he typed too long he could only type with one hand because he had RSI in his other arm. So you see why he must have been typing a long time if he was down to only typing with one hand. I asked him what he was working on. It was something, but I can't remember what. He had had to crack our phones, you know. Or maybe that was later. But he had to replace their firmware because they tried to shut down after not being able to update in so long so they thought they were all pirated. I think he had to work for weeks. But I think he was really happy then. I think sometimes I had been jealous. I went down with somebody—I can't remember her name—and we decided we were going to organize the food stocks. All of it. And we were going to count everything. We were going to photograph every barcode. And we were going to build spreadsheets to track everything as we ate it in realtime. Dave wasn't the only one who could do something useful. I got my degree

in industrial design. Or some kind of design. It was definitely design. I remember I was nine and started the courses. You have to get in there early. You have to get on that career path. And I was going to be the best. I was glued to that tablet. I thought I knew what the teacher was going to say as easily as if I'd programmed it myself. I was in the gifted program...I think. Or maybe that was somebody else. Maybe it was... No, it was me. Though, we were all gifted, weren't we? You had to be. They just didn't let just anybody into the company. We were the best engineers and artists of a generation. Nobody could have done what we did. We knew exactly how many freeze-dried peas we had. And it was completely the wrong number. It was completely the wrong number. We finally had a topic for dinner conversation. Somebody had screwed up. Obviously. Everyone knew the supply chain was unreliable. Contractors. We could all be united against the contractors. If it had not been for them...we could imagine anything. Even Allan's science fictional sexual utopia. Though, he hardly talked about it again. Or at least, never at supper. But in the daytime—and sometimes at night—he went missing, too. It seemed like everybody had started to go missing. We were dissolving, I was sure of it. Maybe we had not even existed in the first place. I told Mae I wondered if we were all ghosts, did she think. She gave me some pills. I didn't feel as much like floating away. Sometimes we still talked about the ghosts. Of course, they were still there. We just didn't know it until we did. I remember Zilog, or if it wasn't Zilog it was a documentary, about the four kinds of knowledge, at least...I think there were four. And one of them was known-unknowns. That is to say, what we know we don't know. And the other, maybe there were only two, was unknown unknowns, which is everything else. And the ghosts were the first one. Except they were also the second. And you see, it all came down to the peas. If it weren't for the peas... You see what I mean. We could have figured it out from the water, too, but there had been so much of it stored, we never bothered to count it. And we had plenty of filters for when we would eventually have needed them. So we didn't think about it. Contractors. We would have blamed it all on contractors. All of it was in the spreadsheets. But we got bored with it. They figured out how to ferment some of the powdered fruits. Of course, going through the ingredient lists on all

those packets, there was so much sugar. Allan said when we ran out of powdered fruits, we could move on to...something, but whatever it was, we could work our way down until we were making alcohol from...pickled beats, maybe. But that would have been...who knew how long away. Someone calculated it would be decades, maybe, until we had gone through the fruits, alone, and if you calculated all that kilogramage of sugar we could drink until halfway through the heat death of the universe. But I don't know how much they had had when they said that. It might not have been a reliable calculation. I never did double-check it. Or maybe I did... It would have all been in the spreadsheets. Sometimes I thought it would be neat to see the heat death of the universe. But it would be so slow. It would be like watching paint dry. I'm sure somebody said that. Instead of watching the universe die, we started trying to follow Zilog, again, instead. Some people said he could travel the whole city even if he were struck blind. I used to go look at the fountains. Such beautiful things. And I would try to think what they would have looked like with water back in the times when the ghosts that had never existed would not have been. It was like having an unlimited season pass to the Vatican tee em and Versailles tee em theme parks. Sometimes we used to climb into the basins and run around. Mostly, I think, that happened when we'd had too many fermented fruit powders. Eventually, we learned which ones of how many you could mix. You would think any fruit would go good together. But we once tried to mix them all together and it came out a black mess we had to pour out. It was awful. We never did that again. RealFrootFlavor tee em can only get you so far. But eventually everyone disappeared. I don't even think I knew where I was. We lost the news after Dave had to re-image our phones. The networks thought they had been pirated, so we could only talk between ourselves. We would text each other from different parts of the city and try to guess where the other one was in the least characters. It was an okay game for a while. We tried to use it to follow Zilog, but we always lost him. A woman, I cannot remember her name, said if you put your ear near the fountain mouths you could hear voices. I'm not sure I ever tried it. Maybe after I had had too many fermented fruit powders. But if I did, I don't remember. Sometimes, I wonder what they would have said. I

remember something from somewhere that gargoyles cannot speak unless water is running over their mouths. We paddled upstream to get more bamboo for a fire. One night I had too many fruit powders and singed off my eyebrows. At least, I think they were my eyebrows. Somebody, singed off their eyebrows, anyway. Or maybe... Maybe that was a story somebody used to tell about one of their great... or great great great great great grandparents or something. Maybe there were a few more greats. It could have happened. I could believe it would have happened. Our shadows used to dance across the walls. It was just like the ancient Martians would have done. We used to play music from our phones by setting the ringtones on patterned loops. Bing. Bing. Bing bing. Bong. Bing. Bing. Bing bing. Bong. Bing. Bing. Bing bing. Bong. Chime. Or something like that. None of us could really play an instrument. I always heard Zilog could play the recorder. But since he could see in the dark, he disappeared even at night. Mae sometimes disappeared too. Everybody disappeared. I am not even sure I knew where I was. But she would give me a pill and everyone would come back. There was a woman I went down on sometimes, but she couldn't give me a blowjob because I could not get it up after any pills. Mae said if I would find something to occupy myself I wouldn't need to depend on them and that we would have to learn to get by without them. And I think I asked her what was the point of giving them to me in the first place then? She didn't get mad, though. She never got mad at things like that. We went back to organizing peas so I could get back to having sex. It was all there but we probably didn't notice it because after a while we were too busy having sex. Sometimes I went down and helped Tracy with her fish. I took some bamboo and started to make a recorder and started to learn to play it. That is the sound I think I heard at night, sometimes. Or something like it. It was the ghostly echo of those instruments from so long ago that had actually never existed, but sounded real enough. At least I tried to make a recorder. But I could not make the mouthpiece work right, so I had to make a kind of flute instead. That would have been more like what the Martians would have used, anyway. But the first one was all wrong. All the holes were the same size. It will only make one sound that way. Maybe the Martians preferred atonal music. I made-up songs as I went along and recorded

them on my phone. I thought we might play them the next time we had a fire. One I used to make myself a new ringtone. Dave had added a lot of new firmware features to our phones, so we didn't have to make do with the stock ones anymore. He made a new version of Jaw Cracker tee em, too. That occupied a few hours for several weeks. It was network aware, so we could share high scores. I was pretty good. The first-gen graphics were not so good. Programmers tend to be such terrible artists most of the time, it's why most software looks so ugly. I think Susan or somebody spent a few days doing new versions. So version two was a huge improvement. The teeth actually looked like teeth. That's something I don't miss, going to the dentist. I think we used to have one just in case somebody got their teeth busted out. Dentist drills go all the way back to the paleolithic era, that's how old they are, pre-historic humans were drilling teeth the same way, only minus electricity, as dentists did when I was a kid. But they will say 'oh, we have pain medication now though'. I once heard an old man talk about his father or grandfather or something like that, I think, growing up in, I think they called it the Soviet Union tee em and how the dentists never used pain relievers. I had a friend, or somebody, who knew somebody who they had put the needle all the way through his gums and squirted the Novatraine tee em on his tongue and then started drilling. 'Oh, come on, the pain isn't that bad, toughen up,' he had said. The dentist was way too young to even know what the Soviet Union tee em was. But I didn't think about it much. You don't think about the pain you aren't having. That's where they're wrong. You don't need pain to appreciate the lack of it. You just find something else to worry about. It was all in the peas. We would have seen it if we hadn't been having sex. Or trying to follow Zilog. Or joking about how he could walk all the way across the city and back again if his eyes had been scooped out with spoons. Though, no one ever said why they would have been scooped out with spoons. But we stopped looking for Zeb. If he was out there, his phone still had the original firmware and wouldn't federate with ours because it would have identified ours as pirated. I am sure some system reported us back to the appropriate authorities on Earth. But we didn't care. Maybe we were better off because we couldn't read the news anymore. Besides, what were they going to do? come and get us?

They weren't coming. Maybe, I think I said, they would send janitors around eventually to cleanup the bones so we didn't spoil everything. Everybody laughed, but we had all had too many fermented fruit powders by then. We had gone out outside the dome to build a fire and lie back and look at the stars. The company sent us on a fieldtrip once out to New Mexico tee em for research purposes. Since we were with the company, we didn't have to have passports, since it was just an internal transfer. It was the next best thing since no one could get into Australia tee em anymore. It was nothing like laying out under the stars here. I don't think Australia tee em would have been either. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe they sent us all down to Australia tee em by mistake. But it didn't matter where we were, we had to do something. Sylvia—I think it was Sylvia—maybe it was Jennifer or Grace or someone—started writing a book. Since Dave had reworked our phones firmwares she didn't have to worry about it reporting her. She found a foldout keyboard, somewhere, to connect to it, I think, and she used to work down in the commissary we had set up. She posted it to us in installments. There was a woman I used to go down on sometimes. And sometimes she would give me a blowjob. She had a thing for it. Sometimes she would read it while I got her off. Sometimes we laughed and read it out loud round a fire when we had one, while we were sober enough to read. I don't think I remember what it was about. I think it might have had something to do with Utah tee em. Or maybe it was someplace else. And I think there was this extended technology eschewing family which was kind of like the Amish tee em crossed with the Mormons tee em. And they all lived on this kind of communal farm way way way way out in the desert. Way out there. So far out it would have seemed as if they weren't even on Earth. And there was this boy, who I think must have been the protagonist, the part I remember is everyone else had gone out one morning for some reason and he had still been in bed and one of his aunts had come in for something or the other and had found him half-asleep with a hard-on. And there was all this 'What's wrong with you?' 'Are you sick?' But I should back up. I think the protagonist was called Nathan. And he had been laying in bed masturbating after everyone else had gone out. Only his aunt, I think her name had been Cathy, remained out in the kitchen. And

he still lay there half-asleep as he pulled his cock out of his pajamas when she came to the door to call him to eat and peeked in and saw him. What was wrong with him? He had to be sick. Everybody had left and he was sick and if anything bad happened it was going to be all her fault. But he had to go to the bathroom more than anything and groaned and rolled out of bed and pulled his pajamas back up, but his hard cock bulged in them. And his aunt quickly hid as he went out into the hall and into the bathroom. She knocked on the door as he was in there and asked if he was alright. The toilet flushed. At least I think there was a toilet. Maybe he had gone out to an outhouse instead and she had followed him. But she knocked on the door. ‘Are you sure you’re alright? What’s taking so long?’ ‘Nothing.’ But after a while she said, ‘Are you sure you’re alright?’ again, and when he was slow to answer she went in. Which is where she found him with his cock still hard. Of course, everyone else would be gone, so if anything bad happened it would be all her fault. ‘What happened to you?’ He tried to cover himself with his hands. ‘Did you get bit by something?’ He stammered. She moved toward him and touched him and made him move his hands so she could see. ‘Did something bite you in your sleep?’ He shook his head. ‘It has to hurt,’ she said. Tentatively, she touched his hard cock. He groaned. She jerked her hand away. Of course everyone would be gone and if anything bad happened it would be her fault. She reached out again. He jerked away. She said, ‘I know it hurts, but you have to let me see what’s wrong.’ And of course she fondles him, wincing as he groans, until he finally cums on her dress. Oh, everyone laughed so hard at that. Or at least, it was something like that. The whole thing was roughly the same. I don’t know how many installments there ended up being. She kept writing them a long time after I stopped reading. I don’t think it was the kind of thing that could end, only go on forever, or just stop. Of course, we found out that everyone was not related, because the guy who had thrown this religion together had adopted the language of brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers and aunts and uncles in God tee em so nobody was really related at all. Somebody—I can’t remember her name—set out to do an examination of... I can’t remember what she called it, but whatever it was, she wanted to deconstruct its underlying connection to the

anti-hero's journey and its relation to virtual-modern literary theory. Or something like that. It was something to do. We kept track of the days, but I don't know why. I guess checking our calendar apps was something to do, too. I think we all, or at least most of us, reset them to pure Martian time. Someone, maybe it was me, structured meetings over several weeks so we could decide what the new months would be called. September-2. October-2. Everyone always agreed they were silly. Dave pushed a firmware update after that with the new names. We had to change a few of them a few weeks later, but it's a working process. Things like that aren't settled after just a few dozen meetings. Zilog never showed up to any of them. But I think he would have believed in the general spirit of our endeavor. But... What was her name? I cannot remember. But she just dug in her heels on that one month. Which is it? Oh, it doesn't matter. Actually, that's why so many of them have at least two names. My favorite is Australia tee em. I think my birthday is in Australia tee em. 'TRADEMARK INFRINGEMENT.' I think we shouted that one time after we had had too many fruit powders around the fire. We danced around while chanting it. When our throats got too hoarse, I played some of my music I had recorded on my phone. By then we had probably had too many fermented fruit powders to remember laughing. It was real Martian music, the same as if they had made it themselves. Maybe there was a slight accent, like they say happens when you listen to someone modern reading ancient Sumerian and detect a faint North German accent. Someone else started writing a book. I tried. Everyone is supposed to have one inside them. But I must be constipated. I could not even blog. I typed entries about watching Tracy's fish. No one ever read it. I gave up checking. No one was that bored. No one bothered to try and follow Zilog anymore. Tracy disappeared, too. Allan, too. But it was not just me, they really did disappear most of the day. We saw them at dinner. They always looked worn out and dirty. But we were all dirty. No one wanted to waste water on cleaning our shitty coveralls. I had grown a beard. It itched alot. When off, my phone could be used as a rudimentary mirror. I didn't think I looked too bad. The woman I used to go down on joked about it like it was sandpaper down there. But I don't see how she could have known where hers ended and mine began. I

lost a little weight. So one night after I had had too many fermented fruit powders I stripped out of my coveralls and danced around in the firelight to the music on my phone and there was a real Martian shadow on the walls. I had made peace with the ghosts. I had given them my shadow. I was merely the instrumentality. It was the shadow world which was real. I had made peace with the ghosts. The whole panoply of the silence of non-extant history washed over us as a flood to induce an intoxication that fermented fruit powders could not have hoped to have matched since first the Martians had distilled the first of those ancient native fruits in forever bygone eras as inaccessible as if they had ever existed even if they had not and laid the foundation for the great civilization that should have followed and would have anointed itself with the jeweled crown of the city whose corridors would be forever their haunt among resplendently rising towers that meet the sun and moons and enumerate the stars and grounded the heavens so that one may walk among the whole of the universe as easily and as difficultly as one may traverse the city as the whole nexus of civilization pointed to the all high and all low and proclaimed that such vaulted heights must prefigure their own extinction and that they must have if they had looked down from such vaulted heights and reached for such nearby stars and known they could only be destined to be ghosts wandering hither and thither along the bridge to the manifold prefiguration of the whole of the universe as we all barreled down into the darkness forever to be swallowed whole by entropy no matter how much we raged against the dying of the light and refused to be dragged gently into that good eternal night. For a little while, Mae changed my pills, so I couldn't drink fermented fruit powders. I stopped trying to make music. I didn't go down on anyone. I don't think I even counted peas anymore. It was all there, if any of us had cared to look, buried in the spreadsheets. It was all in the peas. Then one day, maybe at lunchtime, I think, when a few of us were gathered at the commissary, they finally appeared on the edge of our social periphery, as if to introduce themselves. I think I remember she must have had a very grubby dress, stained and ripped. And his t-shirt and jeans were no better, probably ripped under the arms and frayed in the crotch, that is where they always tend to go first. I think they must have both been barefoot."

The candle wavered, near burnt bout. Mara and the rest sat there agape'n silence, fingers, corners of their mouths, still sticky and stained.

That young man opened'is eyes, faintly smiled. "He tells me t'bid yuns a good night and that yuns sleep well."

The phone rang. She'd been washing dishes and dried'er hands on a cloth as she exited the kitchen.

"Hello."

"Yes. W—"

"What?"

"Are—"

"Yes." Mary-Celleste nodded t'erself.

"Yes, I'll be right there." And she hung up the phone. Absently, she moved toward the kitchen, looked round blankly. She tossed the rag on the counter and hurried t'dis-tangle'er apron strings and tossed't on the counter, too. "W..." She hurried into the living room and down the hall. Pocketbook'n-hand, she must've glanced round, looked puzzled, went back through the den and gotten'er hat from the front closet. Holding the door open, she looked back through the house, then out into a still empty driveway. She turned back halfway down the front steps, rooted through'er pocketbook. "W..." And found'er keys and pulled the door closed. She stuffed'er keys back'n'er pocketbook as she hurried along the sidewalk.

They passed back through a darkened square. Eyes still adjusted t'faint candlelight, they'dn't've yet been able t'discern much by stars-light. People still must've sat round that enshrouded figure'n a distant corner. Or'f they'dn't, whe might've mumbled t'the night.

Ron watched from the porch, hat on, hands'n'is pockets. Early afternoon sun'd've reflected painfully from all those fresh-painted tanks. A car pulled near, stopped beside the truck parked nearby. Taggart climbed out. He mopped'is neck with a handkerchief as'e moved toward the porch. "Shoo, hot one." He still rubbed that handkerchief over'is neck as'e stood beside Ron and squinted at all that white. "Now, that's a pretty sight." He whistled. "Hey—Thompson." A distant figure emerged through heatwaver, ran toward'em. "You should be done by now," Taggart said.

"Almost."

Taggart rubbed'is handkerchief between'is neck and shirtcollar. "Well, get a move on. There's still things to do."

The man turned and disappeared among distant heatwaver-enshrouded tanks.

"Gotta keep on top these things," Taggart said. "Work's satisfactory, I hope."

"Hm?" Ron nodded. "I'm sure it'll be fine."

"Well, if it isn't, you just let me know. There are not going to be any half-done jobs around here anymore."

"Hm. Hot day to be working."

"That it is." Taggart leaned back'is head and dried'is neck. "Hot enough to use a car hood as a griddle, I'd say."

Men emerged from heatwaver t'make their way toward the truck. Shirts sweat-damp, they adjusted their hats down against the sun, drank from worn canteens and capless glass bottles gripped by paint-flecked hands.

"Let's go," Taggart called. "Wasting the day." He shook'is head and folded'is handkerchief and slipped't into'is pocket.

The men climbed into the truck bed.

"Take care," Taggart said. "Don't be afraid to call if there's something else you need."

Ron turned, hands still'n'is pockets, and watched'm walk back t'is car. The truck reversed and turned. Taggart waved'em on and't lurched as the driver adjusted gears and turned toward town. A dust-plume drifted sideways'n the breeze and washed Taggart's car. He started'is windshield wipers, waved again t'Ron, but craned t'looked through the back window without awaiting a reply, and reversed and turned. A dustplume'd've drifted sideways'n the rearview mirror, merged with the distant, shredded remnants from the truck's and'd've obscured Ron's diminishing, shrinking reflection. He'd've stopped at the railroad tracks, allowed dust t'dissipate enough t'see, but heatwaver at each distant end where rails'd've seemed t'converge, still, must've made'm not-easy, as'f't might conceal a train only an arm's length away. As'e approached town, in the distance, he must've seen the truck turn along back streets, but'e'd've crossed a bridged gully and aimed for Mainstreet. A charred griddle protruded from a sandbank off the road. He hummed as'e drove and reached t'crack the window. Sun glinted through a dust-impregnated windshield. He squinted at the semi-figure that'd've seemed t'appear from heatwaver. He slowed'is car. He rolled down the window.

"Hot one, isn't it."

Mary-Celleste paused, looked at'm.

He cleared'is throat. "I'm just... Awful hot to be out is what I mean. This time of day. Where you heading?"

She remained silent a moment. "I've got to go to the school."

"Well, hop in then. I'll give you a ride."

She shook'er head. "I..."

"It's right on my way, anyway." And before she'd reply, he'd climbed out and opened the rear door. "No trouble at all."

He glanced at'er'n the rearview mirror as'e adjusted gears. "I noticed Jeff hasn't been open lately."

"Oh." Mary-Celleste sat looking through a dusty window.

"I say, I noticed Jeff hasn't been in lately."

"He's... He's not...feeling well right now."

Taggart nodded. He fumbled t'roll-up'is window. "Not too much air on you is it?"

Mary-Celleste shook'er head.

"I've been meaning to talk to your husband," Taggart said. He

glanced into the rearview mirror. "We've been working on a new program to get the town fixed up again." He glanced into the rearview mirror. Mary-Celleste still looked through the window. "Anyway, not something you need to worry about. I'll give him a call." He shook his head, glanced into the rearview mirror. "I guess that is if Sarah can get everything sorted out. We've been re-extending the telephone system, you know. Setting new poles. All kinds of things like that. Tough to keep up with, I guess. But everything's really gonna start moving now. You're sure this is not too much air on you?" Mary-Celleste shook her head. "Anyway," he said, and glanced into the rearview mirror. "Going to school today, huh? That's nice. Helping out? I guess it's almost time for Allison to start, isn't it?"

"Hm?"

"I said it's almost time for Allison to start school, isn't it?"

Mary-Celleste nodded.

"Before you know it, she'll be graduating. And we'll really have the town fixed up by then. Better than new. No, better than it ever was. Just wait and see." He laughed as he turned up the hill. "We might even build a new schoolhouse while we're at it." He glanced into the rearview mirror, smiled. He put the car into park in front of the schoolhouse. And when Mary-Celleste moved to open her door, he pushed it open first and jumped out to open it for her. "If there's anything else I can do to help, just let me know."

Mary-Celleste nodded. "Thank you." She held her pocketbook in both her hands as she looked absently at the schoolhouse. She walked toward it. If Taggart said anything else, she mightn't even've heard it, or mightn't've even heard his car turn and wind down the hill toward town. She slipped off her hat and held it along with her pocketbook as she climbed the steps and entered. Eyes turned on her in silence. Mrs Holtcraft looked up from her desk. Allison still stared at a corner, but when Mrs Holtcraft rose, she must've sensed something, because she turned and Mrs Holtcraft motioned with her finger for her to turn round again, which she crossed her arms and did. Muffled laughter.

"Quiet, class." Mrs Holtcraft motioned for Mary-Celleste to approach and leaned across her desk as she came near. "Maybe you should," she said in a low voice, "take her home for today."

Mary-Celleste nodded.

They both paused. After a moment, Mary-Celleste crossed t'the corner. Allison looked up at'er as'er mother offered'er hand. Silently, they both walked down the aisle. "Where's your hat?" Allison pointed and released'er mother's hand and took't from a peg. Mary-Celleste took'er hand again after she'd put't on. Silently, they walked down the front steps.

"It got dark," Genie said.

"Aren't yuh the master of the obvious."

"Oh, quiet," Kayla said. "Yuh're turnin'nto Li."

"I'm—"

They passed through shadow-darkened passages and emerged into starlight. Birds drifted on air currents between towers on their way home and stars flickered at their passage.

"We turn up here," Mara said.

"How can yuh b'sure? We'd've brought a light."

"Hear that?"

"I'dn't'ear anythin."

"Just—"

"*Squeak.*"

"Maybe we'd backtrack," Helena said. "We'dn't wanna get lost."

"Yuh've just eat," Kayla said, "so't'sn't as'f yuh're gonna starve."

"*Squeak.*"

"What's'e smell now?"

"I'dn't know." Kayla checked'er satchel by feel and petted'is head.
"It'd b'anythin."

"And't'd b—"

"Hey—" A sharp whistle.

They all paused.

"Hey—"

"Who's that?"

"Quiet," Mara said. And they waited'n silence.

"Must've been somewhere else," Ambeth said.

"Maybe." Mara motioned. Their eyes'd've been adjusted t'stars-light by then. Towers overhead, long darkened spears yetn't touched by moonlight. "Let's keep moving. It's this way up here." When they turned a corner, distant windows framed flickering lights.

Ambeth said, "See."

"Well, that's good," Helena said. "I just wanna get some sleep."

"I'dn't know."

"What yuh mean yuh'dn't know?"

"Lotta noise," Kayla said.

As they entered the square, someone waved at'em from the stairs, waited there as they approached. "Where've yuns been?" Li said. "We're bout t'go and try and find yuns."

"Gets lost?" Lizbeth said.

"Enjoyed supper too much," Ambeth said.

"Ise cans bets." Lizbeth looked over'em, then glanced at Li, motioned'er head. "Comes ons, lets'ses goes backs ups."

"What's all that noise?" Kayla said as they ascended.

"Whats," Lizbeth said. "Yours gets ase bunchas storytellers together and hopes fors peaces ands quiets?" She laughed. "Theres ain'ts enoughts cords'ns the wholes city tuse ties alls theses mouths shuts."

Li snorted.

Candles burned round the room, melted wax dripping over window ledges and down cracks. Candlelight licked sweat-sheened skin. A tall, stick-thin man marched'n place as those'n their hammocks intoned 'Boom', 'Boom', 'Boom'. He [froze], arms at haphazard angles. He looked left. He looked right. But moved only'is head. He jumped straight up, then ran'n-place, his knees swinging almost as high as'is chest. Everyone laughed. He [froze]. He looked left. He looked right.

"Oh!" Genie stared. "Is that a Silent?"

Lizbeth said, "Whats yous thinks?"

"Well..."

The man sat, crossed'is arms and legs, scowled. Everyone laughed.

"What was't?" Genie said. "I'dn't get't."

"That's whats happens whens yous comes'ns ats the ends," Lizbeth said, and laughed.

The man rose, bowed, moved toward a hammock.

"Aw," Genie said. "A real Silent and I missed't."

Lizabeth snickered.

Ambeth cleared'er throat. "Let's just get t'our stuff."

"Yuh'll never guess what we saw," Kayla told Li.

Lizabeth laughed. "Ands whats was thats?"

Kayla glanced at'er, back t'Li. "We—"

"Lizabeth. Lizabeth." Two or three called and clapped. And after a few repetitions, almost everyone else joined, though they all'dn't've known for what. "Lizabeth. Lizabeth. Lizabeth. Lizabeth. Lizabeth. Lizabeth."

Lizabeth stopped acenter the room as Mara and the rest moved toward their hammocks. She raised'er arms. "Noze. Noze, I'ms nots doins thisses."

"Lizabeth. Lizabeth. Lizabeth. Lizabeth. Lizabeth. Lizabeth."

She raised'er arms again. "Ohs, fudge'ts." She motioned for Li. "Alrights—" She motioned with'er hands. "Alrights—shutsups. Everybodies justs shuts the fudges ups." She paused. "Alrights. Alrights, soes whats yours'res gonnas hears nows's a *true*s stories." Snickers. Boos. "Its's," Lizabeth said. And she grabbed and raised Li's arm. "Ands Ise've gots thus witnesses tuse proves'ts." Li pulled'er arm away, snorted. "Sose thisses doesn'ts'ves alls the poppycocks these rests ofs yours'ves beens suckins ons."

"Blah. Blah. Blah."

Laughter.

Lizabeth grunted. "Wells, yours wanna hears'ts orsn'ts?" Silence. "Alrights. Sose, this's hows wese snuck intos the seventeenth ands saveds alls yours's rears froms thus prophets's machinations."

This's just

This's just me. But somebody's excised the next few pages.

“Talk bout poppycock,” Li said.

Laughter.

“Wells, its happened,” Lizbeth said.

Li rolled’er eyes. She whistled as she walked back towards Mara and the rest.

Everyone laughed.

Lizbeth groaned and motioned with’er hands as’f t’sweep’em all away.

Kayla sat up’n’er hammock. “That really happen?”

Li shrugged.

Lizbeth looked over Li’s shoulder. “The problems withs yours’s yours’ve heards kakas soes longs yours don’ts knows’ts froms foods.”

Genie grimaced.

Lizbeth shook’er head. “Whats’re yous doins?”

Li rolled’er eyes. “She’s writin, wut yuh thin?” So they must’ve been talking bout our journaller.

“Does shese balance ans inkpots between’s’ers knees alls these times? Cans shese holds anythins elses thats ways? Ands whats’s shese writins, anyways?”

“What’s’s appenin,” Genie said. “She always writes down what’ap-pens.”

“Ooookays.” Lizbeth shook’er head, glanced at Li. “Hows’ds yous ends-ups travelins withs thisses bunch?” Before Li’d reply, Lizbeth laughed. “Comes ons,” she said. “Whies don’ts yous comes sleeps withs usses.”

Many candles’d died or been extinguished. Smoke faintly tinted

dimmed air. In the lateness, lighter, almost not-hearable conversations passed hammock-t'hammock.

Li shook'er head. "My'ammock's already'ung."

"Yous cans worries bouts thats tomorrows. Wese'lls kicks somebody elses outs tonights."

"So long," Ambeth said, "as we get some peace and quiet."

Li glanced at'er. She shook'er head, glanced at Lizbeth. "I prefer my own. Besides, usin somebody else's'ammock will fit as well as somebody else's'at."

"Suits yoursself," Lizbeth said, and must've glanced at our journaler's hammock, watched'er as she must've scribbled'n dimmed light, and Lizbeth rolled'er eyes and turned and wove'er way between hammocks and across the room.

Li eased into'er own hammock.

"I'm startin t'see," Ambeth said, "how yuhr friend'd get caught so easy. The prophets must've been able t'hear'er'n the next section over."

Li said, "Nothin interestin'appen while I's gone?"

Mara closed'er eyes. "Let's just get some sleep."

"Yuh," Genie said. "Yuh gonna tell'er what—"

"Let's get some sleep," Ambeth said.

Genie lay there and chewed the inside of'er mouth.

"Get some rest," Mara said. "Everything may start tomorrow."

"Yuns think?" Genie said.

"Never know."

Someone'd've woken amidst night, maybe Genie, and'd've touched Kayla or Helena's shoulder till they stirred.

"What's't?"

"I've t'go."

"Then go."

"Will yuh walk with me t'the fountain?"

A sigh. "Fine." She yawned as she swung from'er hammock and stood.

The moons might still've been high and'd've cast the city'n silver, as they've always done. In that quietude they'd've heard the fountain gush and swush far before they'd've been able t'see'ts moonslight-silvered streams arch and splash.

"What's that?" Genie'd've said.

"What?"

"That sound. It sounds'ike somebody."

Helena or Kayla'd've yawned. She'd've pointed t'the corner as they passed through a square. "Whoever's still there talkin." And they'd've passed on toward the fountain as that robed figure ensconced'n a far corner'd've continued t'mumble, perhaps half-asleep, wherself.

He leaned against the kitchen doorway. He said, "We must not be eating out tonight."

Beatrice closed the stove door and straightened as she dropped a cloth onto the counter. "You're early."

"Hm." With 'is hat pushed down over 'is eyes, he'd've seemed t'look past the floor. "I sent Derek home. I figured I just might as well come myself."

"Well, it will be a while before everything's ready."

"I don't reckon I said it had to be ready now, did I?"

She busied'erself opening and closing cabinets. "If you bring your dirty clothes, I'll see about getting them washed."

"Left them at the office."

She slammed a cabinet door. "I don't know *what* that building is going to smell like in a few more days."

"They're not dirty till they can stand up on their own, anyway," he said. And she glanced at'm. "Besides, I didn't wear them today."

"Did you finally put him to work?"

"You mean Derek?"

"You know who I mean."

"Hm." Ron still looked past the floor. "Jim brought some men out."

"We were talking about that at tea today."

"Where?"

"At Mrs Shoneborn's. Marilyn was there."

"Moving up in the world, aren't we?"

She glared at'm, opened a drawer.

"Hm. What did they say?"

"About?"

"Jim."

"Oh, they're working everywhere. I think they were supposed to start painting the church this evening. That's what Lisa said."

"Lisa?"

"Brubaker."

"Hm. Isn't she going to take over as organist since Mrs Sutherland is sick?"

"Yes."

"Hm." He tilted his head back enough to see the ceiling.

"You should go help," she said.

"Hm."

"With the church."

"What makes you think Jim wants me around?"

"I'm sure you could be useful," she said. "Besides, it would be good for you to be seen down there."

"Hm."

"Stop it."

He looked over at her. "What?"

"What? Hm—Hm. All you do is make noises."

"Well..." He pushed up his hat. "What am I supposed to say?"

"Something."

"How long till dinner's ready?"

"I... I don't know. An hour...an hour and a half, maybe. Why?"

"Well, you told me to say something."

She threw a rag onto the counter. "Y—"

"I think I'm going to go out and see dad awhile," he said. "I'll be back for dinner."

Her face steadied. "Why do you need to go out there now? Why don't you wait until Wednesday?"

"I know. I just...want some privacy."

She remained silent, turned toward the counter.

"I'll be back before dinner."

"Whatever."

He drove beyond town, out toward bloodied horizon. He parked far away and walked with his hands in his pockets, towards a short run of distant once-white picket fence. Only the one side remained, the side with the gate, the rest having fallen down. Grave markers cast long, distorted shadows over sterile ground. The gate squeaked and hung on one hinge as it opened. He walked with his hands in his pockets and pulled his hat down over his eyes again. When he stopped, he remained silent a long time. Finally, he said, "Where did I leave off?" And he tilted back his head, as if to look at the sky. "Well, the business isn't going so well. But it could be worse. Beatrice isn't going so well. But it could be worse. And the town... Well, that could be worse, too. I'll have enough to pay the bank, and that's about it. Not as good as you did, I admit. But if I can say so, I think you were up against a different set of problems than me. Not that I mean any disrespect. ... I don't know. Maybe if you were still running it, things would be better. Mom's still living with Aunt Pegg. I know what you said, but I still don't think that's a bad thing. Bea and her in the same house... I don't think we could stand that. ... Sometimes... Did I tell you the reverend's been out after Mr Tillman. I mean, not expressly, not ever directly, I guess. Just... I don't know. Maybe it's just me. Just seems as if he's working something into every sermon about what we've got to be careful of. Sometimes... Everything seems like such a long time ago. ... I keep thinking I should say something, but I don't know what it is. ... Why can't everything be as it used to be?" He stood there awhile, hands in pockets. A faint breeze stirred. He turned as engine noise approached. A truck passed his car and parked just beyond what remained of that picket fence. Ron watched the

driver climb out. Hands still'n'is pockets, he walked back through the gate. Boards clattered onto ground. "What's going on?"

The man looked at'm as'e stooped'n the truck bed, tossed more boards over the side. "We're supposed to replace the fence."

Ron watched'm dis-load. "Who's doing this?"

"Mr Taggart."

Ron glanced toward the half-broken, hung-open gate. "Hm."

He walked toward'is car.

As'e drove, he'd've recognized Mrs Holtcraft as she moved along a sidewalk, casserole dish'n-hand, as she turned up the Endercotts' walk and started up the front steps. Daylight's blood-tinged dregs'd've reflected'n'is rearview mirror.

[Ahead....?]

He slowed. Men shouted. When'e'd come nearnuf, he rolled-down'is window and called t'another driver. Cars continued t'back up at the intersection. "Is it a bad one?" Ron called.

"Ah, who knows?"

"What's wrong with everybody?" someone called. "If you don't get out of the way, how's the wrecker supposed to get through?"

Horns blared.

Standing'n the kitchen, she'd've heard the front door open and close. She'd turned and half crossed toward the living room when'e entered. He rubbed'is ill-shaven cheek, looked round. He turned and carried the brown paper bag'e clutched'n one hand, back through the hallway. She'd've heard the bathroom door open and close. When'e emerged from the hallway again, he'dn't look at'er, just crossed the living room and sat'n'is chair.

She said, "I thought you weren't going to work today."

"Do I have to tell you everything I do before I do it?" He looked up at'er. "Do I have to have your permission now?"

"I just... was curious. You said—"

"I had to go to the drugstore. I had to pick up a prescription."

"Momma." Allison stood'n the hallway.

"You're not supposed to be out of your room," Mary-Celleste said.

"Momma, can I have some water?"

Mary-Celleste nodded. "Then you have to go back to your room."

Allison crossed the living room toward the kitchen. Mary-Celleste turned—

"I thought she was supposed to be in school."

Mary-Celleste paused. "We can talk about that later." And she crossed the kitchen and got down a glass from the cabinet and filled't and handed't down t'Allison, who grasped't'n both hands. "Alright," she said when Allison offered't back. "Now go back to your room."

"But—"

"Go back to your room, now, Allison."

Allison crossed'er arms.

"Now."

She puffed, but she turned and marched back into the living room and down the hall. Mary-Celleste'd've waited t'hear'er door shut. She set the glass on the counter and turned t'walk into the living room, but Jeff already stood'n the kitchen doorway.

"Why isn't she in school? You made such a thing this morning about taking her to school. Huh? Why isn't she there?"

"Maybe you should sit—"

"DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO."

"I'm not, Jeff."

He paused, ran'is fingers through'is hair, looked round the kitchen, pressed'is thumb t'is eye. "I can tell myself what to do."

Mary-Celleste remained silent.

Finally, he removed'is thumb from'is eye and looked up. "Why is she home?"

"There was an incident at school."

"What does that mean?"

"She got into a fight with the other children on the playground. She threw some rocks at them. And then... And then she threw a few rocks at the teacher and tried to run around the building and hide."

Jeff looked at'er a moment or two, then laughed. He laughed till'e coughed.

"Jeff..."

But'e laughed. And'e reached behind'mself as'f t'grab a chair or the table and missed both and hit the floor.

"Jeff!"

She bent over'm, but'e shoved'er arm aside. "I can get up myself."

"Jeff..."

"I SAID I CAN GET UP MYSELF—" He rose, shook, and'is hands'd've trembled. He touched the side of'is face. "I'm going... I'm going to go take some medicine and lay down."

"Jeff..."

"I said don't touch me—" He pulled away, hand still over the side of'is face, and ambled into the living room.

Genie yawned as they passed through cool morning shadows. She stretched'er arms for the third or fourth time. "Yuns thin't'll start today?"

"It'll start when't starts," Ambeth said.

They entered the fountain square. Everyone else seemed t've already gotten there, so they'd t'wait.

"I wish there's another'ne," Genie said.

"There's," Li said.

"Where?"

Li vaguely pointed. "But yuh've t'take the long way round."

"We can wait," Kayla said. And she opened'er bag and reached into't and withdrew Quetzalcoatl and held'm'n both hands and looked down at'm. "Can't we?"

"*Squeak.*"

"Yuh'd better put that thin away," Li said, "before someone decides t've breakfast."

"None's gonna do that."

"Wut do yuh thin I ate yesterday?"

Kayla looked askance at'er. "Why'd yuh do *that*?"

"Wut's the difference'n eatin nothin else?"

Kayla looked faintly sick. She returned Quetzalcoatl t'er bag and closed the flap.

"Can wen't start this first thin'n the mornin'," Helena said. "I just wanna use the fountain and then go get some breakfast, I'm starved."

"Yuh're always starved."

"Maybe."

Li seemed t'b'at a loss t'reply t'that, so they waited'n silence till

their turn at the fountain. She caught a water jet'n'er cupped hands and splashed'er face.

"Are yuh comin with us this mornin?" Genie said.

Li splashed and rubbed'er face again.

"Yuh'd really come listen. He's jus gotten up t'Catherine and Nathaniel."

"Yuh're—"—Li rinsed'er face once more—"—still seein that old wrinkled thin?"

"We've a bargain," Genie said.

"And the food's good," Helena said.

Somebody whistled. "—Li." Li glanced over'er shoulder. "I'll catch yuns later."

Genie started, "But—"

But Ambeth shook'er head. "Let'er go. I'd rather've the peace and quiet, anyway." She held out'er hands and waited for a fresh spurt t'wash'em.

Worse than the day before [...] they squeezed through compacted alleyways till't must've seemed as'f they'd suffocate. Cook smoke wafted through outlets and inlets, settled'n segments where baffled air died.

"DO YOU BELIEVE IN THE WORLD?"

"What's that?" Genie glanced round as they entered the square, but there were too many and too much movement t'discern anything specific.

"FRESH FRIED. NEVER DRIED."

"IS THERE ANYTHING YOU CAN NEVER NEED?"

It must've seemed as'f the only way t'speak was t'shout.

Helena touched Genie or Kayla's shoulder. "THROUGH THERE."

They turned a corner and compacted so close together they'd speak normally but'd barely breathe. "Maybe we'd've waited till later."

"Too late now."

They pushed through.

"Look!" Genie pointed. Masked figures moved along a higher balcony, disappeared behind fluttering curtains. "Yuns see'em?" Someone near must've, because they still looked up, spat on paving stones before the crowd forced'em on.

"Up through the sidepassage," Mara said. They paused a moment'n an alcove. Deeper within, three or four or five sat round eating with sticks. They looked up. Mara and Ambeth touched t'others' shoulders. "Let's go up this way."

Cooking smoke wafted into a still morning sky.

"Oh, I'm hungry."

They forced their way through t'the corner.

"What's happenin?" Helena looked at the empty corner, glanced at Mara and Ambeth.

"Maybe they're'n't out yet," Ambeth said. To Mara: "Yuh wanna wait?"

Mara looked back over the crowd. "Let's... Let's get outa the square." She craned'er neck. "We'll—"

"Hey," Kayla said. "Is that'm?" She tried t'point, but the crowd left'er no room. A hand rose and waved and moved toward'em through the crowd. And'e must've stepped on something, because'is face rose above the fray enough t'distinguish. He motioned for'em t'follow.

Ambeth glanced at Mara. "Alright," Mara said. "Everybody stick together. Let's go."

They wedged through. That young man'dn't try t'speak over the din, just motioned'em on behind'm till they'd crossed the square and'd passed through an archway into another and'd turned and'd mounted a wide stair. Above, on a broad landing, that same bald-headed old man sat the same as'e'd'n the corner below.

"He offers'is apologies," that young man said. "But there're so many now we found't necessary t'relocate." He stepped among arranged bowls and sat cross-legged beside that wrinkled, bald-headed old man and motioned with'is hand. "Please, he begs yuns sit."

And they'd. Nestled'n the corner of that landing, the din below settled t'a gentle roar and those few who passed up or down the stairs'd've barely gave'em a glance.

That young man offered'em a bowl. "He asks'f yuns slept well."

Genie nodded as Helena passed'er the bowl. Then'er mouth'd've been too full t'speak.

"He's glad." That young man settled back, forearms draped across'is knees. "He's ready t'continue, if yuns'd like."

Helena and Genie and Kayla nodded. Mara said, "Please."

That young man closed'is eyes. "The thing I liked about my job was...was... Well, I do not remember. But it didn't matter. I do not want to make it sound as if only the engineers came out here. I think that is important to say. The company probably employed twice or three times as many artists and writers, so it would be strange

for a percentage of them to not have decided to come with us. Or maybe not. Maybe there was something about us that made it more likely we would leave and that it was somehow connected on some deeper level with our gravitation toward engineering. Or maybe it wasn't. After all, so-called real engineers despised us calling ourselves engineers. So maybe there is a connection there as well. Or maybe we were just closet artistic types. Or worse, halves and halves. And there is nothing worse than someone who is not completely and solely one thing or the other. Maybe that had something to do with it too. I remember Martina said, or I think it had been Martina, she had said how this was a fucking badly thought out project. She said that to... I don't know. But the other person had said, 'Do you think something's gone wrong upstairs?' He had said it because... The miners had the nine-hundred-ninety-nine rule: their shipments got nine-hundred-ninety-nine elevator trips... or maybe it was the nine-thousand-nine-hundred-ninety-nine rule or maybe just the ninety-nine rule, or the five nines rule, but we were supposed to get one trip on the elevator every so often. But sometimes something had to come down and that counted too. So many people tried to cram themselves into that thing. There was no risk of overloading it with just people, but only so many would fit. I think they used to have people on Earth that would stand on the train platform and push people into the cars so the doors would close. I think we basically did that. Frank, I remember the look on his face when he found out Lucille had gone up on the last elevator and finagled a spot on the last ship. Or at least, the last ship we knew there would be for a long time, even if we didn't know *how* long. I can still see him holding little June in his arms. Such a little thing, sucking her thumb still. Or... it could have been someone else, but there were so few children. Well, actually, I think she might have been the only one born there. That may have been a violation of company policy. We were too many in too small a space, though the socket had supposedly been designed for a high traffic. But what did that mean? And the mining drones rolling in day after day made so much noise you could not hear yourself think. All of history is a recapitulation, I think I remember that from something, maybe a documentary, maybe somebody said it. Or maybe I think someone said one time when we had had too

many fermented fruit powders about how maybe history only looked like it repeated itself because the end of the universe was really the beginning when you looked at it right and how at some point time would start to flow backwards so the big bang and the big crunch were the same thing so you would pass through the same point twice and think the second was a repetition of the first and that maybe you would even pass back and forth from one to the other like that, like a kind of...I don't know. Or maybe... I cannot remember what the other popular hypothesis had been. It had something to do with pretzels, maybe. Or maybe somebody just wanted pretzels and went down to find them in the stocks. When we had been cataloging, we had logged over fifty-million plus remaining packets of pretzels. They say engineers have higher statistical correlations with being a creationist. I do not know if that applied to us. Martina once said how this was a fucking badly thought out project. Maybe she had been talking about the universe. Or maybe it was the evacuation. It could have been the drone, too. It was overloaded and couldn't correct in time and clipped one of the mine haulers. The hauler wasn't hurt, but of course, it was a great big multi-ton thing and you wouldn't expect it to be hurt by something the equivalent of a mosquito. But it sheered off a couple rotors and crashed inside the socket. People ran around screaming. But no one got hurt. Even the babies were not hurt, laying there crying inside the drone. They had been too big, someone said, that was the problem. And they were. I never saw a baby so big as either one of them. I think somebody asked if they thought it was because of something going wrong upstairs. I don't remember what anybody replied. But somebody must have said something. Maybe someone said how it was a lucky thing or a miracle they crashed because otherwise they would have died out there and we were the only ones with the medical knowledge to take care of them. They say being an engineer is statistically correlated to being a creationist, but I don't know if that means anything. But they had to have shots for the rest of their lives, so I don't know if that can be called a miracle or not. Every system has to have a margin of error. I think anything else would be a violation of the second law of thermodynamics, maybe. Martina once said something about this being a fucking badly thought out project. I don't know if I knew

what she meant. I could see why Frank didn't want to leave at first. Maybe he thought Lucille might somehow come back or that she had been really waiting up there on that counter-balancing asteroid and was only waiting a chance to come down again. We built the elevator, you know. But the courts ruled the mining corp had the right to access its rights no matter what it took. They say history repeats itself. Maybe Frank thought it was going to repeat, but repeat backwards and Lucille would come down again. Or maybe he thought something I couldn't think of. But I thought I could understand why he stayed. And I think I thought I could understand when he eventually joined us. One of the tractors, maybe, had automatically returned from taking people way out to one of the towns or near the railway or something. Maybe he had gone with them and thought against it and come back. I don't know. But he told this story, I think, or someone told it, about coming up on this half-buried car that had run off a road. Maybe it was near the mountains. And everyone inside had been dead, except for the baby. If there was a baby, they must have been near the mountain if they were up north. Or maybe they were somewhere else. One time I think I heard someone talk about how there was a group of people way out in the desert, a cult or something, maybe, who found one of those drones crashed out there and worshiped it and were supposed to have believed that if you put a small part of it up yourself that would help you get pregnant. So I guess it was some kind of fertility god. I don't know. I heard about that much later. But someone had kept Brittney at the socket when he decided to bring June out here. Or maybe they both came out. Or maybe the others came out later. Some of us didn't have so many fermented fruit powders with them around. Frank said the two boys had grown like none of us would believe and they were already afraid the both of them would be more than eight, or as much as nine, feet tall or more by the time they had peaked. That must have been much later. Though, I guess it doesn't have to have been. They grew faster, either way. They had given them names but...I can't remember them. Maybe... Maybe it doesn't matter. True names are just a method of censorship, anyway. We didn't have to worry about them anymore after Dave updated the firmware on our phones. Though, we all knew who we were, so maybe that didn't matter,

either. But they say all history is just the same handful of events that happen over and over again. The nice thing about the city was we never had to listen to those mine haulers roll in and out. We only had to listen to the ghosts. But once I made peace with them, everything was okay. Martina once said something about this whole thing being a badly thought out project. But I think she left to go somewhere else. I don't know how many went with her, alot, I guess. It must have seemed like a good idea at the time. Of course, we thought what we had done was a good idea, at the time. Maybe there is something to be said for relativism. Or maybe not. Maybe... I remember the girls used to like and go see the fish. One of them—but I can't remember which—would always stick her arm in the ponds we had built and try to catch them and Tracy would fuss at her and she would cry and Tracy would look like she had just bitten the head off a raw fish. Some of us didn't drink so many fermented fruit powders while they were around. Even when we had the bonfires. Sometimes I would play my music and make Martian shadows for them on the walls. And sometimes they got afraid. But sometimes they would clap. When they fell asleep, we would carry them up to their beds. We almost never tried to follow Zilog anymore. Though, even he did not seem to disappear as much. Though, he still did. Someone had decided that Zeb must have been nearby and that he must have been accessing the food stocks, because that would have been the only logical way he could survive. Someone made a joke, I think, about him being able to survive solely on orneriness, but maybe that was something from a movie. Actually, I think it probably was something from a movie. But maybe someone said it, too. But they had decided to set up a trap for him to try and catch him."

That young man opened his eyes.

Helena and Genie still sucked their fingers.

That young man accepted an empty bowl as Ambeth returned't. "He says t'wish yuns a happy day and that may yuns discover many new things and old ones."

Stiffly, they rose. "Will yuns b'here now?" Mara said.

"He says we'll b'ere unless we're somewhere else." And that young man smiled. "We'll see. But the bargain shall remain not-broken."

Mara nodded.

“Allison.” She opened’er daughter’s bedroom door. “It’s time for dinner.” Allison trumbled toward the door. “Let me see your hands.” Allison offered’er palms. “And the backs.” Mary-Celleste shook’er head. “Go and wash up before dinner.” Allison nodded and ran by’er into the hall. “And don’t run.”

Allison stepped outa the bathroom. “It smells bad, momma.”

“That’s just daddy’s medicine, dear. Now, go on. Wash up so we can eat.”

Allison pulled a face, sucked’n a breath, held’t and finally marched’n and closed the door.

Mary-Celleste crossed the hall and knocked softly. “Jeff.” She waited. “Jeff.” She knocked again. “Jeff, it’s time for dinner.” She waited. Silence. After a few more moments, she touched the knob and cracked the door, peeked through. “Jeff...” He lay’n bed. Mary-Celleste glanced toward the bathroom door, then stepped into’er husband’s bedroom. “Jeff. Wake up.” He lay face up. She spoke louder, “Jeff.” Finally, she touched’is shoulder. “Jeff—Jeff.”

A gurgle erupted from deep’n’is throat. He shifted and cracked’is eyes. “Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmm...”

“Jeff...”

He coughed, shifted, tried t’roll over.

“Jeff, are you okay?”

“Gggggggggggggggggggg.”

“Jeff.”

“I...heard you.” He rolled over, looked at’er with rose-tinted eyes. He glanced toward’is nightstand, the dis-capped medicine bottle. “W—what are you doing in here?”

“Y—”

“Get out.” He shifted and tried t’rise. “Get out.”

She stepped toward the door as’e sat up and combed’is fingers through’is hair. “What time is it?”

Mary-Celleste stopped’n the doorway and Allison approached, tried t’peer round’er, but Mary-Celleste closed the door enough so’er skirt blocked everything. “If you’re washed, go sit at the table.”

“Is daddy alright?”

“Go sit at the table.”

Allison shifted on the balls of’er feet t’try and see round’er mother. But Mary-Celleste pointed and Allison’s shoulders slumped and she started down the hall. When she’d passed through the living room, Mary-Celleste turned. “Do you want to eat something?”

He rubbed’is hands over’is wrinkled clothes. “Yeah.”

“I’ll keep everything warm,” Mary-Celleste said, and closed the door.

Genie said, "What're we gonna do today?"

They leaned over a bridge and looked at the crowds below.

"There's so many people."

"There'sn't that many," Ambeth said. "It looks like more with'em all shoved into small spaces."

Mara leaned'er elbows against the railing. "I don't know. There's alot more than yuh see now. More than yuh might think."

"Maybe," Ambeth said.

"'ow long," Genie said, "Yuns thin till't starts?"

"It starts when't starts." Ambeth glanced at Mara. "Somethin's on yuhr mind."

"Hm?"

"Somethin's on yuhr mind when yuh look that way."

Mara shook'er head. "Just somewhere else a moment."

"If we're gonna do somethin," Helena said, "we'd better do't before't gets hot."

"Maybe," Genie said. "Maybe we'd go down and listen t'that robed figure, yuh know, the one that's been sittin down there'n the corner since we got'ere. Whe was still there this mornin, wasn't whe? We'ven't'eard what whe's been sayin yet."

Ambeth glanced at Mara. "What yuh think?"

Mara straightened. "Sounds as good as anything else."

So they continued across that bridge and wound down the inside of a tower till they'd been expelled into a narrow corridor and made their way along that. "If we go round this way," Ambeth said, "we'd b'able t'switch back onto that square adjacent t'—"

"What's that?"

"I hear't," Mara said. "Let's turn up here."

They squinted as they emerged into daylight.

"Over there," Mara pointed. They crossed a square and ducked through a short connecting alleyway.

"Sure?" Ambeth said. "Drums can echo'n funny ways."

But they emerged into a crowd. Drum thump beat through'em.

Genie rose t'tiptoe. "What's goin on?"

"Come on." Ambeth motioned. "There's a stair along this wall, I think." But t'd've been just as crowded, with only room t'mount the third or forth step.

"What's goin on?"

Someone'n the crowd shook their head, pointed. "They're sayin't's a magus."

Genie turned, wide eyed, rose t'tiptoe again.

Rhythmic drums continued.

"Look at all those feathers. Where'd they come from? Look at the colors."

"I can't see," Genie said, and placed'er hand edge against'er brow. "Are they the same as the feathers the priestesses wear'n the festival?"

"No, they're bigger. Much bigger."

"Huge."

"And alotta'em."

"I think the whole robe's made from'em."

"I still can't'ardly see," Genie said. "The sun's'n my eyes."

"Trade places," Ambeth said.

"Oh, wow." Genie seemed t've permanently locked'erself onto tiptoe. "What yuns thin'e's doin'ere? Yuns thin'e came fer the competition?"

"Possible," Mara said.

"How'd they've heard bout't that far away?"

"I don't know."

The drums ceased. Amidst the square, that many-colored-feather-clad figure raised'is staff and'is robe fell from'is painted arms. "I come to speak of Endercott and Sabbath."

Still ensconced'n a distant corner, maybe a few listeners still remained round that robed figure who'd've been speaking for who'd've known how many days. Or perhaps whe'd've just mumbled into empty, warming, morning air.

Evening. He parked on Mainstreet and walked with 'is hands'n 'is pockets and with 'is hat pushed down over 'is eyes. In the distance, maybe't seemed as'f hammer poundings carried on the wind. He paused by a vacant lot. But such sounds'd've been too indistinct t'trace. A truck passed. He walked on. It parked down the street'n front of Ferguson's. Marilyn reached over'ts sides and lifted out pots and ferried'em beneath the shed that'd been constructed on the lot where the grocery store'd've once stood. Many tables remained empty, a few populated by half-filled baskets with hand-lettered price signs. And Marilyn slowly filed back and forth and filled a table with potted plants as the driver climbed out and into the truck bed and handed those harder t'reach over the side. She looked up as Ron approached, a planter pot held against'er stomach.

"Looks busy," Ron said. "Where's Ralph?"

Marilyn set down a planter on a table and brushed'er hands against'er apron. "He had to go get some things. He'll be back in just a little while if you need something and want to wait." She moved t'accept another pot from the man'n the truck.

"Nothing important," Ron said. He glanced into the truck bed. "Would you care for some help?"

She shook'er head. "Oh, I can't ask that, you—"

But'e pushed up 'is hat and reached over the tailgate. "Where do you want them?"

"Well..." She motioned with the pot she held'n'er hands. "Over there will be fine. With the rest."

"Okay."

He looked over filled tables as they finished dis-loading. "You'll have enough of them," he said. "What're they all for?"

Marilyn glanced at'm, bit'er lip, glanced at the truck driver as'e climbed down and opened the cab. He scribbled something on a

clipboard, tore away part and tossed the clipboard onto the seat and slammed the door. He offered'er the paper. Tentatively, she took't, glanced at't. And without a word, he climbed into's truck and disappeared round the corner, beyond Mainstreet, headed, probably, for the railway station.

Ron turned toward Marilyn, after having watched'm go. She still bit'er lip as she looked over the paper. "Can..." She looked up at'm. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"I..." She looked away, toward the ground, then, finally, back over all those flower pots. "Ralph got them cheap somehow."

"Well, if there's a bargain, I'm sure he'd find it."

Marilyn bit'er lip. "Do you think..." She folded the paper and slipped'er hand behind'er apron t'put't'n'er pocket. "Are you going to the memorial tomorrow?"

Ron nodded. "Yeah."

She looked back over the flowers. "Ralph says we can cut them tomorrow morning and sell them to people to put out." She looked back at'm. "Do you... think that would be wrong?"

Ron remained silent. Marilyn bit'er lip again. Finally, he shook's head. "I don't see why it would."

She looked up at'm. "Are you sure?"

"I don't see how it could hurt anything. I think a lot of people would like to have something to put out." He looked over the tables. "In fact... I'd take one right now if they're ready to sell."

"Um..."

He pulled's wallet from's pocket.

"Are you sure?"

"Sure enough," he said. "What do I owe you?"

"I think... I think Ralph said he wanted to charge something... maybe... five?"

"Alright." He removed a bill as she moved toward the table and she gently shifted pots as'f looking for one'n particular. "Actually, make it two." And'e pulled a second bill and offered'em.

"Two? Are you sure?"

"I hope so."

She took the money.

“I’ll just take them with the pots, if that’s okay.”

She nodded. “Do you want me to wrap them up or anything?”

“I don’t think there’s any need.” He looked over the tables. “Does it matter which ones?”

She shook’er head.

He lifted two pots and balanced’em against’is sides. “I’ll see you tomorrow, I guess.” And’e turned and started back toward’is car.

“You’re sure?” she said.

He turned.

“You’re sure you think it’ll be okay?”

“Well,” he said, “I don’t see what it can hurt.”

This's just me. But thinking back t'earlier sections, such as when L——'s talking bout our journaller, it amazes me t'what lengths she goes t'avoid referring to

Make sense?

Several of the next few pages're ink splattered and the handwriting's lopsided and curls as't crosses the page, as'f our journaller'd t'write'n a hurry or'n several odd positions. And alotta words're scratched out or overwritten multiple times or buried under runny, pooled ink, but I'll try t'reconstruct't as best I can and only make changes where I must.

I speak of they who learned all.
I speak of them who brought back news of the flood to come.
The story never to be written.
Hear it now.
Of Endercott, son of his mother, the queen.
Of Sabbath, born of a dollop of glass flung by God.
Sabbath who would become Endercott's brother.
They who brought back news of the ocean to be born.
Hear it now.
Passed from mouth to ear.
Of Endercott's journey across the world.
Of his friend Sabbath.
They who searched out all secrets.
They who brought back news of the rains to come.
Sabbath, friend and brother to Endercott.
Endercott, he who suffered much.
Son of the queen.
He leads where none would.
He, Endercott, marvelous beyond measure.
Who could pass through the mountains?
Who could travel to the world's edge?
None.
But Endercott.
And Sabbath, his friend.
Sabbath, his brother.
They who brought back news of the flood to come.
Who can match them?

What man may say he rules except Endercott?
 What man may say he stands beside Endercott except Sabbath?
 Long did those ancient witches three whisper amongst themselves.
 They whispered amongst themselves, what is this man we see? They
 whispered amongst themselves, surely he is merely three-sevenths
 mortal. They whispered amongst themselves, none otherwise
 might contain his splendor. They whispered amongst themselves,
 when is he to come? They whispered amongst themselves, when
 shall greatness walk the face of the world? They whispered amongst
 themselves, our eyes have seen the coming of the king.
 And God heard these things those witches three whispered amongst
 themselves. And God pondered them in the silence of God's heart.
 And the Tin Woodman⁶³ heard these things in the silence. He who
 lives in the Great Forest. The winds calmed. The trees remained
 silent. And the silence spoke. The silence spoke of those things
 God did not speak.
 Silence echoed his coming.
 Who bore him?
 The queen.
 Endercott, the queen's son.
 Do any walk as Endercott?
 Are any as strong as Endercott?
 Can any stand as Endercott stands?
 Can any do as Endercott does?
 He who leads where none would.
 He who would pass through the mountains.
 He who would travel to the world's edge.
 Silence echoed his coming.
 Who can make more commotion than Endercott?
 Night and day. Day and night. Commotion rose to heaven from the
 queen's bed chamber.
 Who can match Endercott?
 Night and day. Day and night. Cries echoed forth from the queen's
 bed chamber.

⁶³ Bloomenthaal argues this should be 'Tin Woodsman'. (Controversy & Controversy Vol. 7, Issue 31, p. 429.)

The people cried unto God. They cried, Oh God, who has made all things. They cried, did you not make Endercott? They cried, did you not make him without rival? They cried, did you not make he who leads where none would? They cried, did you not make he who they say would pass through the mountains? They cried, did you not make he who they say would travel to the world's edge? They cried, have you not made him? The people cried, Oh God, why have you set down this wild bull amongst us? The people cried, night and day, day and night commotion rises to heaven from the queen's bed chamber. The people cried, you have created Endercott without match. The people cried, night and day, day and night cries echo forth from the queen's bed chamber. The people cried, Oh God, who can do as Endercott does? The people cried, Oh God, who may have peace when you have set this wild bull amongst us? And night and day. Day and night. Commotion rose to heaven from the queen's bed chamber.

Who could match Endercott?

Night and day. Day and night. Cries echoed forth from the queen's bed chamber.

And the people cried unto God. They cried, Oh God, who has made all things. They cried, did you not make man? They cried, did you not make woman? They cried, did you not make wo? They cried, did you not make Endercott? They cried, Oh God, we cry, create now a match for Endercott. They cried, Oh God, we fear even the queen will tire. They cried, Oh God, create now a match for Endercott that he may spend his energies. Allow his name to be pronounced in silence at night.

And when God heard the people's cries, God pondered these things in the silence of God's heart.

Night and day. Day and night. Commotion rose to heaven from the queen's bed chamber.

Who could match Endercott?

Night and day. Day and night. Commotion rose to heaven from the queen's bed chamber.

And the people cried unto God.

Night and day. Day and night. Commotion rose to heaven from the queen's bed chamber.

And God spoke to godsself. God spoke, after the world's creation, I slept. God spoke, after the creation of man, I slept. God spoke, after the creation of woman, I slept. God spoke, after the creation of wo, I slept. God spoke, but after the creation of Endercott, I have not slept. God spoke, night and day, day and night commotion rises to heaven from the queen's bed chamber. God spoke, who can match Endercott? God spoke, night and day, day and night cries echo forth from the queen's bed chamber. God spoke, the people cry unto me that I have set a wild bull amongst them.

And when God heard godsself, God reached to the world's far side, where another sun remains always upon the land, and pinched molten glass from it, and threw it into the wilderness.

God created Sabbath.

Sabbath stood wide-legged in the wilderness.

The wind caressed his hair. The hair of his body was as a wild beast's. The hair of his head flowed as he ran. The wind caressed his hair. The deer could not match his speed. The great wild bulls could not match his strength.

Sabbath stood wide-legged in the wilderness.

The deer, the bulls, shared their grasses with him for his supper. He drank as they drank. He ran as they ran. Sought shade as they sought shade. He defecated as the wild cat does in open country.

At the watering hole, a shepherd boy saw him. He watched him drink as the deer drink, as the bulls drink. Astounded, he returned home. He spoke to his mother. He spoke, I have seen a man by the watering hole drinking as the deer drink, as the bulls drink. He spoke, the wind caresses his hair. He spoke, the hair of his body is as a wild beast's. He spoke, he runs swift as the deer. He spoke, he is strong as the wild bulls. He spoke, he stands wide-legged in the wilderness.

But his mother admonished him. She admonished, speak not of such tales. She admonished, tend yourself to your obligations.

Sabbath stood wide-legged in the wilderness.

A hunter awaiting deer saw him. Each time he took aim, Sabbath appeared. Sabbath took the hunter's weapons, broke them as easily as a wild bull might trample them. And the hunter ran.

He ran to his father's house.

Seeing his son, his father spoke. He spoke, why have you spent yourself? He spoke, where is the deer you should have brought? He spoke, where are your weapons?

And his son the hunter spoke. He spoke, I went into the wilderness to pursue deer as we have always done. He spoke, and each time I took aim, a man appeared. He spoke, the hair of his head was long. He spoke, his hair covered his body as a wild beast's does. He spoke, he ran swift as the deer. He spoke, he ate grass with the deer and the wild bulls. He spoke, when I took aim, he took my weapons. He spoke, with the strength of a wild bull, he broke them.

His father shook his head and he spoke. He spoke, why have you told me this tale?

His son the hunter spoke. He spoke, I have told no tale. He spoke, surely he is as strong and as mighty as Endercott. He spoke, I have seen none match him. He spoke, he makes me afraid. He spoke, he runs swift as the deer. He spoke, he is as strong as the wild bulls. He spoke, he bids the deer in their own tongue flee from my sight.

His father spoke. He spoke, go from my sight. He spoke, return when you do not hide your shame behind tales. He spoke, your tales betray themselves. He spoke, all know there is none stronger than Endercott. He spoke, who can match Endercott? He spoke, who is as strong as Endercott? He spoke, Endercott leads when none would lead. He spoke, who can do as Endercott does? He spoke, night and day, day and night commotion rises to heaven from the queen's bed chamber. He spoke, who can do such but Endercott?

Sabbath stood wide-legged in the wilderness.

A farmer saw him. Affrighted, he ran to the city. He spoke to the guard. He spoke, please, please, I must see Endercott. He spoke, I must see him who leads when none would lead. He spoke, I must see he who can do only what he does. He spoke, I must see he who is as strong as no other. He spoke, I must see he who makes commotion rise to heaven from the queen's bed chamber night and day, day and night.

The guard narrowed his eyes at the farmer and spoke. He spoke, why carry you your shovel as a weapon?

The farmer looked at his own hands, and spoke. He spoke, I have seen that which makes me afraid so that I could not loose it. He spoke,

please, I throw it away now. He spoke, only call for Endercott that he may come forth. And the farmer loosed his shovel so it clattered at his feet and he spoke. He spoke, I have seen a wild man. He spoke, the wind caresses his hair. He spoke, the hair of his body is as a beast's. He spoke, he runs as swift as the deer. He spoke, he is as strong as the wild bulls. He spoke, he tears down my fences and frees cattle. He spoke, he fills in my ditches. He spoke, I have seen none match him. He spoke, he makes me afraid.

The guard laughed and spoke. He spoke, is he stronger than Endercott? He spoke, is he stronger than he who leads when none would? He spoke, can he do what Endercott does? He spoke, does he make commotion rise to heaven from the queen's bed chamber night and day, day and night? He spoke, speak not such tales.

The farmer shivered and spoke. He spoke, I speak no tale but only that which I have seen with my own eyes, have heard with my own ears. He spoke, I have seen a man run as a racing deer. He spoke, I have heard him bellow as an angry bull.

As the guard laughed, a servant turned her ear toward the door. And she went into the great house that is Endercott's house, into the queen's bedchamber and spoke over the noise. She spoke, oh my queen, a man comes to speak at our door. She spoke, he speaks that a wild man has appeared in the wilderness. She spoke, he speaks that he runs swift as the deer. She spoke, he speaks that he is strong as the wild bulls. She spoke, shepherds speak that he drinks with the deer. She spoke, they speak he shares the cattle's grass. She spoke, hunters speak that he breaks their weapons with the strength of wild bulls. She spoke, they speak that he chases them with the speed of the deer.

Endercott raised himself upon the queen's bed and spoke. He spoke, do they really claim this?

The servant girl spoke. She spoke, yes, they do.

Endercott spoke. He spoke, is this man a mere tale?

The servant girl spoke. She spoke, I can only tell as I have been told.

Endercott rose. He went into his hall and called to his men and they assembled round him and he spoke. He spoke, I have heard of a man. He spoke, the shepherds speak that he drinks as deer drink. He spoke, they speak that he eats grass with cows. He spoke, the

hunters speak he breaks their weapons with the strength of wild bulls. He spoke, they speak he chases them with the speed of the deer. He spoke, the farmers speak he fills in ditches. He spoke, they speak he tears down fences and frees cattle.

His men spoke. They spoke, surely this can be no more than a tale. Endercott spoke. He spoke, go then and find if this man is flesh. He spoke, if so, return to me empty handed. He spoke, if he is air, bring him in a glass jar.

So Endercott's men assembled and went into the wilderness. There, they saw Sabbath. He who drinks as the deer drink. He who eats with the cow. He who runs swiftly as the deer. He who is as strong as the wild bulls. And they were afraid.

And they returned with nothing in their hands.

They stood in the queen's chamber and spoke. They spoke, we have assembled and gone into the wilderness. They spoke, there we have seen a man who drinks as the deer drink. They spoke, who eats with the cow. They spoke, who runs swiftly as the deer. They spoke, who is as strong as wild bulls. They spoke, and we were afraid.

The servant girl spoke. She spoke, the people say he is as strong as Endercott. She spoke, that he stands wide-legged in the wilderness, as Endercott would. She spoke, that he is to pass through the mountains, as Endercott will. She spoke, that he does as only Endercott can do.

Endercott raised himself from the queen's bed.

The queen spoke. She spoke, be not so, my son. She spoke, you have sent your men to find whether this man were a tale. She spoke, and they have brought you back no jar. She spoke, they tell you they are frightened. She spoke, the servant girl tells you the people say he is as strong as wild bulls. She spoke, that they say he stands wide-legged in the wilderness. She spoke, that they say he does as Endercott does. She spoke, but allow us to see that he does as you do. The queen spoke to the servant girl. She spoke, call for the harlot Stephanie. She spoke, then we shall see if he does as only Endercott can do.

So the harlot Stephanie came before the queen in the queen's bed chamber and the queen spoke to her. She spoke, go unto the wilderness and spread your legs for the man who the people say is as swift

as the deer and as strong as the wild bulls. She spoke, he who tears down fences and frees cattle. She spoke, who breaks hunters' weapons. She spoke, lie down before him and spread your legs that we may know if he is the measure of Endercott.

And the harlot Stephanie spoke. She spoke, oh my queen, it honors me to do as you request. She spoke, but I am afraid. She spoke, they say the man in the wilderness bellows as the wild bulls and he has torn down fences and frees cows with the strength of the wild bulls. She spoke, the people say he perhaps is even the equal of Endercott. She spoke, and if he is such, how would I survive?

The queen spoke. She spoke, concern yourself not. She spoke, are any as strong as my son Endercott? She spoke, can any do as my son Endercott can? She spoke, your skills will tire him as they would any other man.

So the harlot Stephanie went into the wilderness. And by the watering hole where the cows and deer and wild bulls gather, she lay down and spread her legs before Sabbath.

For seven days and three nights she lay down and spread her legs before him.

But Sabbath drank water as the deer drink. He ate grass as the bulls eat. He stood wide-legged in the wilderness.

On the eighth day the harlot Stephanie returned to the queen. She spoke to her in the queen's bedchamber. She spoke, oh my queen, it is a not-lucky eighth day. She spoke, you sent me into the wilderness to lie and spread my legs before the man who the people say bellows as the wild bulls bellow and has torn down fences and freed cows with the strength of wild bulls. She spoke, he who people say perhaps is even the equal to Endercott. She spoke, but seven days and three nights have I lain before him with my legs spread, yet he has only drank as the deer drink. She spoke, and eaten grass as the cows eat. She spoke, he stands wide-legged in the wilderness. She spoke, the wind caresses his hair. She spoke, the hair of his body is as a beast's. She spoke, his manhood can be compared to only one. She spoke, but seven days and three nights have I lain before him with my legs spread, yet he has only drank as the deer drink.

Endercott raised himself from the queen's bed.

The queen raised herself from her bed and spoke. She spoke, and this

proves what the people say is false. She spoke, who can do as my son Endercott can?

But Endercott remained as silent as the silence which had proclaimed his coming.

The queen spoke. She spoke, do not concern yourself, my son. She spoke, what man can be master to you? She spoke, what man's will can hold you? She spoke, be not as silent as that silence which proclaimed your coming. She spoke, worry not of this man who drinks as deer drink. She spoke, he who tears down fences with the strength of wild bulls. She spoke, his passions cannot keep God from sleep. She spoke, he cannot do as you do.

Endercott raised his head and spoke. He spoke, let us see if he does as I don't. He spoke, I will call for Jarod. He spoke, and we will see what occurs then.

So Endercott went into his hall and called forth Jarod and spoke unto him. He spoke, go into the wilderness. He spoke, find the man who stands wide-legged there. He spoke, who drinks as the deer drink. He spoke, who eats grass as the cows eat. He spoke, who the people say has the strength of wild bulls. He spoke, ply your pleasures to him.

And Jarod spoke. He spoke, oh my ruler, it honors me to do as you request. He spoke, but I am afraid. He spoke, they say the man in the wilderness bellows as the wild bulls bellow and he has torn down fences and frees cows with the strength of the wild bulls. He spoke, the people say he perhaps is even the equal of Endercott. He spoke, and if he is such, how would I survive?

Endercott spoke. He spoke, concern yourself not. He spoke, if he is a man, your skills will tire him as they would any other man who desired to take possession of them.

So Jarod went into the wilderness. And by the watering hole where the cows and deer and wild bulls gather, he offered himself to Sabbath.

For seven days and three nights he offered himself in many ways to him.

But Sabbath drank water as the deer drink. He ate grass as the bulls eat. He stood wide-legged in the wilderness.

On the eighth day, Jarod returned. He spoke to Endercott in the

queen's bedchamber. He spoke, oh my ruler, it is a not-lucky eighth day. He spoke, you sent me into the wilderness to ply my pleasures to the man who the people say bellows as the wild bulls bellow and has torn down fences and freed cows with the strength of wild bulls. He spoke, who people say perhaps is even the equal to Endercott. He spoke, but seven days and three nights have I offered my pleasures and shown my desire, yet he has only drank as the deer drink. He spoke, and eaten grass as the cows eat. He spoke, he stands wide-legged in the wilderness. He spoke, the wind caresses his hair. He spoke, the hair of his body is as a beast's. He spoke, his manhood can be compared to only one. He spoke, but seven days and three nights have I offered my pleasures and shown my desire, yet he has only drank as the deer drink.

The queen rose from her bed and spoke. She spoke, see, my son, what does this wild man do that men do? She spoke, perhaps it wears only the shape of a man.

Endercott rose from the queen's bed. But Endercott remained as silent as the silence which had proclaimed his coming.

The queen caressed him and spoke. She spoke, why concern yourself so? She spoke, do the people not say this man drinks as the deer drink? She spoke, do the people not say he eats grass as the cows eat? She spoke, do the people not say the hair of his body is as a beast's? She spoke, why concern yourself over this wild man any more than you would concern yourself over the deer or the cows?

But Endercott remained as silent as the silence which had proclaimed his coming.

The queen caressed him and spoke. She spoke, forget this man who stands wide-legged in the wilderness. She spoke, can this man do as you do?

Endercott spoke to the queen. He spoke, when has this man who stands wide-legged in the wilderness who they say tears down fences and frees cows with the strength of wild bulls been given opportunity to do as I do?

And Endercott turned to the queen and spoke. He spoke, go my queen, into the wilderness. He spoke, lay by the watering hole as the harlot Stephanie has lain. He spoke, spread your legs before this man who stands wide-legged in the wilderness as the harlot

Stephanie has spread her legs. He spoke, and we shall see if he does as I do.

And the queen spoke. She spoke, oh my son, it honors me to do as you request. She spoke, but I am afraid. She spoke, they say the man in the wilderness bellows as the wild bulls bellow and he has torn down fences and frees cows with the strength of the wild bulls. She spoke, the people say he perhaps is even the equal of you.

Endercott spoke. He spoke, concern yourself not. He spoke, do you not ask are any as strong as I? He spoke, do you not ask can any do as I can?

So the queen went into the wilderness. And by the watering hole where the cows and deer and wild bulls gather, she lay down and spread her legs before Sabbath as the harlot Stephanie had done.

Night and day. Day and night. Commotion rose to heaven from the wilderness.

For seven days and seven nights. Commotion rose to heaven from the wilderness.

On the seventh night the queen spoke to Sabbath. She spoke, surely you do stand wide-legged in the wilderness as my son would. She spoke, your strength is as the strength of wild bulls. She spoke, surely you do as my son does.

And on the seventh night while Sabbath slept, the queen fled to the city. She found her son in his hall and spoke to him. She spoke, surely this man Sabbath stands wide-legged in the wilderness as you would. She spoke, his strength is as the strength of wild bulls. She spoke, surely Sabbath does as my son does.

Endercott remained as silent as the silence which had proclaimed his coming.

And on the eighth morning, Sabbath rose and went to the watering hole.

But the deer scattered from him.

He went into the fields.

But the cows scattered from him.

He bellowed as the bulls bellow. His cry rose up from the wilderness.

He sat by the river in sadness.

A shepherd's daughter carried her water pot to the river. She saw him by the river in his sadness. And she returned to her father and

spoke. She spoke, father, let us offer this man food. She spoke, let us offer this man drink. She spoke, he sits with sadness night and day, day and night by the river. She spoke, the deer do not approach him. She spoke, the cows flee from his sight. She spoke, he is alone in the world.

The shepherd spoke to his daughter. He spoke, why bring this wild man here? He spoke, has he not torn down fences and released cattle?

But the shepherd's daughter regarded her father not. And she went unto the river with her water pot the next morning. There Sabbath remained. And she took him into their house.

The shepherd's daughter set honey cake before him. She set meed before him.

But his eyes remained fixed.

The shepherd's daughter spoke to her father. She spoke, he has only ever drank as the deer drink. She spoke, he has only ever eaten grass as the cows eat.

And her father sat at the table and ate honey cake and drank meed. Sabbath ate honey cake and drank meed.

The hunter came to the shepherd's door. He stopped, afraid, and spoke. He spoke, why has this wild man been allowed here? He spoke, he who destroys hunters' weapons.

The shepherd spoke. He spoke, see you that he eats honey cake and drinks meed. He spoke, he no longer drinks water as the deer drink. He spoke, he no longer eats grass as the cows eat grass. He spoke, be not afraid. He spoke, eat. The shepherd spoke. He spoke to his daughter, bring forth food that we may eat.

And the hunter sat and ate honey cake and drank meed and spoke. He spoke, I have come to hunt the great stag and the great wild bull that have come down from the mountains. He spoke, the farmers speak the great stag tramples their fields and fills their ditches and devours their crops while they sleep. He spoke, they speak the great wild bull tears down their fences and looses their cattle and breaks in the doors to their houses and overturns their hives.

The shepherd spoke. He spoke, I know of these beasts. He spoke, they scatter my sheep into the wilderness so that I cannot find them.

The hunter nodded and spoke. He spoke, and they scatter the game

before the hunters. He spoke, they trample the hunters' weapons beneath their feet and break them. He spoke, they make me afraid. He spoke, I am no match for the great stag. He spoke, I am no match for the great bull. He spoke, but who else is there here to go into the wilderness?

Sabbath, who had eaten honey cake and drank meed, rose. He rose and took up the shepherd's ax.

Sabbath went into the wilderness for three days and three nights.

On the fourth day, Sabbath returned with the great stag's head in his hand. He returned with the great wild bull's head in his hand.

The farmers fell on their faces before him. They kissed his feet. They spoke. They spoke, oh only one other can there be as mighty as Sabbath. They spoke, he has slain the great stag. They spoke, he has slain the great wild bull. They spoke, they are as weak as calves in his hands. They spoke, oh only one other can there be as mighty as Sabbath. They spoke, the hair of his body is as a beast's. They spoke, his strength matches that of wild bulls.

The shepherds' daughters brought forth food in feast.

Sabbath ate honey cake and drank meed. The people ate honey cake and drank meed. They raised their cups to him and cried. They cried, oh only one other can there be as mighty as Sabbath. They cried, his strength matches that of wild bulls.

At night, by the kindled fire, Sabbath sat alone. The shepherd's daughter came forth and sat beside him and spoke. She spoke, Sabbath, you sit away from the people. She spoke, why do you not join the people?

Sabbath spoke to the shepherd's daughter. He spoke, the people say I have the strength of wild bulls. He spoke, what beast would match me? He spoke, I am alone.

The shepherd's daughter spoke to Sabbath. She spoke, you are indeed mighty. She spoke, you have the strength of wild bulls. She spoke, but there remains yet one who would match you. And the shepherd's daughter pointed and spoke. She spoke, there. She spoke, there is where Endercott is. She spoke, the people once said there was none who could match Endercott. She spoke, the people once asked who could do as Endercott can do? She spoke, but you can do so.

Sabbath rose and spoke. He spoke, I shall go there. He spoke, a man of the wilderness must be greater than a man of the city. He spoke, I shall go there and show my strength. He spoke, I shall go there and lead.

But the shepherd's daughter shook her head and spoke. She spoke, please do not such. She spoke, who is as beautiful in face as Endercott? She spoke, the women love him. She spoke, the men love him. She spoke, the wo love him. She spoke, long did those ancient witches three whisper amongst themselves. She spoke, they whispered amongst themselves what is this man they saw? She spoke, they whispered amongst themselves that surely he is merely three-sevenths mortal. She spoke, they whispered amongst themselves that none otherwise might contain his splendor. She spoke, they whispered amongst themselves asking when was he to come? She spoke, they whispered amongst themselves asking when shall greatness walk the face of the world? She spoke, they whispered amongst themselves that their eyes have seen the coming of the king. She spoke, and God heard these things they whispered amongst themselves. She spoke, and God pondered this in the silence of God's heart. She spoke, Sabbath, do not go to use your strength which is as that of wild bulls against Endercott.

Sabbath spoke. He spoke, I must go.

But the shepherd's daughter touched his arm and spoke. She spoke, do not go. She spoke, allow me to bring forth my sister who is the queen's servant girl that she may speak.

And Sabbath assented. And after a day and a night, the shepherd's daughter returned with her sister who was the queen's servant girl.

The shepherd's daughter spoke to Sabbath. She spoke, Sabbath, hear what my sister speaks. She spoke, let it convince you not to use your strength which is as that of wild bulls against Endercott.

And the shepherd's daughter who was the queen's servant girl spoke to Sabbath. She spoke, long ago, before shepherd boys saw Sabbath at the watering hole. She spoke, before God pinched off molten glass from where daylight glows always. She spoke, Endercott spoke to his mother the queen of a dream. She spoke, he spoke he had dreamed of a great ax in the city square which fell from heaven to land beside a great hammer. She spoke, he spoke that the hammer

tried to lift the ax and could not. She spoke, he spoke the people gathered round the ax. She spoke, he spoke the people kissed it. She spoke, he spoke that his mother the queen stood over it and called it his brother.

The shepherd's daughter who was the queen's servant girl spoke the queen's reply. She spoke, the queen spoke to interpret her son's dream. She spoke, the queen spoke that the ax is a man and that this man shall be the equal of her son. She spoke, the queen spoke that the people shall bow before him as they bow before her son and that the people shall cry here is the equal of Endercott. She spoke, the queen spoke that she will anoint him the brother of her son and that he will be her son's help. She spoke, the queen spoke that her son would be his brother's help. She spoke, the queen spoke that the people shall cry here is the equal to Endercott. She spoke, this is what the queen replied.

The shepherd's daughter who was the queen's servant girl spoke Endercott's reply. She spoke, Endercott spoke it would be good to have such a friend.

This the shepherd's daughter who was the queen's servant girl spoke to Sabbath.

And the shepherd's daughter spoke to Sabbath. She spoke, it is said you are to love one another. She spoke, you cannot destroy Endercott. Sabbath remained in silence that night.

The silence that had proclaimed Endercott's coming.

The silence in God's heart.

Sabbath rose as the sun. And with the sun.

The shepherd's daughter set honey cake before him. The shepherd's daughter who was the queen's servant girl set meed before him. Sabbath ate honey cake and drank meed.

The shepherd's daughter braided the hair of his head. The shepherd's daughter who was the queen's servant girl anointed the hair of his body with oil.

The shepherd's daughter arrayed him in a seven-colored robe. The shepherd's daughter who was the queen's servant girl put upon his head a three colored hat.

The shepherds spoke when they saw him. They spoke, oh only one other can there be as mighty as Sabbath. They spoke, he has slain

the great stag. They spoke, he has slain the great wild bull. They spoke, they are as weak as calves in his hands. They spoke, oh only one other can there be as mighty as Sabbath. They spoke, the hair of his body is as a beast's. They spoke, his strength matches that of wild bulls.

The shepherds' wives spoke when they saw him. They spoke, oh only one other can there be as mighty as Sabbath. They spoke, he has slain the great stag. They spoke, he has slain the great wild bull. They spoke, they are as weak as calves in his hands. They spoke, oh only one other can there be as mighty as Sabbath. They spoke, the hair of his body is as a beast's. They spoke, his strength matches that of wild bulls.

Sabbath followed the road to the city.

The people saw him as he passed. But spoke not.

He stood before Endercott's hall. He blocked Endercott from entering his hall.

Endercott.

Who none can match.

Sabbath.

With the strength of wild bulls.

Grappled.

Houses shook.

The street quaked.

Surely the square beneath their feet must rend open a gash in the land.

Sabbath blocked the door to Endercott's hall.

The people fell on their faces before Sabbath. They kissed his feet.

They spoke. They spoke, oh once we spoke there could be none as mighty as Endercott. They spoke, we cried unto God that a bull had been set amongst us. They spoke, Sabbath slays the great stag. They spoke, Sabbath slays the great wild bull. They spoke, he has the strength of wild bulls. They spoke, he blocks the door to Endercott's hall. They spoke, here is the equal to Endercott.

And both men wept.

Endercott spoke to Sabbath.

What did he say?

We should not know.

Both men wept.

They embraced one another.

Amidst the square, he lowered his staff and his many-colored feather cloak covered his arms. "I shall speak more later." And the drums began.

“Wow,” Genie said.

“Yuh said that already,” Kayla said.

“Several times,” Helena said.

They stood on a bridge and looked down at those who moved below. Cats passed silently behind’em on their ways t’other towers. One paused t’look at’em, but only for a moment, then moved on. Kayla pushed Quetzalcoatl’s nose back into’er bag.

“If this’s what’t’s’ike now,” Genie said. “—I can’t wait for’t t’start.”

Helena looked over the railing. “Hey, I think that’s Li.”

“How can yuh tell?”

“That’s’er hat, isn’t’t?” Helena whistled. Below, several looked up. She waved.

“What’d yuh do that for?”

“I’dn’t know. I just’d.”

“Now she’ll come up’ere.”

“So?”

“I’s just gettin used t’peace and quiet.”

Ambeth sighed.

After a while, Li and Lizbeth emerged from a tower, crossed the bridge toward’em. “We’ve been lookin fer yuns,” Li said.

“Great.”

“Reincarnates are’s’eres,” Lizbeth said. “Wese justs snucks ups tuse sees’ems fors ourselves. Theys onlies justs gots’eres sometimes’n these nights.”

“We know,” Ambeth said. “We saw’em when they came’n.”

Lizbeth laughed. "Sures." She motioned t'Li. "Comes ons, wese gets somethins tuse eats."

Li glanced at Mara and the rest. "I'll catch yuh later."

"Yous sures?"

"Yah."

Lizbeth waved at'em as she turned. "Wese'lls tells yuhrs bouts the reïncarnates later," she said. And she crossed the bridge t'disappear into a tower.

Li'd watched'er go, and turned, again, toward the rest.

"What's the matter," Ambeth said, "somethin give yuh indigestion?"

"If yuh missed me, yuh can jus say so."

"Ha." Ambeth rolled'er eyes and looked down over the bridge.

"Besides," Li said. "I was'n on the deal, too. I might aswell get my trade's worth."

"We'd better get going," Mara said. It was already past high sun.

They started across the bridge.

"I'ope'e gets back t'Nathaniel and Catherine this time," Genie said.

Li said, "Wut're yuh talkin bout?"

Mary-Celleste said, "Are you sure you're supposed to take so much?"

Her husband stood at the bathroom sink. He held a glass'n one hand, the bottle'n t'other. Both'is hands shook, but the hand ahold of the glass seemed t'shake more. "I know how to take medicine." The bottle rattled against the glass and umber liquid sloshed out, ran over the rim. He tried t'set the bottle on the sink edge, but't slipped into the basin. "AAAAAAAH—" He grabbed for't, almost lost'is glass.

"D—"

"Momma, what's wrong?" Allison stood'n the darkened hallway'n'er nightclothes.

"Go back to bed," Mary-Celleste said.

"Why is D—"

Mary-Celleste pointed. "Go back to bed."

Allison crossed'er arms, puffed, but turned.

"Close your door and get in bed. I want you to be asleep when I come to check on you." She turned back t'er husband. "Don't worry about it," she said. "I'll clean it up."

He stood there, glass'n-hand, and looked into the basin. "I'll have to go to the drugstore again tomorrow."

"We can do it in the morning," she said. "Before the memorial."

He looked up into the mirror, turned away. Silently, he passed'er and went into'is room and closed the door.

That young man offered Li a bowl. “He says t’tell yuh’e’s happy t’ssee yuh’ve returned.”

“Wutever,” Li said, but she accepted the bowl.

“Is’e gonna go on?” Genie said as she waited for a bowl t’reach’er. “What bout Catherine and Nathaniel?”

“Yes,” that young man said. “He says t’offer’is apologies.” And’e glanced beside’m at that bald-headed old man who still seemed never t’ve moved. “He says sometimes everything becomes scattered and wound together. And’t’s impossible t’tell the part from the whole.”

“Oh, that’s’kay,” Genie said, and then accepted a bowl from Helena.

“He says t’tell yuh’e’ll try’is best t’do better.”

“Oh, I’dn’t mean t’offend’m.”

That young man raised’is hand. “He says t’tell yuh there’s no offense taken. He’ll continue only’f yuh wish’t.”

“Oh,” Genie said. She nodded and swallowed as fast as she’d. “Yah, please.”

That young man closed’is eyes. “We finally caught him. I don’t remember how. Maybe we rigged some net over the entrance to... Or perhaps we had Dave rig some kind of motion sensor or camera setup or something. But we finally caught him. Everybody laughed. Somebody asked him how come he hadn’t uploaded his book yet. And Zeb clutched a bunch of dehydrated food packets to his chest and screamed—I’LL FUCKING DO IT WHEN I’M FUCKING GOOD AND FUCKING READY—and ran off. Everybody laughed. We had known Catherine and Nathaniel for weeks by then. They had come years before with Zeb. But they hadn’t known him long enough to laugh like we did. The others had come up with some new coveralls

for them. There were packs and packs of them still stored sealed away and sometimes we used them so we could avoid having to wash the old ones. I thought she looked good in blue. But Tracy—she thought she looked better in nothing at all. She thought that right from the start. I know because I think she told me so. She had commented about her one day when I had taken the girls down to feed the fish. Somebody said at dinner, before either of them had gotten there, that they had better be careful or they would get their asses sued for violating some non-something-or-the-other agreement. But they had said that to Allan. No one else knew anything about what Tracy had said to me, then. But everyone knew what Allan had thought about Nathaniel. There actually was a contractual clause about interacting with park units—I think that’s what they had been called—park units—they were very old contracts and probably no one had ever updated the boilerplate, or maybe that just meant something different in the language legal systems use. People use language in different ways. You have to be careful. Even if you think you’re speaking the same one, you might not be. But there had been a morals clause about fraternizing with fellow team members and at least June or Brittney or maybe both or Kim or who else I can’t remember were evidence of a violation. Allan laughed. He had said to let them come and get him and haul him back to Earth if they wanted to prosecute him—they could try him right after they were done appealing the right of way. Everybody had laughed. I think it must be impossible to learn how to kiss without knowing it exists. How do you know what you want before you know about it? I think a version of that phrase used to be patented, or was it trademarked? I guess it would have been trademarked. But I don’t remember the original. I once saw a documentary, I think, about how if they left monkeys with no examples of mating, then introduced them to a coed environment, they could not figure out how to mount the female or vise versa. They got off somewhere—I don’t know where—I took the girls down to feed the fish, but Tracy wasn’t there. In some semi-secluded spot, Tracy touched Catherine’s neck and slowly leaned in and—”

“If’e wasn’t’ere,” Li said, “’ow’s’e know about’t?”

Helena tried t’speak with’er mouth full and’t emerged as, “Shhhhhh.”

Li sucked'er sticky fingers. "Suit yuhrself."

That young man smiled. "He says t'tell yuh that yuh remind'm of a character'n a movie'e once saw. But'e can't remember which, only't was the director's last theatrical release, he thinks."

"Nice."

That young man closed'is eyes, continued.

As they'd've passed through from passageway-t'passageway and square-t'square, that enshrouded figure'd've remained'n a distant corner. A select few'd've still gathered round, languid amid afternoon heat, as'f they'd nothing better t'do while they waited for everything t'begin. And whe'd've continued.

Wilting flowers punctuated graves, lay scattered across the ground as 'f some truck'd overturned and wind'd blown'em there. Silent people filtered between'em, dressed all'n blues. Ron stopped before a bare marker. Several moments'e looked down at't, finally lowered'mself and placed a flower among sparse, brown grass.

"A shame," someone said behind'm.

Ron turned.

"A shame." Mrs Holtcraft held a copy of *The Book* against'er chest and seemed t'look at nothing and beyond everything.

Ron turned, again, t'the marker.

"Do you know about Mrs Coreman?" she said.

"Yeah."

"A shame."

Ron nodded.

"An empty one looks so awful, doesn't it?" Mrs Holtcraft said. "It was good of you to bring something."

Ron turned away from the marker. "Have you seen Sarah?"

Mrs Holtcraft shook'er head.

"I thought she would be here."

But Mrs Holtcraft just looked at nothing and beyond everything. Beatrice approached. Her blue skirt'd've rippled'n the light breeze.

"Have you seen Sarah?" Ron said.

Beatrice shook'er head. She took'is arm. "Should we go?"

Ron nodded. "Alright."

They passed the Holdfasts. Allison'd said something lost'n the wind. She said, "Momma why do some people die?"

"Hush." Mary-Celleste glanced round, caught Ron's eyes. She took'er daughter's hand. "It's time to be quiet now."

Ron touched'is hat as they passed.

(Somewhere)

The drums ceased. Amidst the square, that many-colored-feather-clad figure raised'is staff and'is robe fell from'is painted arms. "I come to speak of Endercott and Sabbath."

I speak of they who learned all.
I speak of them who brought back news of the flood to come.
The story never to be written.
Hear it now.
Of Endercott, son of his mother, the queen.
Of Sabbath, born of a dollop of glass flung by God.
Sabbath who would become Endercott's brother.
They who brought back news of the ocean to be born.
Hear it now.
Passed from mouth to ear.
Of Endercott's journey across the world.
Of his friend Sabbath.
They who searched out all secrets.
They who brought back news of the rains to come.
Sabbath, friend and brother to Endercott.
Endercott, he who suffered much.
Son of the queen.
He who leads where none would.
He, Endercott, marvelous beyond measure.
Who could pass through the mountains?
Who could travel to the world's edge?
None.
But Endercott.
And Sabbath, his friend.
Sabbath, his brother.
They who brought back news of the flood to come.
Who can match them?

What man may say he rules except Endercott?

What man may say he stands beside Endercott except Sabbath?

And Endercott spoke to Sabbath. He spoke, friend, there is only one chair in my hall where there should be two. He spoke, let us go to the Great Forest that we may build another. He spoke, that we may sit at the other's side.

But the people were near and they spoke. They spoke, oh do not do so. They spoke, you are young. They spoke, you are strong. They spoke, do not desert us. They spoke, the Great Forest lies far away. They spoke, its guard is the Tin Woodman. They spoke, his ax fells men and not trees. They spoke, his breath is steam and his belly a furnace.

Endercott admonished them. He admonished them, Sabbath my friend has the strength of wild bulls. He admonished them, he slays the great stag. He admonished them, he slays the great wild bull. He admonished them, who can equal him but me? He admonished them, I am Endercott. He admonished them, who else but he can do as I do? He admonished them, who can match us?

But the people cried. They cried, oh you will go and leave us. They cried, you will leave us and you shall be gone. They cried, your hall shall be empty. They cried, the queen's bedchamber shall be silent. They cried, God shall sleep.

But Endercott swept his arm at them and spoke. He spoke, what do I care of the sleep of God? And he faced his friend Sabbath and spoke. He spoke, I have my friend. He spoke, and my friend shall have his chair in my hall. He spoke, if my hall shall be empty then so be it. He spoke, if the queen's bedchamber shall be silent, so be it. He spoke, if God shall sleep, so be it.

So Endercott and Sabbath went into Endercott's hall. They prepared themselves for their journey to the Great Forest. They girded themselves with belts no other men could bear. They fitted themselves with axes no other men could lift. They fitted themselves with hammers no other men could wield.

They moved to leave Endercott's hall. But the queen blocked the door.

She spoke to her son. She spoke, my son, I have had a dream. She spoke, I dreamt you were amidst a great wood. She spoke, the

birds sounded and the deer moaned. She spoke, in the countryside wild bulls bellowed and a commotion rose. She spoke, the people stirred from their beds. She spoke, God woke. She spoke, there had been no sound like it. She spoke, there had been no sound like it except the silence that told your coming.

Endercott laughed and spoke to his mother the queen. He spoke, I will interpret your dream, mother. He spoke, your dream is the sound of our victory. He spoke, your dream is the sound that will rise from the land to heaven to tell what we have done.

The queen spoke to Sabbath. She spoke, I am afraid for my son. She spoke, I am afraid for you his friend. She spoke, I beg you both stay. She spoke, stay in this hall. She spoke, the world knows your strengths know no bounds. She spoke, heaven knows your strengths know no bounds. She spoke, the people know your strengths know no bounds.

Sabbath spoke to the queen. He spoke, I must go where my friend goes. He spoke, I must tread where my friend treads. He spoke, where my friend does battle, I must do battle.

Tears filled the queen's eyes and she spoke to her son. She spoke, I cannot turn you aside. She spoke, your will is that of wild bulls. She spoke, but recall my words. She spoke, remember you are not alone. She spoke, great as your own strength is, do not rely solely upon it. She spoke, look to Sabbath. She spoke, this you have not done. She spoke, always before you have been alone in the land. She spoke, who could do as you do? She spoke, but recall my words and remember you are not alone.

Endercott spoke to his mother the queen. He spoke, I shall recall your words.

His mother the queen shook her head and spoke. She spoke, I fear you will not.

But his mother the queen stepped aside and daylight shone through the doorway as she spoke. She spoke, go that you may return. She spoke, go to the Great Forest and find he whose ax fells men and not trees. She spoke, he whose breath is steam and whose belly is a furnace. She spoke, go that you may return.

So Endercott and Sabbath followed the setting sun. Far into the desert. For three nights they slept in the desert. Amidst the third

night, Endercott woke in Darkness. He looked round from within Darkness. Sabbath did not wake. Endercott touched his shoulder. But Sabbath did not wake.

A voice spoke from Darkness. It spoke, he will not wake.

Endercott faced Darkness and spoke. He spoke, who are you that hides in darkness?

For the stars had extinguished. And the moons gone.

Darkness spoke. Darkness spoke, can I hide in what I am? Darkness spoke, mighty ruler, how little you know.

Endercott spoke. He spoke, do you cause my friend to remain asleep?

Darkness spoke. Darkness spoke, it is I who wishes your friend remain asleep.

Endercott spoke. He spoke, are you afraid to face both of us?

Darkness laughed and spoke. Darkness spoke, poor ruler Endercott.

Darkness spoke, you are the one so mighty, so beautiful, so proud, so noble. Darkness spoke, and you are the one who has kept God awake. Darkness spoke, and you are the one who seeks the Great Forest. Darkness spoke, and seek to kill its Tin Woodman.

Endercott spoke. He spoke how do you know of our plans? He spoke, are you our enemy's spy? He spoke, go then and tell him of our plans. He spoke, tell him we come. He spoke, it will matter not.

Darkness laughed and spoke. Darkness spoke, poor ruler Endercott.

Darkness spoke, do you not know that the Tin Woodman heard from the silence in God's heart of your coming? Darkness spoke, long has he prepared for you, since even before your feet touched dust. Darkness spoke, even now you are surrounded by his forces. Darkness spoke, do you not feel them breathe in the night? Darkness spoke, for even before your feet touched dust did he go unto the doctor in his tower. Darkness spoke, and night and day, day and night he brought to the doctor the bodies of the men whom his ax had hued as a man would hue trees. Darkness spoke, and the doctor took needle and thread and wire and called down lightning and wrought life. Darkness spoke, his children he suckled on blue dyes and acids were their milks. Darkness spoke, from the bodies of the men the Tin Woodman had hued as men hue trees, the doctor stitched an army. Darkness spoke, feel their breath in the night, poor ruler Endercott?

Endercott spoke. He spoke, why speak of this to me? He spoke, do you offer help?

Darkness spoke. Darkness spoke, of a kind.

Endercott spoke. He spoke, do you speak in riddles?

Darkness spoke. Darkness spoke, of a kind.

Endercott spoke. He spoke, then speak plain or leave. He spoke, I would rather test my strength against this army of your words than deal further with faceless, formless darkness.

Darkness laughed and spoke. Darkness spoke, poor ruler Endercott, what do you believe lies beneath all masks?

Endercott spoke. He spoke, do your riddles have a purpose?

Darkness spoke. Darkness spoke, of a kind.

Endercott spoke. He spoke, then speak of what kind or allow me withdraw my ax.

Darkness spoke. Darkness spoke, poor ruler Endercott, my riddles anger you so? Darkness spoke, then I give you a challenge. Darkness spoke, solve but one and I shall spare you the night. Darkness spoke, solve but one and in the blink of an eye, you shall wake beside the Great Forest. Darkness spoke, solve but one and the army whose breath you feel in the night shall be far away. Darkness spoke, solve but one and you will have your chance to face the one you seek.

Endercott spoke. He spoke, then speak your riddle.

Darkness laughed and spoke. Darkness spoke, four directions gird creation. Darkness spoke, your mother the queen lies behind you, but this you know you know. Darkness spoke, the great mountains lie north, but what is beyond you know you don't know. Darkness spoke, the Great Forest lies ahead, but what is there you don't know that you know. Darkness spoke, the forth direction you will one day travel. Darkness spoke, what is that direction?

Endercott spoke. He spoke, what type of riddle is this?

Darkness spoke. Darkness spoke, it is mine.

Endercott spoke. He spoke, you might as well ask me what you have in pockets that do not exist.

Darkness remained silent.

Endercott considered. Finally, Endercott spoke. He spoke, how am I to solve this? He spoke, at least allow my friend to wake so that he may aid me.

But Darkness remained silent.
Endercott spoke. He spoke, does your riddle even have an answer?
But Darkness remained silent.
Endercott spoke. He spoke, allow me hear it again.
But Darkness remained silent.
Endercott spoke. He spoke, how are such questions to be answered?
But Darkness remained silent.
Endercott cried. He cried, will you give us no chance?
But Darkness remained silent.
Endercott stood. He drew his ax in one hand and his hammer in the other and spoke. He spoke, then dissipate yourself and we will prove ourselves against whatever armies you claim lie in wait.
But Darkness remained silent.
Endercott called to Darkness. He called, I demand it.
But Darkness remained silent.
Endercott called to Darkness. He called, I will not play such games.
But Darkness remained silent.
Endercott called to Darkness. He called, do you hear me? He called, I will not play your games.
But Darkness remained silent.
Finally, Endercott cried. He cried, I do not know.
Endercott cried to Darkness. He cried, I do not know.
Darkness dissipated. Morning sun hung halfway up the sky.
Sabbath woke. He rose. He saw small trees. When he looked round, he saw they had arrived at the Great Forest's edge. He spoke to Endercott. He spoke, by what magic are we here? He spoke, had we not lain down to sleep only on the third night?
Endercott looked away from the desert. Endercott turned toward the Great Forest. Clanks and groans echoed from it. Steam hissed from within it.
Endercott pointed the way with his ax and spoke. He spoke, what is immediate concerns us now. He spoke, this is the Great Forest. He spoke, this is that place which is guarded by the Tin Woodman. He spoke, he whose ax fells men and not trees. He spoke, he whose breath is steam and whose belly is a furnace.
And Sabbath withdrew his ax in one hand and his hammer in the other and spoke. He spoke, I will go with my friend.

Steam hissed from the forest as they stepped beyond its threshold.

Great trees towered overhead. Blocked the sun. Steam hissed and made words and spoke. Steam spoke, Endercott and Sabbath would do wise to ask of themselves why they come to the Great Forest.

The steam came from all directions as they walked. The steam spoke.

It spoke, they would be wise to ask what they want here.

The steam spoke. It spoke, they should question themselves as to why they come here.

Endercott called to the forest. He called, why should we ask ourselves that which we already know?

The steam spoke. It spoke, do you? It spoke, do Endercott and Sabbath know why they have come to the Great Forest?

Steam encircled them. So they could not see. Endercott and Sabbath stood back-t'back.

The steam spoke. It spoke, do you? It spoke, do Endercott and Sabbath know why they have come to the Great Forest?

Steam encircled them. Whirled about them. Breathed hot and wet upon them.

Sabbath spoke to Endercott. He spoke

I'm sorry, the next few pages're just too scratched over and blotted
t'discern anything.

spoke to Endercott. He spoke, the Tin Woodman's body must be divided.

Endercott agreed.

And they both took up their axes and divided the Tin Woodman's body. Fragments they hammered into emblems no wider than thumb or forefinger may fit around. And they went through the forest and caught crows and ravens. They tied these emblems to their legs with twine. And bid them fly. A great flock twinkled as it rose toward the sun. And at night it is these black birds which cross unseen in the night skies. It is the metal tied to their legs which glints in the moonlights.

Endercott and Sabbath watched them and Sabbath spoke. He spoke, I will have a dream of this.

Endercott held forth his arm to his friend and spoke. He spoke, friend, come, let us bring our axes against those trees which the Tin Woodman wood not bring his ax.

And Endercott and Sabbath took up their axes.

Endercott, who can do as he does? Except Sabbath. Sabbath. Who has the strength of wild bulls.

The forest fell before their axes. Trees whose tops reached to heaven fell before their axes.

Sabbath stood over a new-fallen tree and spoke to his friend Endercott.

He spoke, I will make a door. He spoke, this door will be for your hall that all who see it shall know what we have done. He spoke, so that all who see it shall know we traveled to the Great Forest. He spoke, and so that all who see it shall know we fought with the Tin Woodman. He spoke, he whose ax felled men as other axes felled

trees. He spoke, he whose breath was steam and whose belly was a furnace. He spoke, and none shall question it.
And Sabbath made this door for his friend Endercott.
They carried the door Sabbath had made to the river.
So the door Sabbath had made was a raft unto them.
This is the story of the great door that opens Endercott's hall. That all marvel to see. That none can deny that they traveled to the Great Forest. That they fought the Tin Woodman. He whose ax felled men as other axes felled trees. He whose breath was steam and whose belly was a furnace.

(Somewhere)

Amidst the square, he lowered his staff and his many-colored feather cloak covered his arms. "I will speak more later." And the drums began.

Genie and Helena and Kayla and our journaller waited on a stair. Genie pointed. "There they come."

Ambeth and Mara filtered through and emerged from the crowd.

"Did yuns find anythin out?" Genie said. "When's't gonna start?"

Ambeth shook'er head. "It starts when't starts." She glanced round. "Where's Li?"

"Lizbeth passed," Helena said.

Ambeth rolled'er eyes. "I guess that's one thin taken care'a."

"Are we gonna go eat now?" Kayla said. Quetzalcoatl poked out'is head. "*Squeak.*"

Mara nodded. "Might aswell."

"I suppose," that young man said as'e offered another bowl, "yuns know the reïncarnates've come."

Helena nodded. She was the first t'finish chewing. "We saw'em arrive."

"He says t'tell yuns t'b'careful."

Genie said, "Why?"

"He says, because ghosts need bodies."

"I'dn't think we've t'worry much," Ambeth said.

"Perhaps," that young man said. "He says t'tell yuns'e's sorry t'see yuns go and that'e'll miss yuns."

"Are we goin somewhere?"

That young man glanced at that wrinkled, bald-headed old man beside'm. "He says t'say that everything must end eventually." He shook'is head. "But..." And offered another bowl. "N'yet."

Kayla reached into't. Quetzalcoatl sat on'er knee and nibbled something pinioned between'is forepaws. "Did'e ever meet'em?" she said. "I mean, were there reïncarnates back then, too?"

"He says t'say n'yet. That they were only ghosts then. And only half-made." He placed an empty bowl aside, relaxed'is forearms on'is knees and closed'is eyes. "Sometimes we told the girls ghost stories. But they didn't scare. We had so long made peace with them they could move as easily through us as round us. But none of this had been in the plan. Or maybe it had been. Maybe it was a plan we had not known about. A meta plan. Or maybe that was just something to think to avoid the fact that the people who we thought were in charge really were in charge and they were the only ones in charge. It is different to be born possessed. Being immigrants, it took us time.

Things had had to ebb and flow and wash and replace our wholes particle by particle to leave us remade the same as we had been to start with. Yet different. Finally, Mae had confided with the rest of us what Zilog and Allan and Tracy and a few others had been up to. He really was a genius. Maybe the only true genius I ever knew. How he had convinced them I do not know. But the engineers had sunk a shaft all the way into the aquifer. But of course, we were the best. And you cannot make anything real unless you make it real. There are no signatures on this city. There never were any signatures anywhere, except of those who we had invented as their makers. That is why we were brought here. There was no one else on Earth who could do what we did. All we had had to do was prime the first pump. Everything was already laid out. If we had dared follow him deep enough into the darkness we would have heard the pumps gurgle as they reset. Or if we had followed the right extension cords down to where they had drilled through the capstone. I think it made me reconsider things that had happened before. Everything seemed like it had happened a lifetime ago. I think I asked Mae if she had ever really considered doing what they had ordered her to do and figure out how to inject tranquilizers into the socket's water supply. But I don't think she ever answered. But I guess it didn't matter. It took a long time for the tanks to fill. They are so many beneath the city. Trickle streams running aqueducts to fill yet more solid-state pumps that gurgled as they reset. Somehow it seemed as if everything were coming together. But it could not have been. Where was anything going? There was no destination. Yet we were on our way. Someone came running. Shouting. We followed them. Jets of water arched through the air and splattered into the fountain basin and twinkled rainbows in sunlight. The girls jumped around laughing and playing in the water as rainbow droplets settled in their hair."

That wrinkled, bald-headed old man sighed.

Night. Candles burned on window sills and alighted shadows against walls and floors. Most'd taken t'their hammocks, sat with their legs swung over or astride as they chanted. "Horror story. Horror story. Horror story. Horror story."

A cat lay on a sill and looked up at their noise. Others watched from the doorway.

Someone stood acenter the room and raised'er hands. Chants slowly ebbed.

"Pssst." Someone must've whispered and pointed at our journaller as she sat'n'er hammock and'er pen scratched paper. But the woman acenter the room cleared'er throat and arrested their attention.

Men walked arm'n-arm with women.

"Don't walk so fast," Chevsky said. She'dn't've'd t'look over'er shoulder t'know Martina and Johnathon were somewhere behind.

"I don't want it to look strange," he said.

"You'll look strange if you're [goose]-stepping all over the place," Chevsky said. "Just relax. Tryna be random only gets you something that's obviously not random."

"We're all walking too close together."

"We're all going to the same place," Chevsky said. "So, obviously." Lightly, she swung'er purse. "If I have to fucking carry this thing much farther I'm going to throw it in a bush."

"Y—"

"Oh, come on," she said. "Can't you tell a joke?" She shook'er head. "Almost there," she said. "So just try to act natural."

They ascended front steps. A curtain fluttered and before they'd ring or knock the door opened and Marta motioned'em'n. Martina and Johnathon ascended the steps behind'em.

Chevsky tossed'er purse across the room. "Fucking thank god." And she slipped off'er shoes and kicked'em beneath the coffee table. She reached behind'erself and dis-fastened'er dress and sighed and slipped't over'er hips. Someone'd opened the door t'let'n Martina and Johnathon. "God." And Chevsky turned and shoved Martina into a wall, kissed'er.

After a moment or two, Martina pushed'er away. "You don't have to be in such a hurry."

Chevsky brushed'er hands aside and pressed against'er and kissed'er again, pulled back only long enough t'say, "Um, I do."

But Martina pushed'er away, gave'erself room t'toss'er hat nearby. Marta appeared'n the hall doorway. "We've got something to eat in the kitchen." Then an arm wrapped'er naked waist, pulled'er back.

Martina ran'er fingers through'er hair. "I'm going to get some water first."

Chevsky stepped from'er underclothes and consigned'em t'the floor and followed. Martina stood by the sink and tilted back'er head t'drain'er glass. Across the kitchen, Sheryl bent over a counter and a man slowly moved'mself'n-and-outa'er. "Not near the food," Chevsky said. She hovered'er fingers over each bowl'n turn till she found something crunchy. "I don't want ass smell all over everything."

Sheryl looked back at'er as best she'd, her cheek pressed against the counter. "... fuck you..."

"Ha. Said by the woman with a cock up her ass."

"Better than having a stick."

"You're confusing me with someone else." Chevsky placed a couple crackers between'er teeth and lips. "What yuh think?"

"Very rabbity," Martina said.

Chevsky flicked'er tongue and popped'em into'er mouth, faintly smiled as she chewed. "You gonna stay that way all day?"

Martina set down'er glass. Chevsky moved toward'er. "What's the use of having a fucking tea party if you don't fuck?" And she ran'er hands over Martina's dress. "I want this off."

Still bent over the counter, Sheryl breathed harder. The man's hips slapped'er buttocks. She reached between'er legs and rubbed'erself.

Chevsky took Martina's hands and pulled'er toward the living room. "And I want it off now."

Others'd filtered into the living room by then, sat on the couch with towels'n their laps. Chevsky laughed. "Done already?"

"Is that an invitation?" one said.

Chevsky laughed. "Yeah, keep your hardons to yourselves." And she pulled Martina toward the hall.

Bedsprings tinked. Through a half-open door, they'd've seen Johnathon with someone else who lay on'is back with'is legs up as Johnathon worked'is erection between the man's clasped feet.

Chevsky pulled'er into a room barren of anything but a bed and

nightstand. Perhaps t'd been meant as a child's room. And pushed'er towards the bed. "That dress is still on."

Martina nodded. "Perceptive."

"I said I wanted it off."

"I guess you'll just have to do it yourself, then, won't you."

Chevsky pushed'er down onto the bed and stood over'er and cupped'er face and kissed'er. "Don't fuck with me." And she grabbed at dress buttons. And bent close and touched'er cheek behind Martina's ear as Martina squirmed beneath'er. A harsh whisper: "I'm just going to have to teach you another lesson."

"Fucking get off."

"Exactly what I'm going to do." And she tugged Martina's dress down, but't bunched at'er waist. So she shoved up'er skirt and forced'er hand between Martina's legs. "You know you want it." Her free hand intertwined'n Martina's hair and pulled and rolled her over. "You can't get away from me, bitch." And she forced'er face into the mattress, rubbed'er nose'n't as she rubbed between Martina's legs. Quickly, she released'er and moved both hands t'jerk down Martina's undergarments and slapped'er buttocks. And slapped'em again. And again. Martina yelped. Squirmed. "Shut up, bitch. Did I tell you you could talk?" And she shoved Martina's face into the mattress. Then pried-apart'er buttocks and spat between'em. "Maybe you want some of what Sheryl's getting. Is that the kind of slut you are?"

Martina tried t'wiggle beneath'er. "No."

May it please
But I wish thee would
Lie upon my bosom
O my delicate love
Goddess of the moonlight
Knowledge and beauty
Shalt thou
With all thy enchantment
Be proved real?
O heart of mine
Unquenchable yearning
May I only hunger and thirst?
Night after night

Thought
Shall I be ever maiden?
O my delicate love
Lastly
When asleep
Finally
Between twilights
Over towers
The salt-colored moons
In a
Dream
I spoke with the statues
Before all the silent
How soon shall it be?
How soon shall it be that
All my days be gone?
It was first turning
When I saw thee
Thy moonslit face

Hair caressed by the wind

Eyes starsward

And filled with heavens

O what am I?

O what am I

But a river shut up?

A torrent

O my delicate love

I pass the doors

In the night

Consummate heartache

These sobbings

O my delicate love

Who arrests thee?

Hark, O love

To the shuttered garden

O my delicate love

Night after night

Thought

Shall none say of me
When they light the pyres
There be no more to say
O my delicate love
Play upon
Play upon thy instrument
O my delicate love
Cause the winds to howl
O heart of mine
Like fire
Shall ever it be unleashed?
Waterlilies
Upon overflowing ponds
I tremble
Tiny leaves
In the wind
Hark, O love
In the wasteland
A golden bird calls

O my delicate love
How soon shall it be?
How soon shall it be that
All my days be gone?
Love
My trembling spirit
A mountain wind
Dark petals
Fallen
Be it long now?
Night after night
Thought
Shall not they recall us?
Surely somehow
By some measure
O my delicate love
But what be the world's lifetime?
O my delicate love
I heard the silent reply

Ye who have eternity

It never can be thine

Call to me

Call to me, O love

Let not thy heart

Let not thy spirit

Fear

The sun

On the wall

The moons

On the tower

Whisper to me

Whisper to me, O love

Love may shelter

A human heart

A mortal spirit

Surely somehow

By some measure

From derision

O heart of mine
In front of all the silent
Look up
The stars fall
At night
As when I found thee
In a moonslit corridor
The darkness
Beneath the towers
The water
In the night
The shuttered garden
Awake, O north wind
Hark to where from all pumps rush
Where the fire be kindled
O my delicate love
How curious it be
O endless heat
Shall it depart?

Nay

But always

And forever

O my delicate love

Sleep dearest

Upon my bosom

Others shall witness

Dawn

And yet

Again

The wind

Upon the mountains

“Oh, I’m not going to just finger your fucking little asshole, bitch. I’m going to shove my fucking arm up it and split you in fucking two.”

“No...”

Slap. Martina groaned.

“You don’t have a fucking say in the matter.” Her slickened finger pressed against Martina’s anus. “After all the nice things I’ve given you and you’re too much of a prissy little bitch to say thank you. I hope you liked your ass, because I’m going to destroy it. And there’s not a fucking thing y—”

“Minivan.”

Chevsky withdrew’er hand, leaned forward. “What’s wrong?”

“Gah, my nose fucking itches.”

Chevsky snorted. She leaned forward and untied Martina’s hands. Martina rubbed’er nose and sighed and laid’er head down. “Fuck.”

“Better?” Chevsky said. “I’d like to get back to raping you, here.”

Martina shook’er head. “I think I drank too much. I’ve gotta piss.”

“Yah yah,” Chevsky said as she rolled off the bed and loosed the ropes. “I should make you go and piss in the yard.”

Martina stretched, sighed. “Don’t get yourself overexcited.” She lifted a robe from the end of the bed and slipped’er arms into’t.

“I’m not done raping you, you know.”

Martina stepped toward’er and slipped’er hands between Chevsky’s legs. “You’ll just have to wait.”

“Fucking tease.”

“Yeah.”

Chevsky kissed’er.

Martina pulled away. "I'll be back."

"You bet your ass you will."

"Or what?"

"Or I'll hunt you down, is what. And fuck you in front of everybody else."

"Really."

"Yeah," Chevsky said. "I'll fucking drag you out in the street and let them all see what a real fucking slut you are." And she bit Martina's lower lip, tugged't with'er teeth, let't plop back. "I'll stake you out at a fucking ladies' garden party and let them watch you get fucked till your eyes roll back in your fucking head."

"Language. This is a PG-13 project."

Chevsky closed'er eyes as Martina's hand worked between'er legs. She grunted. "Why stop with me?" Martina said. "I'm sure you'd like to tie them all down to their adirondacks. And make them cum. One. By. One." Chevsky's breath caught. "And that Mrs Redmond. I'm sure you'd like to pin her down and show her just how many uses those croquet mallets of hers have." Chevsky's stomach tightened.

Martina withdrew'er damp fingers. "That ought to take the edge off a little while."

Chevsky panted. "Don't think this little detour is going to save you."

Martina stepped toward the door, faintly smiled. "Get something on and we'll get a snack."

For most, sex'd given way t'an opportunity t'relax, and they lay round the living room, draped over the couch, the floor, heads propped by their arms or pillows.

"Boss." Someone on the floor said, and raised their arm as Martina entered.

"Shut up," Chevsky said.

"You don't have to let everything hang out, you know. Why don't you cover that shit up."

"Because I like to watch you faggots squirm and try not to throw up at the sight of a pussy."

"And us straight guys?"

"So you know what you're not getting."

"As if we'd want it."

"Pussy's pussy," someone said.

"You'd fuck anything."

Two other women emerged from the kitchen, plates'n-hand. When Martina and Chevsky returned with their own plates, further conversation'd already blossomed.

"That's fine for you to say," Johnathan said. "All you have to do is stay home all day. We men have to go and work fucking jobs."

"Oh, fucking boo hoo," Sheryl said.

"I'd rather," Marta said as she picked through'er plate. "I'd rather go work than deal with attending one fucking more ladies' afternoon tea."

"Oh, fucking boo hoo," Gregg said.

"You try putting up with this shit," Sheryl said.

"You try working a fucking assembly line."

"I wouldn't mind going to a tea party," Johnathon said. "So long as they were all like ours."

Chevsky snorted. "Maybe we could invite Mrs Redmond."

Sheryl said, "huh?"

"Nothing." Chevsky glanced at Martina and shook'er head.

"How's Scarlet?"

"As big as a fucking hot air balloon," Chevsky said.

Sheryl shook'er head. "I'm not letting that happen to me."

"Well," Chevsky said—and smacked'er lips and licked'er thumb and forefinger—"I guess that won't be a problem so long as you take it in the ass."

"Bite me."

"An invitation?"

Sheryl shook'er head and sipped'er drink.

"Besides," Chevsky said. "She should make the most of the opportunity. Now she can have as many men as she wants pork her day and night. It's not like she can get knocked up twice."

"Stop it," Martina said.

"I bet she'll be glad to get out of that basement."

"Stop it."

"I'm just saying."

"Won't be long to wait," Marta said.

That living room lay adrift'n silence.

“Fuck this shit,” Johnathon said. “I refuse to be horny and depressed at the same time.”

“Is that what you men do?” Chevsky said. “Fuck shit?”

Marta laughed.

Sheryl pulled a face, shook’er head.

“We do what we have to.”

“That’s just what everybody does,” Chevsky said, and glanced at Martina. “Well?” she said, and tugged, guiding’er across the living room.

“I’ve not finished eating yet.”

“Exactly,” Chevsky said.

And everything went till the phone rang. Johnathon stumbled out into a darkened living room. He yawned as 'e clicked-on a light and answered't.

Marta rubbed'er face and leaned against the hall doorway. "What is it?"

"Alright," Johnathon said. And placed the phone back on the receiver. He looked up at'er. "Mary and Joseph just checked into the hotel."

"Fuck."

"Should we go?"

Marta paused. "No. If too many people are moving around in the middle of the night, someone'll get suspicious." Besides, she said, "what're we going to do about it?"

And'n some distant basement where they'd've covered the windows, Scarlet bit into a fabric wad and screamed as she lay back on a table.

"It's coming."

Blood and other red fluids dribbled off the table edge and splattered concrete.

"Push."

Intermixed with feces.

"Push."

And screams.

"Push."

And wet sounds.

"Oh, shit."

Upstairs, Jenny washed'er hands'n the kitchen sink.

Martina remained silent.

"I think..." Jenny leaned over the sink while water still swirled down the drain. She breathed as'f fightingn't t'vomit. But lost. She grabbed for a kitchen towel, wet't and touched'er mouth, wiped'er nose. "I'll go down and check on Scarlet again."

She stopped'n the doorway and looked over'er shoulder. "I'm just a medical assistant," she said. "I'm not supposed to do this sort of stuff." She turned and descended into the basement.

“Wake up,” Helena said, and poked Genie, who jerked and looked up. “What’s the matter with yuh?”

Genie paused, shook’er head. “I’dn’t sleep well.”

“Nightmares,” Kayla said.

“’ow’d yuh know?”

Kayla shrugged, offered Quetzalcoatl something and’e reached from the bag and grabbed’t and nibbled at’t as’e seemed t’watch people from beneath the shade of the flap.

“What, too scary for yuh?” Helena said.

“Ah, don’t make funa’er. I saw yuhr face too.”

“I just happen t’prefer psychological horror. Not body horror. And I just’dn’t think’t’s fair t’put’em both together.”

Kayla laughed.

Genie said, “When yuns thin they’re gonna get back?”

“Who knows?”

“Let’s go do somethin. I’m bored.”

“What?”

“Let’s go see,” Genie said. “Let’s go see’f whe’s still over there’n that square.”

“Which’ne?”

“The one that’s all wrapped up.”

“Oh.” Kayla shrugged. She pushed Quetzalcoatl back into’er satchel as’e motioned with empty paws as’f for more. “As good as anythin else.”

“Yuns thin,” Genie said as they walked, “Li’s gonna stay off with Lizbeth all the time?”

“How the heck’d we know?”

"I's jus wonderin."

A few still sat round that robed figure'n the corner, butn't so many they'dn't get close.

Someone who stood with their shoulder against a wall glanced back at'em. He said, "What's she doin?"

Helena and Genie and Kayla must've glanced back at our journaller.

"She's writin thins," Kayla said.

"Why?"

"Jus'cause," Helena said.

"Oh." He returned's gaze t'the robed figure. "One of those."

Helena shook'er head. "Come on, let's go. I'dn't like't round'ere."

"Wait," Genie said. "We might'ear what whe's talkin bout."

"—the thing bout using diced tomatoes instead a sun-dried's yuh've t'make sure they're well drained, otherwise your crust'll become too soggy—"

"What's whe talkin bout?" Genie said.

"Cookin."

"That all?"

"For the last several days."

"Nothin else?"

"Yah. Why?"

So that robed figure'dn't been talking bout Ron or Beatrice. But'f
whe'd've, whe'd've probably continued with, maybe:

Arm'n-arm, Ron and Beatrice descended the church's steps after the service. Others filtered out behind'em. Ralph Ferguson waved from the sidewalk. Ron nodded.

"Lovely day, isn't it?" Ralph said. He smiled.

Ron glanced skyward. "Good enough."

Ralph laughed. "Well, I think there's going to be a lot of good days from here on out."

"Oh?" Beatrice said.

Ralph still smiled. "Might as well tell you two, everybody else is going to hear about it soon enough, but I've got an arrangement with Jim Taggart. We're going to have a whole new grocery store built."

"Wonderful," Beatrice said.

"And not like it was before," Ralph said. "Better. I've been talking to the reverend. He's been going down south, you know, to see a Mr Perkins down there. Owns some factories, or something. There's a salesman coming up next week. But they seem to think they've got all these new fixtures and devices to do all kinds of things we never thought of before."

"Sounds," Ron said, "like it'll cost alot."

Ralph laughed. "Almost nothing. This new council thing's paying for it."

"Hm."

Ralph said, "Yeah, I heard Jim did some work out your way. Figured I might as well get in on the deal, too." He laughed.

After a moment, Marilyn said t'Beatrice, "Have you seen Sarah today?"

Beatrice shook'er head.

Marilyn bit'er lip. "She wasn't at the service. And she wasn't at the memorial, either."

"Maybe she's getting some practice in."

"Ralph."

"She's not her mother, that's all I'm saying."

"Well," Beatrice said, "everything takes time."

"Well, she'd better hurry up," Ralph said. He laughed. "Like that thing this morning."

"What was that?" Ron said.

"Oh, some phone call. Couldn't hear a word of what was going on. Sounded as if you were trying to listen to someone a hundred miles away."

"We got one like that this morning, too," Beatrice said.

Ron glanced at'er. "When?"

"When you went to start the car. It was right as I was walking out the door. I could hardly hear anything. I tried to get Sarah back on the line, but I couldn't."

Ralph snorted, shook'is head. "You see. At the rate she's going, I don't know if there's any use of those new telephone poles they've been putting in." He shook'is head. "Well, good seeing you. Why don't you come by sometime this week? We can have dinner again and talk about everything."

"Sounds fine," Beatrice said.

Ron'dn't reply.

"I'll call you later," Beatrice said t'Marilyn, "and we can arrange something."

Politely, they parted and moved towards their cars.

Beatrice smooth'er dress after she climbed'n and Ron closed the passenger door.

Someone waved as they pulled into the street.

"Where are you going?" Beatrice said when they turned at the intersection.

"I thought we might ride by the Coremans' and see how Sarah's doing."

"You could have mentioned something to me first."

"I'm mentioning it now."

She looked out the window a moment. "Do you think something's wrong?"

"I don't know."

Ron pulled beside the curb and dropped the car into park. "You coming?"

Beatrice stowed'er compact and refastened'er pocketbook. "Of course."

When'e climbed out, he stood there and looked at the house.

"Are you going to open the door?"

"Hm?" He closed the driver side door and walked round.

Beatrice took'is arm as they went up the path towards the house.

He stopped before they mounted the front steps. "Smell that?"

She paused, raised'er nose. But before she'd reply, he jerked away from'er and ran up the stairs. "Call the fire department."

"W—"

"CALL THE FIRE DEPARTMENT."

He tore off'is jacket, wrapped't over the doorknob, but the door'd been locked. "SARAH!" He kicked the door. "SARAH—" Wood round the lock splintered. Smoke boiled over'm.

Beatrice moved across the yard, brown grass crackling underfoot. She raised onto tiptoe, as'f t'try and see through the windows. She'd've known there'd've been no way of calling anyone. Who'd've answered the switchboard? A car turned the corner. She moved toward the street, waved'er arms, called, bent toward the driver side window when they'd gotten close. The car reversed, sped toward the fire station, or maybe the church, because most everyone'd've still been there. When she turned, Ron'd disappeared. She moved across the yard as best she'd'n'er heels. "Ronald?" She stopped at the bottom of the steps and grabbed the railing, but'dn't mount'em. Smoke wafted through the broken'n front door. "Ronald?"

Engine noise grew from the distance.

Explosion. Fire licked from a window. She screamed and jumped back. Car doors slammed'n the street, behind'er. No siren yet. Someone grabbed'er arm t'try and pull'er back. She jerked free. "He's in there— He's—"

Somebody screamed: "Get those cars out of the way!"
Still no siren.
Framed through the doorway, firelight flickered against smoke.
"GET THOSE CARS OUT OF THE WAY!"
Distantly, a siren blared, or maybe't'd just been a bird.
A window shattered. Women'n the street screamed into their
Sunday finest gloves.

Even after Sarah lay on the grass and both Falstaffs knelt over'er and Gregor pulled back'er eyelids and the older Falstaff shook'is head and Gregor forced'er mouth open and popped a bottlecap with'is teeth and poured something down'er throat and shoved'er onto'er side when she vomited, everyone else'd've still watched Ron. Soot'd've stained'is dress shirt. He coughed. He must've looked much as'e'd years before. Beatrice touched'is arm. He looked at'er.

And I don't think'e'd've been the kind of person t'notice their eyes.

[Hungry]

This is just me, but I've been thinking bout something. H——'s comment before seems strange, bout horror stories. I don't think't seems as'f't's something she'd've said. I wonder'f, maybe, instead't's our journaller putting'er own words'n someone else's mouth. That's just my thinking, though.

(Somewhere)

The drums ceased. Amidst the square, that many-colored-feather-clad figure raised 'is staff and 'is robe fell from 'is painted arms. "I come to speak of Endercott and Sabbath."

I speak of they who learned all.
I speak of them who brought back news of the flood to come.
The story never to be written.
Hear it now.
Of Endercott, son of his mother, the queen.
Of Sabbath, born of a dollop of glass flung by God.
Sabbath who would become Endercott's brother.
They who brought back news of the ocean to be born.
Hear it now.
Passed from mouth to ear.
Of Endercott's journey across the world.
Of his friend Sabbath.
They who searched out all secrets.
They who brought back news of the rains to come.
Sabbath, friend and brother to Endercott.
Endercott, he who suffered much.
Son of the queen.
He who leads where none would.
He, Endercott, marvelous beyond measure.
Who could pass through the mountains?
Who could travel to the world's edge?
None.
But Endercott.
And Sabbath, his friend.

Sabbath, his brother.

They who brought back news of the flood to come.

Who can match them?

What man may say he rules except Endercott?

What man may say he stands beside Endercott except Sabbath?

Who but Endercott and Sabbath could hang the great door that opens Endercott's hall? That all marvel to see. That none can deny that they traveled to the Great Forest. That fought they the Tin Woodman. Whose ax felled men as other axes felled trees. He whose breath was steam and whose belly was a furnace.

And the queen spoke to Sabbath. She spoke, in all your travels you have returned safe. And she spoke to her son. She spoke, surely, my son, you interpret dreams that no other can. And she offered her hands to them and spoke. She spoke, come, the people celebrate your return. She spoke, let us go and anoint you both. She spoke, let us go and anoint Sabbath that he may be your brother before all eyes. She spoke, for there are none who can do as Sabbath and Endercott can do.

And the people gathered in the great hall.

The queen anointed her son with oil. She anointed Sabbath with oil.

Endercott spoke to the people. He spoke, before you stands Sabbath.

He spoke, he who slew the great stag. He spoke, he who slew the great wild bull. He spoke, he who has the strength of wild bulls. He spoke, see that my mother the queen anoints him. He spoke, see that I grasp his hand as a brother. He spoke, who can do as we do?

The people spoke. They spoke, none rules but Endercott.

The people spoke. They spoke, none may set beside him but Sabbath.

And at the head of the great hall, Endercott and Sabbath took their seats. Endercott, his chair tinted with age. Sabbath, his chair fresh-smelling from the workmens' shops.

Cries rose to heaven.

The people feasted. The people made music. The people danced.

And at daybreak, Endercott and Sabbath retired to the queen's bed chamber.

Night and day. Day and night. Commotion rose to heaven from the queen's bed chamber.

For seven days and seven nights cries echoed forth from the queen's bed chamber.

For seven more days and seven more nights did commotion rise to heaven from the queen's bed chamber.

The people cried unto God. They cried, Oh God, what have you done?

Who can make more commotion than Endercott and Sabbath?

Night and day. Day and night. Commotion rose to heaven from the queen's bed chamber.

Who but Sabbath can match Endercott?

Night and day. Day and night. Cries echoed forth from the queen's bed chamber.

The people cried unto God. They cried, Oh God, who has made all things. They cried, did you not make Endercott? They cried, did you not make Sabbath? They cried, did you not make they who traveled to the Great Forest? They cried, did you not make they who slew the Tin Woodman? They cried, did you not make them? They cried, Oh God, why have you set down these wild bulls amongst us?

The people cried unto God.

Night and day. Day and night. The people cried unto God. They cried, Oh God, commotion rises to heaven from the queen's bed chamber. They cried, Oh God, they are without match.

Night and day. Day and night. The people cried unto God. They cried, cries echo forth from the queen's bed chamber. They cried, Oh God, who can do as they do? They cried, Oh God, who may have peace when you have set these wild bulls amongst us?

And night and day. Day and night. Commotion rose to heaven from the queen's bed chamber.

Who could match Endercott but Sabbath?

Night and day. Day and night. Cries echoed forth from the queen's bed chamber.

And the people cried unto God. They cried, Oh God, who has made all things. They cried, Oh God, did you not make man? They cried, Oh God, did you not make woman? They cried, Oh God, did you not make wo? They cried, Oh God, did you not make Endercott? They cried, Oh God, did you not make Sabbath? They cried, Oh God, we cry, what would you do now? They cried, Oh God, we are

afraid the queen shall not tire. They cried, Oh God, what will be done with their energies now? They cried, Oh God, will silence never speak again?

Night and day. Day and night. Cries echoed forth from the queen's bed chamber.

And God could not hear the people's cries.

Night and day. Day and night. Commotion rose to heaven from the queen's bed chamber.

Who can match Endercott and Sabbath?

Night and day. Day and night. Cries echoed forth from the queen's bed chamber.

And the people cried unto God.

And how could God have heard them?

Night and day. Day and night. Commotion rose to heaven from the queen's bed chamber.

And God spoke to godself. God spoke, after the world's creation, I slept. God spoke, after the creation of man, I slept. God spoke, after the creation of woman, I slept. God spoke, after the creation of wo, I slept. God spoke, but after the creation of Endercott, I did not sleep. God spoke, I created Sabbath. God spoke, and they traveled unto the Great Forest and slew the Tin Woodman as I slept. God spoke, night and day, day and night commotion rises to heaven from the queen's bed chamber. God spoke, who can match Endercott and Sabbath? God spoke, night and day, day and night cries echo forth from the queen's bed chamber. God spoke, so I cannot hear even myself speak.

So God argued with godself. God argued, the two together cannot be matched. God argued, they will trample underfoot the world. God argued, they will leave no secrets. God argued, they will know all. God argued, but man is not God. God argued, woman is not God. God argued, wo is not God. God argued, to know all would bring only sadness. God argued, and madness. God argued, and the sound of their madness would fill the world. God argued, and heaven. God argued, and nothing that is on the world would sleep. God argued, and nothing that is in heaven would sleep. God argued, none would sleep until the last days. God argued, this is why man must die. God argued, this is why woman must die.

God argued, this is why wo must die. God argued, Endercott and Sabbath must die.

But God argued with godself. God argued, did I not create Endercott? God argued, did I not create Sabbath? God argued, did I not make them as they are? God argued, did I not make them capable to reveal all secrets?

But God argued with godself. God argued, what is my responsibility for that which I create?

And God argued with godself no more. But pondered these things in the silence of God's heart.

Night and day. Day and night. Commotion rose to heaven from the queen's bed chamber.

So none heard silence speak.

Then.

Crash.

Servants ran into the hall.

Sunlight shone through a hole in the roof for all to see.

A body lay on the floor at the feet of Endercott's and Sabbath's chairs.

The guards stared with bleary eyes. They stared as servants loaded a mangled corpse onto a wheel barrow.

Endercott. Sabbath. The queen. All appeared from the queen's bed-chamber.

Who could tell if this creature were man? Were wo? Were woman?

How could one fall from such a great height?

Servants whispered. They whispered of great eagles in distant mountains that might carry men and dash their prey to ground.

They spoke of many things.

But Endercott remained silent. As silent as the silence which proclaimed his coming.

His mother the queen touched his shoulder and spoke. She spoke, let us return to the bed chamber.

But Endercott did not return to the queen's bed chamber.

He watched the servants who cleaned the floor at the feet of Endercott's and Sabbath's chairs.

His mother the queen touched his shoulder and spoke. She spoke, let us return to the bedchamber.

But Endercott did not return to the queen's bed chamber.

His brother Sabbath touched his shoulder and spoke. He spoke, what disturbs you, my brother?

Endercott spoke to Sabbath. He spoke, is this a vision only I see?

He spoke, do these blood stains appear only before my eyes? He spoke, why do they remain? He spoke, why do not the servants work harder? He spoke, why cannot they wash away this blood?

Sabbath spoke to Endercott. He spoke, what bothers you so in this blood? He spoke, have you not seen such before?

Endercott spoke to Sabbath. He spoke, did we not travel to the Great Forest and slay the Tin Woodman? He spoke, did not you slay the great stag? He spoke, did you not slay the great wild bull? He spoke, do wise witches not speak the world itself must lie on its deathbed? He spoke, And each man with it? He spoke, each Woman? He spoke, each Wo?

Sabbath spoke to Endercott. He spoke, but the none of us. He spoke, not you Endercott. He spoke, not I Sabbath. He spoke, nor our mother the queen yet die.

Endercott spoke to Sabbath. He spoke, but we will. He spoke, oh, my brother, it seems as if you are already dead to me. He spoke, you appear as a corpse. He spoke, and I weep as I would weep over your winding sheet.

And Endercott set himself apart from them. And wept as he would weep over a winding sheet.

He went from his hall and fell on his knees before the Death House's dark door.

He coated his face with dust.

And dust became mud where his tears flowed.

He walked the streets not recognized.

His brother Sabbath sought him. And when he found him Sabbath spoke to his brother Endercott. He spoke, my brother, return to us. He spoke, return to your brother Sabbath. He spoke, return to your mother the queen.

But Endercott would not.

Endercott spoke to his brother Sabbath. He spoke, my brother, all is but a corpse to me. He spoke, I cannot see past that which is to come.

Endercott went before the Death House's dark door.

He coated his face with dust.

And dust became mud where his tears flowed.

He walked the streets not recognized.

His brother Sabbath sought him. But Endercott fled. He fled into the mountains.

Sabbath returned and spoke to the queen. He spoke, my brother Endercott has fled. He spoke, your son Endercott has fled into the mountains.

The queen spoke to Sabbath. She spoke, what shall become of my son? She spoke, who shall know him? The queen touched Sabbath's arm and spoke. She spoke, you must follow him. She spoke, none other can do so.

Sabbath spoke to the queen. He spoke, I will follow him.

So Sabbath girded himself with a belt none other but he or his brother Endercott could bear. He took up an ax none other than he or his brother Endercott could lift. He took up a hammer none other than he or his brother Endercott could wield.

Endercott fled into the mountains.

And Sabbath followed.

(Somewhere)

Amidst the square, he lowered his staff and his many-colored feather cloak covered his arms. "I will speak more later." And the drums began.

“Can yuh’ear where they’re comin from?” Genie said.
 “Maybe over that way,” Kayla said, and pointed.
 “I’dn’t...” Helena shook’er head. “I’dn’t wanna go chasin drums.
 Yuh heard what Ambeth said, they’d b’echoin from anywhere.”
 Genie’s face fell, but she’dn’t say anything.
 Quetzalcoatl stuck’is head from Kayla’s bag. “*Squeak.*” But Kayla
 pushed’m back’n as two cats wandered by.
 “Shadows’re almost gone,” Helena said as they walked. “I wish
 they’d get back. I’m gettin hungry.”
 “Yuh’re—”
 “’ey,” Genie said. “Isn’t that’em?” She pointed.
 Mara and Ambeth emerged from the crowd.
 “Is’t time?” Someone said as they passed. “Is’t gonna start?”
 “What yewens think?”
 “E dun’t knewn.”
 “What’re they talkin bout?” Genie said.
 Helena shook’er head. “I’dn’t know.”
 They waited for Mara and Ambeth.
 “What’s’appenin?” Genie said. “Is’t gonna start?”
 “Maybe,” Mara said.
 Ambeth motioned for’em t’follow.
 In the fountain square, low voices interlocked into singular com-
 motion.
 “Yuh think’t’s time yet?”
 “Maybe?”
 “What yuh think?”
 “Could be.”

“When should’t?”
“What do whens’ink?”
“Hm, anybody?”
“Now’s as good as any time.”
“When?”
“When?”
“Av yewn heard somethin?”
“Maybe.”
“Has everybody else heard?”
“Is’t starting?”
“What did yuh say?”
“Might still b’a little while.”
“Maybe’t already started.”
“What’ve you-ens heard?”
“When?”
“Where’d yuh hear that?”
“When?”
“Maybe.”

Cats sat on fountain’s edge drinking from one of the small basins carved there t’catch the overflow from smaller jets and someone moved between’em and stepped into outflowing water and grabbed a spout and pulled’erself up, climbed till she stood atop’t and cupped’er hands round’er mouth.

“IT BEGINS—”

BOOK IV

She rested'er head against the window. But smoke and dust'd've obscured everything beyond. Vibrations traveled through'er skull, rattled'er teeth together. The train hurtled through night.

"Allison, come away from there. What are you doing?"

She moved'n'er seat, straightened. Her bonnet lay'n'er lap and absently she'd wound the strap round'er finger. "I was only listening."

"To what?" Her mother looked up. "Put your cap back on."

"Yes'm." With'er hair gathered, the confined train, the hot night, she scowled as she knotted the bonnet ribbon below'er chin and when she glanced toward the window'er reflection scowled back. "I wish we could open the windows."

"Don't be silly." Her mother looked down at the book open'n'er lap. "There's a dust storm."

"There's always a dust storm."

"And that's why you shouldn't worry about opening the window."

Allison'dn't reply. Nothing else t'do, she looked round the car. Only old women. All hidden within long-sleeved, high-collared dresses, billed bonnets that concealed the faces of those whose heads leaned forward as they slept. The old woman behind'em snored. And Allison tried t'look round.

"Don't stare. It's not polite."

"I have to do something," Allison said.

"Then sit quietly. That's something. And it's very hard to do. You should see if you can master it."

Allison sighed. She looked toward the front of the carriage, at the fire extinguisher mounted on the wall. But the carriage door opened and saved'er the trouble of finding something more interesting. The

conductor paused after'e closed the door, produced a bandanna and rubbed between'is collar and neck before'e started down the aisle. Allison leaned toward'er mother. "I thought men weren't allowed in the women's car."

"Hush." Mary-Celleste glanced up and over'er shoulder. The conductor nodded t'em as'e passed. And she waited till'e'd gone through t'the next car. "Obviously, there has to be an exception for the conductor."

"Is that what they mean when they say the exception that proves the rule?"

Mary-Celleste shook'er head. The woman behind'em snored. "We should be quiet or we'll wake someone."

"I was just asking a question."

"Later."

"But there's nothing to do."

"You should've brought something to read."

"I...just didn't think of it," Allison said. She glanced at'er bag. "I ...guess I was too busy." She turned t'the window. "Is it going to be very different than home?"

"You've already asked me that ten times since we got on the train."

"I'm sorry." Allison turned from'er reflection. "I guess I'm just excited."

"There's nothing to be excited about. It's like any other town."

"Do you think Uncle Jack will be there to meet us at the station?"

"Of course he will." Mary-Celleste turned the page, creased't flat with'er thumb.

The rear door clicked open. Allison glanced over'er shoulder, but the conductor'd already passed. He paused at the head of the carriage and produced'is watch from'is vest pocket. "The train will be arriving in fifteen minutes." His voice'd've been high and nasally and'd've seemed t'rattle'is bristle mustache as'f't were barely tacked on. "Fifteen minutes." And'e re-pocketed'is watch with one hand and opened the door with t'other and disappeared.

Mary-Celleste looked up, closed'er book, reached over and put't'n'er bag. "You'd better start getting ready."

Allison nodded. And she leaned toward the window, as'f t'try and glimpse the station lights through the storm.

When she pulled aside the curtain, a million tiny flickerings wavered'n the night. A bonfire must've been lit'n a distant square and yellow-red violence licked paving stones as shadows capered, gibbed, leaped, stretched impossibly high on nearby buildings. Shouts carried on the faintest wind that'dn't've even managed t'rustle the fabric against'er fingers. Lamps flickered in tower windows. And as always, for a moment, it'd've seemed impossible t'discern celestial from ground.

She turned, let the curtain fall.

already too faded, experimental inks too light volatile, especially blues

He yawned again, straightened. And when'e reached up and clicked-off the utility light, a faint glow guided'm t'the door.

Blurred white-on-black text scrolled into nothingness, framed a humanoid outline. Dave glanced over'is shoulder. His chair squeaked. "Late," he said. He scratched the back of'is leg with'is bare foot.

"Where'd you get that shirt?"

Dave glanced down. "Found a pack of scrub tops buried in a storage locker." He looked down again. "What's wrong with it?"

"Little big, isn't it?"

Dave pinched the synthetic fabric, pulled't away from'is chest, out t'arm's length. He shrugged. When'e let go, the fabric still conically protruded.

"What time is it?"

Dave turned toward the screens, pecked at a keyboard. "Gotta be at least a couple hours past the timeslip."

Nathaniel groaned, mumbled.

He laid a pencil on the blotter and rubbed'is eyes. A typewriter clattered'n the next room. He pushed'is chair back and went t'the window, adjusted the blinds. Blood-haze afternoon eked between'em.

Typewriter clatter assaulted'm when'e opened the door. "Time to go, Ruth."

His secretary looked up, fingers poised over typewriter keys. "The storm's over?"

"Take a look for yourself."

Her chair squeaked as she rose and moved toward the window. "Oh, I hate going out when it's like this."

"Only thing to do would be never to leave the house," he said as'e opened the closet and reached for'is coat. And as'e fitted't over'is shoulders, she turned from the window and sat at'er desk. "Uh uh," he said as'e reached for'is hat. "Time to go home."

"I just want to finish this," she said.

"Is there any reason it can't wait till tomorrow?"

"If I leave it on the platen the paper'll roll up. And if I take it out, I'll never be able to line it up again. It's very short, anyway."

"You're making me feel bad." He lifted'is scarf from'ts hanger.

"No," she said. "You go on." She typed two strokes and paused, her fingers poised on the homerow as she looked over'er desk. "Wait a minute," she said, and opened the drawer and retrieved'er notepad. "I forgot. Your wife called while you were out earlier. She wanted you to be sure to remember—"

"That the councilmans dinner is tonight and that we have to be there by six-thirty and no later."

She nodded and laid the pad back'n the drawer. "That's it."

“Evening, Ruth,” he said as’e opened the outer door. “And remember, don’t stay too long.” Baldur watched’m from beneath the desk, licked’is forepaws, and Ron said, “You too.”

Ruth paused, fingers over typewriter keys. “Evening, Councilman.” But’er voice’d’ve been distant as she snatched a pencil from the nearby mug, pulled the carriage t’one side and vigorously rubbed the eraser end against the paper.

He closed the door. Muted typewriter clatter followed’m down the hallway. Near the doors, his shoes scuffed over sand and’e glanced down at where’t’d’ve scoured the hardwood finish. Habitually, he pulled the scarf up over’is mouth and nose as’e pushed-open the door.

The engine hissed and people scuttled across the platform with their luggage, but the storm outside remained audible. Even with the platform fully enclosed, dust still sifted from the train cars, stirred by departing passengers. And probably Allison'd t'fight a tickle at the back of'er throat as she stepped down onto the platform.

"Do you see your uncle yet?"

Allison shook'er head. Women stepped onto the platform from the opposite end of the women's car. But there seemed no passengers'n the men's, or at least none t'depart at that station.

"Over there." Her mother pointed t'a long row of benches. "We'll just have to wait until he gets here."

Dust'd been given a chance t'settle there and Mary-Celleste deposited'er carpetbag and dis-buckled't and produced a cloth t'wipe the slats. "Sit down, Allison." She re-buckled'er bag.

But Allison turned and looked round at the station. "Who are they?" And she rose t'tiptoe.

"Who are who?"

"Them," Allison said. "They weren't on the train."

Mary-Celleste looked up. Two women descended from the women's car. "They're getting off the train. So therefore they must have been on the train."

"But they weren't."

"Allison, sit down. You're excited and allowing your imagination to run away."

"But—"

"Sit down."

Allison sat by'er mother, but still followed the pair as they moved across the station.

"They're gone."

"Allison."

"But—"

"And what makes you think they weren't on the train?"

"Because everyone on the train was old."

"Allison."

"Well, at least, there weren't any my age. And the one—one of the ones that got off—she couldn't have been much older than me. And the other, she had a green dress and there wasn't anyone with a green dress on the train. I—"

"Mary."

Mary-Celleste looked across the station. Dust stained'er brother's jacket and sifted from'is hat and shoulders as'e walked. "Forgive me if I don't offer a hug."

Mary-Celleste stood. "Is it still that bad?"

Her brother shrugged and dust avalanched from'is shoulders. "It's starting to trail off. But let me take your bags. We'd better get going. We'll have to take it slow, so it'll be a while before we get to the house."

"Hello, Uncle Jack."

"Allison." He nodded, but smiled, something bout't probably'd've seemed worn out. They started toward the doors. "How was the trip?"

"We didn't see much," Allison said. "It stormed the whole way."

"Well," he said, "it's not as if there's all that much to see, anyway." He stopped at the doors. "Better hold hands, I think. And cover your mouths." He touched the door and sand, dust and wind burst through the crack. Allison's throat'd've tickled and she'd've coughed into'er scarf as she'd've pulled't over'er mouth and'd've taken'er mother's hand. Yellow lights sparsely populated the lot, reduced t'vague pulsing forms as dust swells blew by and round'em. They'd've tipped their hat and bonnets against the wind, would've'd t'hope't didn't suddenly change direction and fling grit'n their eyes. And they'dn't've been able t'hear anything over the roar till the last car door'd slammed shut.

She put'er hand on'is chest. It rose and fell. And after a moment, he opened'is eyes.

"You're too tired," she said. "One of these days you're going to spend so long down there you'll come out looking like a root vegetable."

"What kind?"

Her hand floated across'is stomach and played over'is groin. "Maybe something that looks like this."

"I never cared for limp vegetables."

She kissed'is jaw. "I could do something about that."

"What time is it?"

"Still early."

"We really need to come up with a clock that isn't on somebody's phone."

"What for?" She kneaded'm. "It's not as if I need one to tell how late it is when you come round."

"Sorry."

"Well, I hope you're going to make up for it this morning."

"I should really go check in. Something could have happened."

"What?"

"Dave's compiling something or the other."

"And you'd rather be down there in the dark with him than having me do this to you? Should you be telling me something?" He laughed and rested the back of'is head on'is forearm. "And remember," she said. "You owe me for not showing up last night. And I'm going to collect."

"What happened to Tracy?"

“Something or the other with the aquaponics. Quit evading the point.”

“So you had to spend the night all alone. Horrible.”

“Watch it, mister. Maybe I’ll up and decide to cancel the debt if you keep complaining.”

“Not complaining.” But’e lifted’is forearm from behind’is head and pulled’er hand away from’is half erection. “But I really need to take a piss first.”

“Hmmm.” And she rolled over. “Well, see if there’s anything for you when you get back.”

And when’e’d returned from the fountain’n bottom of the stair-well, she lay on’er side, legs tucked and so she might’ve appeared something likenable t’an indecipherable rune.

He sat on the bed’s edge, rested’is fingers on’er thigh. “You’re not really mad, are you?”

“Shouldn’t I be?”

“Probably.”

“You,” she said, and nudged’m with’er feet. But when she’d’e caught’er ankles and stood and pulled’er t’the edge. “And what do you think you’re doing?” She brought up’er feet, ankles together, and rested’em against’is chest.

“Waiting for you to spread your legs.”

“Tough luck,” she said.

He shrugged. “If that’s the way it’s got to be.” He’d only t’bow’is legs and ease’is hips forward t’guide’mself into’er. And when’is hips met’er buttocks, he’d’ve grabbed’er ankles and held’em together as’e worked’n-and-outa’er.

“Beast,” she said.

And’e pressed’is chest against’er feet and forced’er knees back t’near touch’er stomach. His thrusts quickened. “Takes one to know.”

“Let go.”

And when’e’d, her legs wrapped’is waist and’er ankles interlocked’n the small of’is back. And’e leaned forward and planted’is hands either side of’er and met’er mouth as she rose toward’m.

As the older man bent and skried over the map, arms behind's back, hands somewhere lost'n the folds of's black robes, Collard placed a glass paperweight on'ts fourth corner. "This is the river." He traced's finger parallel t'a blue-inked line through an otherwise not-marked section.

"This is as far as you got?" The reverend braced'mself, palms on the table edge, black fabric flowing and bunching down over's hands, allowing only's fingertips t'b'revealed.

"It's rugged terrain. We followed the canyon rim till our supplies ran low."

"And why didn't you take the river?"

"We could probably rig up something to get men and equipment down. But it's getting back up that's the problem. And until we find some kind of access point we're—"

"Next time," the reverend said, "we'll send two teams. One to go up river and one to go down."

"But without knowing how far they have to go, it'll be impossible to supply them."

The reverend straightened. "The Lord will provide the means if we provide the will."

"Yes, sir. It's just—"

"A cup of coffee?"

Collard shook's head. "I'm just afraid..."

"Of?"

"The storms are getting more frequent. And longer. And I—"

The reverend turned and walked t'the window. Below, dust-obscured streetlamps faintly glowed. "Obviously," he said. "We're

living on borrowed time. It's a countdown, you see? We've failed to take care of the problem and the warning can't be more plain."

"Yes, sir. But it always tends to be worse this time of year. And if we bog down as we did the last time... In my opinion we should wait till the season passes. Otherwise we're risking men and equipment. If we—"

"Remember what I said about the will?"

"Yes, sir. But—"

"By the way, you haven't spoken to your wife since you've gotten back, have you?"

Collard paused. "No, sir."

"Why don't you go home. I'm sure your wife will be happy to see you. And I'm sure you'll let me know if she's happened to receive any news while you were away."

"Sir?"

"Any telegrams."

"Oh. Yes. I mean, we haven't been blessed yet. But we're still hopeful."

"I'll keep you both in my prayers. Goodnight."

"Yes, sir... Goodnight."

After Collard'd gone and headlights cut onto the street below, the reverend turned from the window. He stopped by the table and looked down and after a while traced his finger over a blue ink line. "Where are you?"

He adjusted 'is cuffs as 'e came downstairs. Below, Beatrice checked 'erself 'n the hall mirror. And she'd've seen 'm'n't and said, "Are you wearing the round cufflinks?"

He raised 'is arm as 'e stepped from the stairs. "Round cufflinks."

She turned 'er face side-t'side, glanced at 'erself from the corners of 'er eyes. "The others look so gaudy."

"Yes, so gaudy."

She'dn't bother t'glance back at 'm. "And you shouldn't rub your shirt when you come in. It just makes it worse to get out."

He leaned toward the mirror, as 'f t'check 'is collar. "I didn't know your clothes had to be clean when you sent them to the cleaners."

"Don't start this now."

"Start what?"

She opened 'er bag and removed a clutch and from that produced a compact. "By the way, I've told Josh to come over and take care of the yard tomorrow."

"It's not as if there's much to mow."

"All the more reason it should look the best it can."

She lightly touched 'er hair.

"Is that what you're wearing?"

"Of course," she said.

"The newest thing, I suppose."

"Yes," she said, and restored the compact and clutch. "It's the first to come in. Mrs Greene said there wouldn't be another like it in town." She ran 'er black-gloved hands over puffed sleeves and down 'er forearms t'where angled lace fringe half-covered 'er hands. And when she turned, the skirt's great pleated mass took up energy as 'f t'where a

flywheel. She reached for'er hat, cocked't and dis-fastened'ts dustveil.
"I hope you're not going to have one of your errands tonight."

"I thought I might go by and check on the Coremans later, see if they need anything." Convulsively, he checked'is pockets.

"I'm sure," she said.

"But if you'd rather I stayed home."

"I wouldn't dream of taking you away from your responsibilities," she said, and looked over'er reflection a final time before she turned toward the closet. "It's not like someone in your position can control himself, is it? And you need to do what you need to do."

"What I need," he said, "is my overcoat. Or else this suit is going to be less than spotless when it goes to the cleaners."

"Let's not start this now."

A bare bulb flickered on within a porcelain fixture. Mary-Celleste produced a brush from'er bag and dusted'er daughter's shoulders as they waited'n the boarded-up gap between the garage and back door. "Good idea," Jack said as'e came through with Allison's bag. "Rita has a thing about dust." He pulled off'is jacket and dropped't onto a peg. "Don't tell her I told you anything, though." He opened the screendoor, held't open with'is foot as'e fished'is keys from'is pocket and dis-locked the back door and opened't a crack before'e bent and lifted their bags and nudged open the door the rest of the way with'is elbow. He called from the kitchen, "We're back."

Allison entered last. And the screendoor hung as't clattered shut and she grabbed the handle, overcompensated, and't slammed as Rita entered.

"Allison." Her mother glanced back.

"Don't worry about it," Jack said. "It swells when there's a storm and sticks."

His wife nodded, glanced at'er husband. And she hugged Mary-Celleste. "Good you made it safely. Did you hear they actually had a derailment the other day somewhere out west? The winds were that bad. They say it just picked up the train and—"

"She doesn't want to hear about that now," Jack said. "I'll put these upstairs."

And Rita led'em into the living room. Only the one lamp'n the corner'd've been turned on. Beyond curtains and glass, wind rattled the shutters. She motioned'em toward the couch. "Oh, I'm sorry,"

she said. "I'm sure you'd both like something to drink. Allison, dear, if you don't mind. There's a pitcher in the fridge and the glasses are in the cabinet above the sink."

"Okay."

Rita leaned forward as she left, said'n a low voice, "How was the train?"

"It was fine. Why?" Mary-Celleste removed'er bonnet and held't'n'er lap.

"Did you see anybody?" And'er sister'n-law cut'er eyes toward the kitchen door.

"Of course I saw people."

"I mean," she said, and glanced toward the kitchen again, called, "And Allison, the tray's in the cabinet next to the waste bin," before she turned back t'Mary-Celleste. "They say she's been going in and out of town. They say they've seen her on the train. And if anyone would know it was her, I figured you—"

"Who?"

"Her," Rita said. "You know. *Her*."

Allison returned with the tray and set't on the coffee table.

"Thank you, dear."

And Jack descended the stairs. "I put them in their room."

"Good," his wife said. And she glanced toward Mary-Celleste and seemed t'try and smile. "We were just talking about how nice it is to have her here."

He nodded.

"Something to drink, dear?"

After'e sat, he looked across t'the coffee table, leaned forward and poured'mself a glass and sat back with't balanced on the chair arm.

"Mary?" But'er sister'n-law shook'er head. However, Allison leaned forward and poured a glass, probably t'quiet another tickle'n'er throat.

"Good, isn't it?" Rita said. "It's a powder. Someone came up with it—what?—a year or two ago. I don't know if it's gotten up north yet. You mix it with water. Makes it taste just like the real thing, doesn't it? Don't you think?"

Allison looked down at'er glass. "It's very... It's very...lemony."

"You see," Rita said, and glanced toward'er husband. "If I were

to mix it up and tell you it was real lemons, you'd probably say how good the harvest was this year." She waited as if for a reply, but he just sat there in silence, his half-full glass in hand.

Allison's glass had clinked as she set it on the tray. "If it's alright, I think I'd like to go to bed now." She glanced toward her mother. "I feel tired."

"Oh, of course, dear." Her aunt nodded. "I'm sure you're worn out from that long ride. I'm sure it must have been nerve-racking. That takes a toll on you, too. You go right on up. It's the second door past the top of the stairs."

"Don't make too much noise," her uncle said.

"Yes." His wife nodded. "The boys are asleep in the next room."

"I'll be quiet. Goodnight." She glanced at her mother again as she rose.

"Dear," Rita said as Allison ascended into darkness. "You'll stain the chair if you aren't careful."

He cut his eyes toward his wife, but leaned forward and set his glass on the coffee table. And after a moment, she moved it onto the tray. Finally, she said, "We're sorry we couldn't make it to the funeral. It was just..."

"Work," Jack said.

"It must be going well then," Mary-Celleste said.

"Oh, yes." Rita nodded. "Everything's quite well. Isn't it, dear? Quite well. Wouldn't you say, dear?"

"As good as anything else," he said. And added, "Not that dad would have said that."

"Jack."

He glanced at his wife. "What?"

"I think he understood in the end," Mary-Celleste said.

"Hogwash."

"Jack!"

"I don't want to hear it," he said. "Do we have any more cigarettes?"

"I think there's some in the drawer. But—"

He leaned forward enough to reach the table and opened the narrow drawer underneath and grabbed a half-crumpled packet and lighter, but he'd fiddled the lighter more than six or eight times to get a flame.

"There's rumors of cutbacks," he said.

"Jack, maybe we'd better talk about this later. She doesn't—"

"She's living in my house. She'd better know the score." He paused t'draw on the cigarette and release the smoke through's nose. "We're running short on metal. The deliveries just aren't coming in. And what parts we have we've got trouble shipping out. And orders are down."

"I would've thought they'd need parts for all kinds of things, as bad as everything is," Mary-Celleste said.

"But who can pay?" Cigarette between's fingers, smoke curled upward.

"Jack," his wife said. "The ceiling."

He glanced up.

"It's okay," she said. "I'll clean it tomorrow."

He took a draw, let't out, said t'Mary-Celleste, "You understand it's not going to be the easy life around here."

"Jack."

"It's better if we just get it out in the open."

"I hadn't figured so," Mary-Celleste said. "Though, if it's such an imposition, I don't see why you had us come up here."

"What *else* could I do?" he said. "Just leave my sister and niece alone so God knows what could happen?"

"Jack!"

"I don't want to hear it."

"I could've done something," Mary-Celleste said. "I could've gotten by."

"And how would that have looked? A woman alone and—"

"I don't see what it should matter to you."

"This town might not be as small as you're used to. But there are eyes and opinions everywhere. And more than that. Do you understand?"

His wife cleared'er throat. "It's late, dear." And she glanced over'er shoulder toward the clock. He'd too, then leaned forward and dropped'is cigarette butt into'is dis-used glass. Rita glanced toward'er sister'n-law, weakly smiled. "I've laid a few things out for you. You should be able to make yourselves comfortable." She glanced toward the light. "If you're tired..."

Mary-Celleste stood, bonnet'n-hand. "I think I will." She paused at the bottom of the stairs. "Goodnight."

She'd reached the top of the stairs before the living room lights went out. Maybe she'd've thought't was just'em going t'bed. But when she'd entered the room, after failing t'find a switch along the wall, and running against the bedframe, and reaching overhead for the light string, and pulling't twice, then thrice, the room remained dark.

There'd've been no need t'whisper'n'is ear. But she'd. "You should come out with us today." Sweat'd've glued their skin together as they'd lain there while late-morning breeze stirred the curtains. Her fingers intertwined with'is secretion-matted pubic hair. "You should get out and see more people. Alot of them want to see you, you know."

He grunted.

"The more they think you're hiding," she said, "the worse it's going to be. If you've got a void, it's going to be filled by something."

"Theology?" His fingers skated vertebrae-t'vetebrae along'er back.

"Isn't it all about penetrating deeply into mysterious places? Thrusting into the confines of the unknown?"

"What are we talking about?"

"Does it matter?" She shifted and rolled and straddled'is lap and leaned over'm. "What if everything's one in the same? And there's the cycle of the crisis. Over and over again, the need and the resolution. The resolution and the need."

"I'm completely lost."

"If you'd get more sleep, you wouldn't have this problem."

"I guess." He looked round'er, toward the curtained windows. "What time is it?"

"Not noon yet."

He stretched'is arms over'is head, arched'is chest. "I've gotta go. We're supposed to have a meeting this morning."

"You can't hide down there with Allan forever."

"I'm not hiding."

"Then come out with me today."

"I don't want everyone looking at me like I can solve their problems and know exactly what they need."

"They won't."

He pushed'mself up on'is elbows so their faces near touched. "I think it excites you."

"What?"

"The look some of the women get in their eyes."

"What a wicked thing to say."

"Let me up."

She shook'er head and the tip of'er nose burnished'is.

"You'll make me take matters into my own hands."

"I dare you."

He leaned up, kissed'er, grabbed'er waist and bucked so they rolled and she landed on'er back. She tried t'lock'er ankles round'm, but'e pushed apart'er legs. "Have a nice day out," he said. "I'll see you later."

"I doubt it," she said. As'e stood, she scooted t'bed's edge, put'er legs over the side and sat up. "You'll be too busy with *Allan*." But she smiled as she said't. And she took'is hand. "Come on. I'll clean you up. And you can fulfill your obligation to do the same."

"Obligation?"

She ran'er hand down'er body. "This is part your mess, too."

"I'm afraid there's always a mess," Rita said.

The storm'd settled'n the night, but little'f any light'd've made't between the shutters. And dust'd've hung'n the air, as't always does, illuminated by the kitchen's single low-watt bulb. And Rita followed Mary-Celleste's eyes up t't. "You get used to it after a while."

"Why don't you get something brighter?"

"Don't want to use too much electricity. Besides, you get used to it after a while." She turned towards the sink, rubbed a dishcloth over the counter. "And it'll be better when we can open the windows again." She stopped and adjusted'er hips as'f t'ward off a knotted muscle.

"Was there a blackout last night?"

Rita turned. "What do you mean?"

"I was just wondering. The lights wouldn't come on. But I thought I could still see the streetlamps on between the shutters."

"Oh that's just... Nothing to worry about."

"Oh." Mary-Celleste glanced round the kitchen. "Jack already gone?"

"Oh, yes. Jack has to get off early, you know. But there's a little bit of coffee still on the stove if you want some."

"Why don't you take a rest and we'll both have a cup."

"No, I'm fine. Really."

Mary-Celleste put'er hand on'er sister'n-law's arm. "It won't hurt anything to sit down a few minutes. And I can help with whatever you need." And she touched Rita's shoulder. With a half-nod, t'other woman moved toward the kitchen table and sat. Mary-Celleste

turned toward the cabinet and the coffee pot. She split what remained between two mugs. "Should I make some more?"

"No," Rita said. "This is more than enough. This is fine." And she wrapped both hands around'er mug and looked down into't as Mary-Celleste pulled out a chair.

"Rita, what is it?"

But she shook'er head. "Nothing. It's nothing." She raised'er mug'n both hands and sipped. Winced. "It's not much, I'm afraid."

Mary-Celleste ran'er tongue along the backs of'er teeth. "It has a certain bite to it."

"Actually," Rita said. "It's not coffee. Not real coffee, anyway. Or at least, it's supposed to have some in it. I don't know. It's a powder. You buy it in a tin. Have you seen them?"

Mary-Celleste shook'er head.

"I usually only make it for Jack in the morning. It's so expensive. You have no idea."

"It's like that everywhere."

Rita shook'er head. "But up there, where it's more rural, you're closer to everything, so you're bound to get things cheaper."

Silence. Mary-Celleste sipped what she'd.

Muffled sounds overhead.

"I'd better start breakfast," Rita said.

Mary-Celleste rose with'er. "I'll help."

"No, you don't need..."

"We can get it done faster together. And then you can rest some more and we can talk. Now, where do we start?"

"Of course, you simply must start with one of the green-topped ones," she said.

"I see," Ron said.

"Yes," Mrs Potter said. "You must."

"I guess, if I must." He lifted a [canapé] between thumb and forefinger and placed't into'is mouth.

"You see," Mrs Potter said. "What did I tell you?"

"Yes," he said. "I see what you mean." But Mrs Potter'd disappeared by then, had gone t'look over someone else's shoulder'n a distant part of the room. Ron looked down at the [canapés], didn't reach for another.

"Heck of a thing, isn't it?"

Ron turned and found'mself looking into Mr Brinn's mustache. "Quite."

"Have you tried the [hors d'oeuvres]?"

"I guess... John, what exactly is—" —someone squeezed between'em— "—all this? And why are all these other people here?"

"Interested parties, of course," Brinn said. A blue-jacketed waiter appeared with a tray of yellow-liquid-filled crystal. And Brinn took one and sipped. "Say, that's something. Have you tried this yet?"

"No."

"Well, you should. Got a certain...zing to it." Careful of'is mustache, he sipped again. But Ron raised'is hand t'the waiter, who then disappeared across the room.

"But, John, really, why all this?"

"Oh, it's Matilda. All Matilda's doing. She says we've had too many drab affairs. Completely overwhelmed the women's planning

committee single handed, you know. Regular one-woman...well, whatever you call it. Got to get everyone up and out of the doldrums, you know. Just because the storm rages *outside* doesn't mean we can't let ourselves live a little on the *inside*."

After Brinn'd gone wherever, Ron looked round, again, at the [canapé] table. He still held a crumb-tainted napkin, but with no obvious place t'discard't, he folded't into'is pocket.

Beatrice stood surrounded'n a distant corner. Her white teeth flashed when she laughed. He'd've joined'er, but probably wandered into the hall instead. The grandfather clock'd've been removed long before. Pictures hung'n'ts place from floor t'ceiling, barely space between'em t'notice the wallpaper.

"Excuse me, sir."

She'dn't smile, but held a silver tray'n'er gloved hands.

His head cocked, but she half-turned, as'f t'hide. "Julie?"

"Please, excuse me, sir." But't was impossible t'get by'm because of the platter.

"What are you doing here? Where's your fa—"

"He's not around anymore," she said, voice low. "If you please, sir."

"What do you mean? Is he alright? I was hoping to see—"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I—"

"You." Mrs Brinn appeared round the corner. "There you are. Everyone's waiting. What's keeping you?"

"Sorry, mam."

"My fault," Ron said, and stepped outa'er way.

"I hope," Mrs Brinn said—the young woman disappeared into the room beyond—"I hope she wasn't accosting you. She's rather new, I'm afraid. And hasn't quite learned the ropes yet, as they say."

Ron looked at'er, slipped'is hands into'is pockets. "The other way round, I'm afraid." He produced a weak smile. "I rather got carried away, myself. Reminiscing, you know."

"Yes?" She nodded. "Really, do tell. It's most likely marvelously droll."

He nodded. "Yes, I spent quite a lot of time in this house as a child, you know." Her smile'd've already begun t'flatten. "Of course, it's been redone since then. A few times, in fact. But it's still basically

the same.” He looked up the stairs. “Sometimes I think I’ll just turn around and he’ll show up, just like he used to be.”

She seemed momentarily t’choke. “Yes... Well... Yes, well...shall we join the others? I’m sure your wife has them captivated on one point or the other.”

He looked past’er and toward the door. “Yes, I’m sure she has.”

Walking arm'n-arm, their woven broadbrim hats near collided as they weaved through one alley and up into another square. "What's the deal with all the people?" Tracy said.

Catherine shook'er head, silent as they crossed. Eyes tracked'er, flicked away when she turned toward'em. They'd've walked on.

Crack, thump thump thump thump t'one side. And lettuce heads rolled at'em and a young woman flailed'er arms, "No no no no no". And Balled leafy green knocked against their ankles, rolled away toward various walls. "Sorry," the young woman said, after she knelt and scooped as many'n'er arms as she'd.

"Here," Catherine said. "Let us help you with those." And she picked two from'er arms before they'd tumble.

"No no no. You don't need to do that."

"We're already doing it," Catherine said. "Now, where do they go? We'd better get them'n the shade before they wilt." She glanced at Tracy, who rolled'er eyes but crouched and gathered the last two or three and held them'n'er arms.

"Oh..." The young woman glanced over'er shoulder, seemed t've lost'er bearings a moment. "Over here."

The cart sat caddy-cornered on a stair.

"Who's driving this thing?" Tracy said.

The young woman looked down. "Me."

"You shouldn't try to control such a heavy load going down steps."

"Well..."

"But everyone has to learn sometime," Catherine said. And she glanced over the cart. "Everything looks so fresh."

A smile. "Just picked this morning."

Tracy bent over the produce. "Where'd all this come from?" She sniffed't.

A voice from behind: "From the ground. Where else?" A slat-crate-filled handtruck went bumpety-bumpety-bumpety as Troy guided't down the stairs. "What's going on?"

"Just a little accident," Catherine said.

He stopped the handtruck on a step above and left't and squeezed by the cart. "Someone steer it and I'll lift." The young woman bounded up the stairs, grabbed the handles as Troy lifted the front and forced't round and kept't from running away as they dropped down the steps into the alley.

"Somebody's showing off," Catherine said.

He cleared'is throat. "—"

"Eh, what's taking so long? I'm standing over here." The woman trumbled through an archway. "I'm coming over there. I'm asking what's going on. What's going on?"

The young woman glanced round at'em, faintly dropped'er head.

"Nothing," Catherine said.

"I need this to cook," the woman said.

"Sorry," the young woman said.

"Let me around that cart." The woman moved round t'the cart. "I'm going to take this." And she grabbed the handles and started't forward. "I'm going to take it down to the end of the alley and turn left." And she pushed't down an alley and turned and pushed't beneath a wide archway, called, "I'm going to push it down the stairs..."

Tracy shook'er head. "God..."

"Did...did I do something wrong?"

"No," Catherine said.

Tracy said, "She just gets... Yeah."

But the young woman still chewed the inside of'er cheek. She glanced back at Troy. "What can I do to help?"

"Never mind that," Tracy said. "Where did all this come from? You can't be up and running this fast."

Troy smiled, reached into the top crate and produced a small potato. "Want one?"

"I don't eat things out of the dirt."

"Then what do you eat?" the young woman said.

Catherine laughed.

"Bullshit you've gotten this far," Tracy said.

"Leave him alone," Catherine said. And she smiled at'm. "It's been a long time since I've seen you. Where've you been hiding?"

"Underground, it looks like," Tracy said. "Where else could he get that dirty?"

He shrugged, bit into the potato.

"Ignore them," Catherine said t'the young woman. She smiled. "I'm—"

"Oh, I know who you are—I—Oh, and I'm Pamela—are you coming tonight?" She winced, mumbled t'erself.

"What's tonight?"

"The wedding."

Catherine paused, glanced toward Troy, who rubbed the back of's neck. "Something somebody's come up with. Night of the eternity...thousand nights...or something like that..." He shrugged.

"Never mind," Tracy said. "I still say there's something funny going on here."

"Oh, there is," Catherine said, and took'er arm. "Just nothing to do with your bet." She smiled. "You two go on. And—"

The woman marched between'em, grabbed the handtruck. "I came back for this. I'm going to take it over with the rest of the stuff." And she pushed't down the alley. "I'm pushing it down the alley."

Tracy rolled'er eyes.

Catherine tugged'er arm, waved t'Pamela and Troy. "You two have a nice morning."

And they cut across the way and dropped down a set of stairs into a covered alleyway.

“Now, tell me everything you’ve heard about this.”

Faint, pinkened light filtered between shutter boards and'd've set the living room dimly aglow by the time Mary-Celleste passed through and mounted the stairs.

"Allison. Wake up."

She moved beneath the sheet.

"Allison."

Her hair peaked above the cover-line, then'er closed eyes. "I'm awake."

"Good, then you can get up too"

Interlocked bedsprings eeked'n sequence with'er as she sat up. "Oh, I feel so awful. It was so hot last night. I don't think I slept at all." She rubbed one eye, nightdress still damp against'er back.

"You slept," her mother said. And she squeezed between bed and wall and lifted'er bag onto the mattress and opened't. "Everybody's had breakfast. We've left a plate for you."

Allison nodded. "Are we really going to have to stay here long?"

"Don't say things like that." Mary-Celleste finished with whatever she'd arranged'n'er bag and re-cinched't and slid't under the bed. "You don't want to be rude to your aunt and uncle."

"Oh, I don't mean anything about them. It's just... I don't know..."

"Hush. I don't want to hear you say anything like that around them."

"Oh, I wouldn't ever do that."

"Then you shouldn't say it in secret either."

"Yes'm."

"Now, get dressed. We have things to do today."

"Are we going out?"

"Just get dressed and come downstairs."

And when Mary-Celleste entered the kitchen, Rita'd've just emptied the dustpan into the garbage. "I said I was going to do that."

"I got it," Rita said. She knelt and set the dust pan beneath the sink and propped the broom'n the corner by the refrigerator.

"Allison should be down soon. Are you alright?"

Rita turned and looked over the kitchen. "Fine." She turned round again. "I think I'll go work on the living room."

"What in the world is there to do in there?"

"Dusting. You know, things like that." And she produced a cloth from'er pocket as she moved toward the doorway.

"Lord's sake, take it easy."

Rita turned, face gaunt. "Ssssh." Her lips contorted hard round harsh sound. "Be careful what you say."

Mary-Celleste followed'er into the living room. "What's wrong?" Rita bent over the coffee table. "And who's going to hear me, anyway?"

Behind'em, Allison descended the stairs. "Morning."

Rita looked up. "Morning, dear. Sleep well?"

Allison nodded. "Fine." She glanced at'er mother. "Very... well, actually."

Her mother nodded toward the kitchen. Silently, Allison moved that way.

And after she'd gone, Mary-Celleste said, "Why don't—" But Rita passed'er, opened a small closet beneath the stairs and drug out a rug sweeper. "Rita, the rug's clean. Why don't you—"

"What do you know about it!" Her sister'n-law's knuckles changed color as she gripped the rug sweeper's handle.

Mary-Celleste paused, glanced toward the kitchen. "I'm sorry," she said. "I was just trying to help."

Slowly, Rita's face softened. "If you want to help..." she said. "You can go upstairs and see that your bed's made up."

Mary-Celleste nodded. "Okay," she said. "I'll do that." She glanced over'er shoulder as she mounted the stairs, as'er sister'n-law jerked the rug sweeper back and forth.

But things'dn't've been the same. Where once'd been back yard, stood only metal and glass. Potted plants ringed the conservatory, smelled of wet dirt. The convivial atmosphere must've carried over from the living room not-broken. And blue-jacketed waiters'd've moved, perhaps, round the table sunwise till Ron looked down and found'is plate filled.

He glanced up at the glass panel ceiling. As high as the house's main roof, it must've looked the ghostly partner of the main house, or as'f the house were being pulled from the ether, or being drawn into't.

"Beautiful, don't you think?" Mrs Brinn said.

He looked down, looked across at'er. "Yes." Mechanically, he lifted'is knife. By then only two waiters'd've remained, each stationed at either end of the table. "Am I wrong," he said, "or have I seen some new employees?" And'e glanced toward Mr Brinn as'e forked a bite into'is mouth.

"I'm sure," he said. His mustache ends swung as'e chewed. "Matilda, you know, she's a large-hearted person."

And'is wife turned from someone nearby. "But of course," she said t'Ron. "I feel one should do what one can to help those caught in these extraordinary times."

"Yes," Ron said, and nodded and glanced down at'is plate. "I thought I saw Julie Pate, actually. Strange she was away from the farm. Most people I've known out there can't imagine leaving the life, so it seems kind of strange she'd be here. Do you happen to know why?"

"Julie? Oh, I can't really say." She laughed. "To be honest, I sometimes can't keep track of them anymore. It's Deloise who's in charge of those things, anymore. I just find it too cumbersome to keep

up with, all the details of who's coming and going and such." She laughed. "I just don't know what we would do if we hadn't hired her."

"It's just that—"

"Relax," someone said. "You don't always have to talk shop."

"I thought that's what we were here to do."

"Well..." T'other councilman cleared's throat. "Saunders, I heard you're adding another expansion to your house?"

The man touched's mouth with a napkin, nodded.

"Another one?" a woman said. "It'll be the tallest thing you can see for miles."

"Not hardly that tall, I would hope."

Laughter.

"What about you, Ron, any plans?"

"No."

"Waiting to spring it on us, I'm sure."

Laughter.

Beatrice smiled. "You never can tell."

"Maybe even Saunders might have a run for his money."

Laughter.

"Actually," Ron said, and'e set's fork down. "I've been thinking it's an awfully large house for just two people. It might be more useful to move into something smaller."

A few glanced at'm. Beatrice faintly laughed. Others followed.

"Hah, you almost had us there for a minute."

Dis-used paint sprayers and pressure washers and rusted roll-around toolboxes and who knows what other detritus lay scattered round the cells. She wound through interconnected cubicula, toward the structure's center, and mounted the helical stairs there. Dirty yellow cords snaked from solar panels above t'interconnect dim worklights below. Her tablet brushed'er leg as she climbed.

"...there's only one option..." She jerked and glanced down. Light washed against'er thigh. The screen'd somehow jumped t'full brightness. And she winced, tapped't. Her own voice: "There's a whole spectrum of things to consider..." She touched the screen. It'dn't respond. Her voice: "... only thing we can do is prevent any further migration of hexachromium..." Allan's voice: "... there's only one option..." She thumbed the power button, forced a shut-down. Her face reflected on a glass-black surface.

She pressed the power button. Nothing.

"Oh, damn it."

She sighed and climbed toward daylight.

Clutching'er bag'n'er lap, she glared through the dust-covered windshield. "That was the most inappropriate thing I think I've ever seen."

Dust floated'n headlight illumination, swirled when the car ripped through the air ahead.

"What in the Lord's name were you thinking?" She'dn't glance across at'm. "I don't know how we're ever going to recover from this." She still'd'n't glance across at'm. "And what am I supposed to say to the ladies tomorrow?"

"You'll think of something," he said. "You always do."

He steered into the driveway, but stopped short of the garage. "I'll let you out. I'm going to go check on Mrs Coreman before it gets too late."

"I should have known," she said, and pushed-open the door, but stopped before she slammed't. She bent t'look inside. "You'd do anything to get away and go *there*, wouldn't you?"

Headlights splattered over'er as'e backed down the drive and turned.

He parked near beside the curb and removed'is suit jacket as'e mounted the front steps and hung't over'is arm as'e loosened'is tie and collar. He raised'is hand as'f t'knock.

Light filtered into the hallway from the living room. And when'e entered, she sat'n the same green armchair as always. He sat on the nearby stool.

"Good evening, Mrs Coreman."

But she just stared straight ahead.

"Ring. Ring."

Her hand darted through air. "Operator. How may I connect your call?"

"I would like to speak to Mrs Coreman, please."

"Younger or senior, sir."

"Senior."

"Just a moment, sir." Her hands moved through the air.

"Hello."

"Hello, Mrs Coreman. This is Ron."

"Ron." She smiled, seemingly at a distance. "What can I do for you?"

"I was just calling to see if everything was okay with you."

"Oh, I'm fine. How are things with you?"

"Fine," he said. "Do you need anything?"

"No," she said. "Are you okay, dear? You don't sound so well."

"I'm fine. Just tired."

"Who's there?" The younger Sarah Coreman, moving as'f she'd been an old woman'erself, stood'n the doorway, fidgeted with'er bathrobe, paused. Ron lifted a finger t'is lips and she nodded.

"I'll let you go now, Mrs Coreman. You have a nice night."

"You too, dear. Give my best to your parents, will you?"

"I will."

“And would you mind doing something else for me?”

“I’d be glad to.”

“If you’re out playing and see Officer Coreman, will you tell him to turn his radio back on?”

“I’ll do that. Goodbye, Mrs Coreman.”

“Goodbye.”

Ron rose and walked toward the hall. Behind’m, Mrs Coreman’s hands darted through the air, then settled into’er lap. “Sorry,” he said. “I figured you were asleep and didn’t want to wake you.”

She shook’er head. “It’s okay.”

“Anything changed?”

She shook’er head.

“Goodnight then. Sorry to disturb you.”

She closed the door behind’m as’e went down the stairs. The locked thunk-clicked. For a moment’e stood on the lawn amidst streetlamp-lit night, hands’n’is pockets as a hot night breeze rustled crispy, water-starved hedges.

Noise and light interrupted quiet darkness.

Mae paused, leaned back and looked through an archway. Maybe something bout the voice tickled a memory, because she turned from wherever she'd been bound and dropped down half-curved steps into a half-buried chamber with thin horizontal windows at its extremities. But the projection-filled wall overwhelmed the meager sunlight they allowed.

She moved between those seated'n flickery projection backwash.

The projector sat propped on its three small legs, cord run back into a keyboard-and-screen-backlight-backlit archway.

"What're you doing?"

"Guerrilla fucking truth."

Mae glanced over'er shoulder. "Is that Richard Kylie narrating?" Zeb'dn't respond.

She looked back at'm. "I thought you'd be over this by now."

Silently, he henpecked's laptop keyboard.

She glanced over'er shoulder again. "How many petabytes of documentaries do you have on there?"

"Fucking enough."

"You remember that African film project that McLuhan referenced?"

"At least some people are still interested in the fucking truth."

Mae glanced over those projection-backwashed figures. "Maybe."

"What the fuck's that supposed to mean?"

She said, "You know what it means."

Behind'er, the room dimmed and instinctively she looked back as the credits rolled.

The projection faded from the wall. Zeb yanked the projector's cord and stuffed it'n's shorts pocket. The laptop's well-worn hinges sluiced down and the lid snapped shut. And'e grabbed everything and lunged down a darkened passage.

Wind moved through the fractured house as'f't were a woodwind. Dry floorboards creaked with'is gate and'is shoeprints marred dust-silted floors. Dust stirred as Sheryl sat up, squinted'n the low light emitted by a small battery-powered lamp on the mantel nearby.

'd've said. His tie'd've drooped'n'is hand and'is fingers'd've fell away from'is collar button. He'd've stopped before the couch. And she'd've dis-buckled'is belt, dis-buttoned'is fly and'd've fitted him through the hole in his underwear, taking'm into'er mouth awhile while she'd've rubbed'erself with'er free hand. But then she'd've pulled away and'd've left'm t'work'mself free of'is underwear while she'd've turned on'er knees and'd've rested'er forearms on the back of the couch and'd've bunched'er frayed, dust-impregnated skirt over the small of'er back.

He ran'is free hand through'er pubic hair.

Without a word, he slipped into'er till'is pants button grazed'er under-thigh and'is shirt-tail fell and obscured'is groin. Her head drooped, hair fell round'er head and hid'er face, convulsed with their combined motions till'e grit'is teeth and grabbed'er hips and groaned and pressed'mself tight against'er buttocks and held'mself against and inside'er.

Breathing hard, Sheryl looked over'er shoulder and brushed'er hair aside. "Did you bring something to eat?"

He breathed hard, swallowed, nodded.

"Where's it?"

"Out in my jacket."

"Get it."

"Can I wait?" He'dn't softened completely yet and seemed t'wanna wait till that fact forced'm t'slip from'er.

"No. Unless you want something later," she said.

He grunted, shuddered, but pulled free, fitted'mself back into'is underwear and buttoned'mself up t'go back out t'the car. And when'e'd returned she'd've sat on the couch'n one corner with one leg beneath'er and on a wet spot as't stained dusty upholstery fabric. She dis-wrapped a sandwich and stuffed't'n'er mouth t'hold't while she wrung-off a pop bottle cap.

She breathed between bites and gulps, "You're late."

"Things became complicated." And'e winced when'e shifted and near dry secretions that'd've glued'is pubic hair t'is underwear tugged and then seemingly sandpaper-esque fabric moved against'is penis head. He watched'er head go back as she drank. "Have you been

getting enough water?" He glanced toward what'd been a kitchen. "I thought the pipes still worked." Sink and cabinet handles and icebox sat luminescent'n moonlight. Splintered joist and rafters gaped at stars.

"It tastes like rust," she said as she pulled'er mouth from the pop bottle.

"You get used to it after a while."

She pulled a face before she bit into the sandwich again. "Anything more on the train?"

He shook'is head. "There was a wreck a couple days ago. It's got everything fouled coming or going south."

"... fuck..." She swallowed and up-ended the pop bottle.

As'e'd talked, his eyes'd've wandered up'er bare leg and toward'er crotch. And the pop bottle'd've vacuum-popped when she pulled't from'er lips. "Want more?" she said. He nodded. "Good. Then you can pay the price."

They walked with grocery bags held against their stomachs.

"That was strange," Mary-Celleste said as they started down the sidewalk. "He didn't even tell you how much it was before he put it on your bill."

"W-what?" Rita's bag crinkled against'er stomach. Voice distant: "He doesn't need to." Her jaw tensed as t'd most of the way through the store. "We should get home."

And she said no more as they walked.

"Who's car is that?" Mary-Celleste said. "It's parked in front of your house."

No reply. Herky jerky, Rita continued forward, perhaps as a stick figure moves, hampered by cord-tied joints. The brown paper bag crushed against'er chest as they moved up the driveway and through the garage and into the kitchen.

Argile or Ceili alone'd've blocked the whole kitchen-living-room doorway. He turned. He smiled.

"Good morning, Mrs Moore."

Jaw tense, she managed t'nod.

"We, of course, apologize for the intrusion."

Argile said from the living room: "Apologize, of course."

"We seem to have caught you at a bit of an—"

From the living room: "—inconvenient time. Of course, maybe everything—"

"—worked out. We were able to keep young—"

"—Mrs Holdfast company—"

"—while you were away."

"Where is my daughter?"

Bent'n the doorway, he'd've seemed t'smile. "Good morning, Mrs Holdfast. We Apologize for any—"

"—alarm we might've caused."

"Please, come in."

"And have a seat."

And'e moved aside t'allow'er through. Allison sat acenter the couch.

"Please," Argile said from the corner, "have a seat."

"Mrs Moore," Ceili said. "Please, join us."

"Join us," Argile said when she entered from the kitchen. Rita still clutched the paper bag.

"Can we help?"

After a moment, Rita looked down, paused, turned back toward the kitchen and set the bag on the table.

"We were just talking with your daughter—"

"—about your trip. It must be exciting to be a young person and—"

"—come to a town like this for the first time."

Neither'd yet removed'is overcoat.

Mary-Celleste stood'n front of the couch. She glanced aside as Rita sat by Allison. "You'll have to excuse me," she said, "but I don't know who you are."

"Our apologies."

"Apologies."

"This is Mr Gunther," Ceili said.

"This is Mr Vandermeer."

Ceili glanced toward'm. "Or am I Mr Gunther today? And you Mr Vandermeer?"

Argile seemed thoughtful a moment.

But Ceili said, "No matter." And'e turned toward Mary-Celleste and smiled an almost shy smile. "We just stopped by—"

"—to make sure everything was alright."

"Yes," Ceili said.

After a moment of silence, Rita looked up. Nodded. "Of course," she said. "Everything's... Everything is fine. Absolutely fine."

"Excellent," Argile said.

"Yes, very good."

“Of course, we don’t want to take up any more of your time—”
“—than we have to.” Ceili turned t’ Mary-Celleste. “It was good to meet you.”

“Yes.”

They slipped on their hats. Ceili held the door and Argile touched’is hat as’e bent t’pass through and Ceili said, “Ladies,” before he bent and passed through the doorway and closed the door.

The shutters were probably still closed, so’f Mary-Celleste’d instinctively turned t’watch’em go, all she’d’ve seen’d’ve been boards and what pinkened light eked between.

“Mother...”

She glanced at Allison, who stared wide eyed at’er aunt as the woman doubled over into’er lap, face’n’er hands.

And Mary-Celleste kneeled next t’er. “What’s going on? What was that all about?”

Rita looked up outa’er hands, face puffed wet.

Stickiness dripped from'is chin and spotted the dirty couch. "That's right," she said as she leaned back. "Lick all of it out of me." And pushed'is head between'er legs as'f that'd allow'is tongue deeper. "Get it all out." His limp penis dangled between'is legs as'e shifted on'is dirtied knees and clear-white spotted the dusty floor between'em. Head back, she shivered and looked down at'm. "All of it." Shiver. "I want to hear it." And'e gulped for effect. "Yes... All of it... Get all of it..." And she trembled and'er stomach punched'n-and-out, tight, contracted, tensed. And'er fingers tightened on'is hair and pulled'is face back t'reveal'is glistening mouth and chin. "Swallow," she said, and watched'is throat undulate. And she closed'er eyes and trembled.

Warm night. Still air. Electric lights hung tacked a short way along a wall, dim, batteries low, weak. But dwindled, left sometimes only moonlight. Candles and oil lamps'd been shoved into niches between ill-mated mud bricks. Arches and stars between. Winding curved steps. Giggles, laughter, foot patter. Hands guarded candles as their owners and bearers rushed by. Eyes lingered a little too long'n recognition. But she smiled, and they'd smile, then disappear.

Noise washed down stairsteps as she rose toward an aglow archway. Smudge pots dangled from fractious arch struts grown from each nearby building that seemed poised t'form a dome but missed one another by height or angle, a broken arch skeleton of a dome without skin or muscle, shingle or brick, naked t'the sky. And't must've seemed as'f every crevice'd been stuffed with a candle, as'f that apparently aflame square threatened t'overwhelm the stars.

"You came."

Catherine turned. "Well, I could hardly have turned you down, could I?"

Pamela took'er hand. "This way. It's just about to start." And she guided'er through the crowd, who must've seemed t'part when they turned or glanced over their shoulders and saw Catherine.

If the arch struts overhead'd managed t'meet, the crowd'd've ringed that point, where a dozen or so couples'n rough-cut pullovers with rope cords round their waists held hands and attempted t'stifle their giddiness as they glanced at each other and away. And the crowd must've seemed no less infected.

A young man raised'is arms for quiet.

"We gather here," he said, "in sight of the heavens to honor the

unions of those who stand before us. It is said that when the Lord created all things he created each in a day. And once it was asked how the days could be counted before the creation of the sun and where the sun would travel before the creation of the sky.” Pamela pressed Catherine’s hand, her attention rapt, and she’d’ve held’er breath, as everyone else must’ve seemed to. “And when an elder was asked about this, his reply was, that a day was as to the Lord as a thousand years, and that a thousand years were as a day. So the same would be eternity.” And’e raised’is hands as’f t’embrace the couples before’m. “Will you then take the one and the other? Will you rejoice in, cleave to one and the other for the remains of eternity, as the day passes to night and a thousand years pass to eternity? Will you?”

Loud cries rose from all as each gripped t’other’s hand.

“Then go—” —he flung back’is arms—“ —forever into the latter days of eternity of the day and the night.”

And the couples turned into’emselves, almost violent’n their quickness, and kissed t’other, reached round shoulders and waists, enmeshed their fingers’n t’other’s hair.

And every dammed breath must’ve seemed t’surge from the crowd’n unison and wash over and through’em and Catherine must’ve shaken as Pamela squeezed’er hand.

“Go upstairs.”

“Why?” Allison said.

“Because I said so.”

“But—”

Mary-Celleste cut'er eyes toward'er daughter. “Don't argue with me. Just go. And don't come down until I say.”

Mary-Celleste waited till she heard the door close overhead before she went into the kitchen.

“Who were those men?” But Rita still puttered with the grocery bag, laid items along the counter. “Why do they have keys to your house?” Rita went onto'er toes and opened a cabinet. “W—”

“I heard you—” She almost croaked. And she'd t'wipe'er cheek with a dishrag. “It's nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“No,” Rita said. “I mean...yes. It's just the way things are.”

Mary-Celleste blocked the refrigerator. “Rita. Stop.” But Rita reached round'er for the refrigerator handle.

“Please...”

“Not until you tell me what's going on. NOW—”

Rita's face elongated, she glanced round the kitchen. “Don't be so loud.” She almost whispered, as'f t'balance out what'd come before.

“Then tell me—”

“It's okay,” Rita said. It seemed she'dn't quite manage'er normal voice.

“My daughter was alone with two strange men that just came into your house and—”

“They wouldn't have done anything.”

Mary-Celleste stared.

“They were just inspecting.” Rita moved’er hands aimlessly. “After all, it really is his so he has every right to—and you can’t blame him for wanting to make sure—”

“Who?”

“Mr Perkins, of course. And he has a right to make sure the wrong kind of people don’t work for him, so you see since they’re his houses he has a perfect right to make sure nothing bad goes on in them and ...please, move...I have to get this put away before...”

Silently, Mary-Celleste stepped aside.

“You see it’s really okay,” Rita said as she bent and shifted things inside the refrigerator and ferried items from the counter. “Jack’s right—I just overreact sometimes. It’s just one of those things I do. It’s nothing, really. And you can’t really blame him, you know, for wanting to make sure everything’s alright. We don’t want the kind of people around who do bad things, do we? It makes everything safer this way, doesn’t it. So you see, everything’s perfectly alright.”

Melted wax dripped over a window ledge and hardened along the wall. The flame wavered and a curtain fluttered.

“It’s not me who’s out late this time.”

And without a word, she knelt on the bed and laid’er body along’is and kissed’m. “Would you marry me for a thousand years plus eternity?”

“What?”

As’is hand slipped into’er sari and touched’er waist, hers rested on’is stomach. “Don’t talk,” she said.

A knock on the door and 'e looked up, pen still 'n-hand, as she poked'er head through. "Councilman, Mrs Coreman is here. Should I show her in?"

He put down the pen and nodded, only just'd time t'stand and button'is jacket before the door opened again.

"Good morning, Mrs Coreman." He smiled and rounded'is desk. "Can we get you anything?"

She shook'er head.

He nodded t'Ruth, who closed the door on'er way out. Ron held out'is hand. "Please, have a seat." And'e turned one of the chairs'n front of'is desk t'b'easier for'er t'ease into.

She perched on'ts edge, handbag'n'er lap. Such a slight, desiccated woman, it'd've probably been difficult for'm t' imagine she'd've been barely been a half-dozen-or-so[†] years older than'm.

He positioned t'other chair t'face'ers and sat. "What can I do for you?"

"She's here." Her eyes'd've sunk deep into'er skull and'd've sometimes seemed too glassy.

"Who is, Mrs Coreman?"

"Her."

Ron nodded. "What makes you think that?"

"I've seen her."

"Where is that?"

"Around," she said. "Skulking around. She's not out in the open. But she's here."

"I'll see what I can do."

“You should be out looking,” she said. “Before more bad things happen.”

Ron nodded. “We’ll do that.”

“And you should get people that won’t be influenced by her.”

“We will.”

She slipped off the seat edge and stood, adjusted’er coat and scarf, yet shivered. “You shouldn’t keep it so cold in here.”

“Let me get the door.”

“You make sure to go out and get her.”

“Yes, mam.”

“We don’t want any more bad things to happen.”

“No, mam. We don’t.”

After she’d gone, Ron stood there’n reception a moment, hands’n’is pockets.

“Anything I can do for you, Councilman?”

“Hmm?” He looked away from infinity, followed Baldur as’e strolled round Ruth’s desk. “No. Nothing right now.” He half-turned. “Do I have anything scheduled for today?”

Ruth glanced at’er blotter. “A meeting at three-thirty.”

He nodded, seemingly t’mself. “Alright. I think... I’ve got some things to do. So I’m going to go out for a while. I’ll probably be back ...sometime after lunch.”

“Will you be anywhere I can call you?”

Pause. He shook’is head. “Probably not. Don’t worry about it.”

The screendoor slammed, but hung open behind'm, and'e'dn't turn t'fix't. Exhaust wafted through from the garage.

"Do you want some coffee?" Rita said.

He shook'is head as'e passed.

"Jack..."

He turned'n the living room doorway. "What?"

"You..."

"Well—what is it? Come on. I'm tired and I just want to get cleaned up and go to bed."

"She's probably trying to warn you about me." Mary-Celleste raised'erself from the couch. "We're leaving, Jack. I'm taking Allison and we're going home."

He crossed the room and stopped at the stairs, put'is hand on the banister end. "Not now."

"We're going tomorrow morning."

"No, you're not."

"I'm leaving, Jack."

He snapped round, released the rail. "No—you're not."

"You can't tell me what to do."

"I'm telling you."

"We're going down to the train station tomorrow."

"I said you're not."

"You can't—"

"I'M YOUR BROTHER—"

Rita stood'n the doorway, shook. "Not so loud." And Jack glanced toward'er, then back t'is sister.

"I'm your brother. And dad is dead. Jeff is dead—that means I very much *can*."

"I have the money, and I'm buying the tickets."

"No, you're not."

"I'm—"

"YOU'RE NOT..." The rail shook as 'e struck't. "You're not going anywhere. You're not doing anything. I'm not going to let you drag this family down."

"This isn't a negotiation," Mary-Celleste said.

"No," he said. "It's not."

"I'm—"

"Because you can't buy a ticket."

She paused, stared at'm a moment. "What do you mean?"

"Women can't travel from this station without being accompanied by a man."

"That's ridiculous," Mary-Celleste said, and Rita cringed at'er amplitude shift. "It's a woman only car. It's—"

"But only a man can buy tickets." Flat and factual voice.

"How can that be?" Mary-Celleste gesticulated. "What is wrong with this place?"

"After all," Rita said, "Mr Perkins did build the new station when a storm destroyed the last one, so he has every right to—"

Mary-Celleste glared at'er and'er voice dribbled t'a faint squeak.

Jack cleared'is throat, coughed something up and wiped'is mouth with the back of'is soot-coated hand. "I'm not going to let you ruin this family's reputation. Things are as they are. You'll just have to get used to them like everybody else." He turned and grasped the banister again. "There's nothing more to talk about."

"I don't want to hear it," Tracy said. "No whining and moaning and complaining about *oh he's gone* and all that fucking sort of thing."

Catherine walked between water troughs. Green stuff floated thick-packed along liquid surface. "What's got you so grumpy today?"

"Nothing," Tracy said, and yawned.

"Not much sleep?"

"I kept having this dream."

"Dream?"

"About having set up all the aquaponics equipment down in a corridor underground somewhere."

"It must've been dark."

"Purple. I ran electricity down from the solar panels to power ultraviolet lamps." She turned and pointed at Mae. "Not a word."

Mae crouched by one of the lettuce troughs, snapped off a few crisp, tender, young, dark-red chutes. "You wouldn't be the first to have a pathological fear of—"

"Word."

Mae shrugged, stuffed the dark-red leaves'n'er mouth, and chewed.

"Stop that. What's wrong with you? Can't you wait till lunch?"

"Humans didn't evolve to have set eating times," Mae said as she stood. "But to eat whenever food's possibility presented itself."

"Well, if you want to eat somebody out—why don't you go over to the dirties or something."

"The subconscious is really getting its way today, isn't it?"

"Oh, hell—"

"Besides," Catherine said, "it's not a fight, you know."

Mae nodded. “We’ll need both of you to make this thing sustainable.”

Tracy knelt at a dripping pex-t’bamboo connection. “We wouldn’t need anything at all if there weren’t so many fucking people here. We could’ve survived a lifetime on what was in the stores if just the people who should be here were here.”

Mae crouched again. “An old lifetime or a new lifetime? But you shouldn’t blame yourself. It can take our brain’s software a long time to adjust to radically new circumstances.”

“Oh—get away from there.”

“By the way,” Mae said. “Did he and Allan say when they would be back?”

He shook the last offered hand and turned down the steps. A lamp or a candle burned near a window on the porch.

“Wrrrr.”

Stark white, almost pearlescent, the slightest radiation’d’ve seemed t’redouble from’er fur.

“Sorry,” Ron said. “I don’t shake paws.”

“Wrrrr.”

He slipped’is hands into’is pockets as’e continued down the sidewalk. And the cat walked beside’m.

“I know,” he said. “It would probably make you feel better. Make you feel like someone was there who cared. Wouldn’t it? If the head of the town council comes around and cares enough to shake your hand in the middle of the night, then things have to be going to get better, right?”

“Wrrrr.”

He stopped and glanced over’is shoulder. The lamp or candle’d been extinguished.

“Wrrrr.”

“Yeah, but you’re used to sleeping on bare floors and rugs, I bet.” He turned and started toward the sidewalk again. “Look,” he said as they both reached the car. “It’s late. And I’m sure you’ve got places to be. So goodbye.”

“Wrrrr.”

“Same to...” He looked up, toward a distant yard that lay beyond what a distant still working streetlamp’d illuminate. A skeletal hedge with’ts million arthritic joints stood still with the lack of wind. He glanced down. “You hear that?”

“Wrrrrr.”

“I guess. But—” A motor faintly rumbled somewhere’n the distance. He looked toward the hedge again. But’f a dark-clad figure’d been crouched out there’n the dark [...]

He shook’is head. “Tell you what,” he said, and opened the passenger side door, knelt. “It may not be much, but I know someplace you can go. How about that?” And’e lifted’er into the seat. She looked at’m as’e climbed behind the wheel. “How does that sound?”

Brittney threaded'er way through cubicalae till she came t'the central stairs. Shadowless noon waited above. A square walled'n by none-the-same-size keystone arches. She ducked through a smaller one into a zigzag alley which spit'er onto narrow stairs. Ahead, a small archway opened'n the outer wall.

"Wait."

Brittney turned, looked back. June waved from behind a distant parapet. Disappeared.

Brittney waited, shifted'er backpack over'er shoulder, tugged'er hat's lariat and pulled't onto'er head as she'd. Faintly, she smiled as June hurried across the square, stopped short, bent double, palms on'er knees as she breathed hard. And as she bent forward'er extended-length sari, where't wrapped'er neck and went over'er head t'form a hood, drooped and she'd t'push't up. "I'm...sorry...I'm late." June looked up.

"What makes you think you're late?"

"Well I..." June straightened. "I thought I was."

"I'd've waited."

June tried t're-adjust'er hood, but tugged't t'no avail, and she huffed and worked'er arms free of'er backpack and set't on the ground t're-wrap and re-fit the whole thing.

Brittney still smiled. "Come on," and she stooped and lifted June's backpack. "You can adjust that on the way."

"You don't need to carry that."

"Well, we haven't got all day."

June finished with'er hood and ran up and grabbed'er pack. "I've got it."

"I hope you brought everything," Brittney said.

"I brought everything you told me to bring."

They passed through the outer wall, didn't pause on the overlook

and started down the switchback stairs and crossed the old stone dock. But whatever the ancient water level'd been, the surface was as far below the dock then as now, and they both descended bamboo ladders t'get t'the floated dock and water rose between bamboo and between their toes as they crossed. June stopped and started t'keep'er balance, hurried t'keep up when Brittney glanced over'er shoulder. Feet extended over a nearby boat. Faint snores. Brittney tossed'er backpack into'er boat and climbed banded-legs over. But June paused. "What's the matter?" Britt said.

"Nothing," June said.

Britt looked at'er. "Uh huh. How much have you been out on the water?"

"Plenty of times."

"Since we were kids."

June'dn't reply.

"Uh, huh. Well, get in then."

"It won't turn over, will it?"

Brittney pointed t'the ballast. "See that? It'll keep us good and steady. Even better than the inflatable ones used to be. Now, come on, Miss Experienced Boater."

June grasped one of the four poles that held the boat's thatched roof and stepped one foot then t'other over the side and'dn't let go as the boat faintly buoyed.

"See," Brittney said. "Nothing to it. Put your pack in the middle." She lifted a paddle. "That is, if you still want to go."

"Of course," June said. And she eased'er self down, still ahold of the pole.

"Paddle's there." Brittney cut water with'ers. "You take the other side." She glanced over'er shoulder. "You sure you're up for this?"

"Uh huh." June lifted t'other paddle from between'er feet and lowered the blade over the side.

"Alright then, let's get going."

She'dn't protest as'e lifted'er and a brown paper bag between splintered porch rails and then pulled'mself up between'em, nor when'e lifted'er again and hunkered and made'is way beneath a splintered porch roof and pushed-open the door till't scraped warped floorboards and'e and they squeezed between't and the splintered jamb.

Sheryl stood at the front of the room, fingers on a dusty sheet tacked over a boarded-up window.

"I brought you something," he said. "Or at least, someone." He hunched and lowered the cat. And she turned and looked back up at'm a moment, then turned and looked across the room at Sheryl. Paw prints marked the dust. She stopped and looked up at Sheryl. "Wrrrrr."

She knelt and lifted'er. "Hello, Eris." And she walked back t'the couch with'er'n'er arms.

"You know her?" Ron set the paper bag on a couch cushion.

"Of course." And Sheryl let Eris down on a cushion. And she lay there, looked up particularly at Ron, till Sheryl rustled the brown paper bag.

"What did you bring her here for?" She said as she chewed. "Are you one of those?"

"One of what?"

She swallowed. "Who likes an audience."

"We're going to be late," he said. The two boys'd already gone through t'the garage. Rita fixed'er gloves and glanced down at'er dress. "You look fine," he said.

"Are you sure we can all fit?" Rita lifted'er pocketbook from the table.

"We'll fit," he said, and glanced at'is sister as she entered the kitchen, followed by Allison. "That'll be fine," he said, with a glance at each's dress.

"You make it sound as if I'd go in there wear—"

Rita said, "We don't want to be late."

Jack held the door, motioned everyone through so'e'd lock't after'em. And'n the car, he looked into the rearview mirror, boys along the front seat next t'him. "Everyone set?"

Rita nodded, pocketbook'n'er lap. "Yes."

Morning light'd've made dust-covered windows sparkle and they'd've winced from the diffused brightness of't as'e backed into the road. Allison bent close t'the window so close Mary-Celleste'd t'warn'ern't t'touch'er forehead t'the glass. "They're all the same," Allison said. They turned at the next intersection. It must've almost seemed as'f they were rolling over the same street again and again. "Why are they all the same?"

"Why not?" the boys said.

"Yeah. What would they need to be different for?"

"But how do you tell which one is which?"

The boys snickered. "That's what house numbers are for."

"Alright," Jack said. "Everyone settle down and be quiet."

As Allison continued t'stare through the dust-marred window, her

aunt leaned toward Mary-Celleste, whispered. "One or two of the ladies," she said, "they might know who you are and—"

"How would they know that?"

Jack glanced into the mirror. "Everything alright back there?"

"Fine, Jack," Rita said. And when 'is eyes disappeared from the mirror, she'd've whispered, "That doesn't matter. It's just that you should...play it down, if you know what I mean?"

Mary-Celleste shook'er head.

"I just...if they ask you, you shouldn't just... Just, you know, don't make a big deal of it."

They turned the corner and Allison gasped. "Wow." And she leaned t'see between the seats and through the windshield. "It's huge."

"What," the boys said, "you never seen a church before?"

"Quiet," Jack said. And'e turned the car into the parking lot. A steel-and-chrome steeple glinted high above.

"We're too late," Rita said. "There's not going to be any spaces left."

"Just hold on." He turned onto the next row.

"There." And Rita leaned between the seats and pointed.

"I see it."

But the lines were painted so narrow they'd barely open the doors enough t'squeeze out without damaging the next car.

"Allison." Mary-Celleste took'er daughter's hand, drew'er attention from massive riveted-steel flying buttresses. But'er eyes were drawn upward again as they passed through one of the sets of open double doors. "It looks even bigger inside," she said.

"Shhh."

Jack moved'em between aisles thick with too many species of loud silence. And from where they sat, where the rostrum'd've stood covered with a drapery'd've barely been discernible.

Mary-Celleste turned as'er sister'n-law nudged'er arm. Subtly, she motioned over'er shoulder. Several viewing levels continued above, but at the highest remained a loan box, curtain pulled aside. A white-headed man leaned forward, cane betwixt'is knees. Next t'him, a woman might've said something behind a white-gloved hand. That'd've been the only color truly knowable from that distance.

“That’s Mr and Mrs Perkins,” Rita said, voice a register so low’t almost’dn’t’ve been speech. “Don’t stare.” She motioned faintly, as’f pointing something out’n a different direction. If she’d noticed’t, Mary-Celleste’dn’t’ve asked bout the empty seat beside’em’n the box above.

Brass rings clink clink clinked against each other, seemed t’draw everyone’s attention forward. A blue-robed figured’d appeared off-center the rise at the front of the church and stood there a moment as’f waiting for some silent signal, on which’e pivoted toward the massive radio that’d been concealed behind a curtain and clicked’t on.

Static malaise settled through the building as tubes warmed. At first’t must’ve seemed as’f the building were build t’channel sound, amplify’t. But after a moment or two, Mary-Celleste must’ve realized’t’d’ve only come from judiciously placed speakers.

And the reverend’s voice echoed through that massive space.

Steps, a passage just narrow enough for a person, opened ahead. For a while, she lost the morning light, emerged into't, and too used t'semidarkness, she blinked and raised'er hand over'er eyes before she dropped into another passage and sun haze remained hovering between'er and darkness even when she blinked. Nearnuf, raw, wet soil turned'er nose and she followed that scent into daylight.

Troy glanced over'is bare shoulder, lowered a sack t'the ground. Naked from the waist up, dried soil clung t'is skin, flaked away with movement, while darker thus damper clung t'the backs of'is hands and between'is fingers. "Alright?" he said.

She nodded. "Not used to the light." And she tugged'er lariat and pulled'er hat from'er back and fixed't so'ts brim shielded'er eyes.

Rows and rows of new-sprouted green fringe stretched through seemingly ancient rain gutters. Crumbling plastic buckets overflowed with green tendrils and tiny flowers. A mosaic must've once been along one wall. But only dislocated colored tiles'd've remained. Distant towers framed the sun.

"So this is where you've been hiding."

He shrugged, but glanced off into caddycornered distance.

She wound among gathered carts and propped tools. "You've been busy."

"It's not just me," he said, and glanced over makeshift planters. Sweat'd've trickled down'is back, soaked into'is cut-off pants. "Do you want to see?"

"Please."

He led'er down among the greenery, pointed from one planter or holey bucket or cracked pot t'the next and somehow discerned one

green fringe from another. "Here." He crouched over a deep-set trough and pinched a multi-stemmed protrusion and freed the root. "Carrots."

She closed'er teeth round't'n one crunch. Grit sifted between'er teeth, but she nodded as she chewed.

"Here," he said, and held out'is hand for'er t'deposit the stalk and leafery. "I'll show you where we're composting."

They moved on and round a corner. Long-handled tools'd've leaned propped against walls, some bandaged with decaying tape and cord. A wove bamboo mat covered rows of green fringe yet too delicate for direct sun. And she'd've accepted'is offer t'water'em with a nail-perforated tin can till the myriad of tiny green leaves bowed peppered with misty droplets.

She glanced up at'm as she worked, carefuln't t'linger on any one spot too long. "We've been looking for you at...some of the little festivals they've been having, you know?"

He'dn't look at'er, just shook'is head. "Been too busy." He kneeled, seeds cradled'n one palm, and picked'em out one-by-one as'e fingered new holes'n fresh-moist soil. "Besides," he said, "it's probably not my thing, anyway."

"I don't know," Catherine said. "I think you might enjoy it."

He shook'is head.

"I know someone else who would've very much liked to have seen you there."

He smoothed over the holes with'is finger, stood, wiped'is hands on'is exposed thigh below'is shorts. "Maybe we should go have a look at the beats. Some of them might be ready to pull." Without looking back, he said, "We might be able to have some for lunch."

She set down the can and walked with'm. "Don't try to run away from me."

"I'm not running away."

"Everybody is," she said. But she shook'er head. "Besides, I don't think you're disinterested, yourself."

"In what?"

"You know what—or should I say who?"

"As the herbs come along," he said, "we can use them in the pickling."

"I'm sure Pamela will be glad to hear that." She smiled, took's arm as they walked. "She's very nice," she said. "And I know you're interested. So what's wrong?"

He shrugged.

"That's not an answer."

"I don't know." He shrugged. "I'm sure she could find somebody better...or more interesting."

"Stop that."

"Well, it's true."

"I don't think so. And even if it were true—if, now—it doesn't matter if there's something *better* if she knows what she wants." No reply. "And I know you're not shy. So what's the reason?"

He shook's head.

"I'll get it out of you one way or the other," she said.

He shook's head.

"Alright," she said. "But she's going to be disappointed." She released's arm and walked past.

Behind'er, he said, "Because I don't know how."

She turned. "What do you mean you don't know how?"

He glanced round, as'f t'ensure they were still alone. "I don't know how."

Faintly, she smiled. And she walked back and took's arm again, pointed somewhere they'd sit. "Let's talk about it."

A knock at the door and he looked up from his desk. "You asked me to let you know when it was lunchtime."

Ron nodded. "Thanks, Ruth." He capped a pen and laid it on the blotter.

Out'n reception, Ruth pulled the cover over her typewriter. Baldur looked on from his bed'n the corner. "You going out today?"

"Yes," she said. "I thought I'd go to the diner." She glanced over her shoulder and out the window. "It's clearer than it was yesterday."

Ron nodded and followed her gaze. "Yes, it looks like a nice day." He opened the door for her and, after closing it, flipped the brass plaque round to read: NOT IN OFFICE. "Can I walk you out?"

She smiled and nodded. And down the hall he opened the inner then outer doors for her. "What about you?" she said. "You going to the diner?"

He shook his head. "I thought I'd make a run out to New Street and see how things are going."

"Poor folks out there," she said.

"Anyway, if you want a ride, I could drop you off at the diner on my way."

She shook her head. "No, no. You go on. It's a nice day and I'd like to walk, anyway."

Their paths diverged at the sidewalk, but he waved when he pulled from the parking lot and turned down Mainstreet. On his way he stopped at the grocer's, as usual.

And after he'd dis-loaded a couple brown paper bags and shaken more hands than he'd the night before, he left the car and moved down the sidewalk. Ambling along, he looked from house-to-house,

as'f t'assess each splintered board, each broken window pane, and where a roof remained, perhaps, a bent weather cock. He stepped into the street t'avoid shattered trusses. In the distance, only a rusted metal post marked the street's end, open desert beyond, but wind'd crept a sandbank past the pole and onto asphalt. He turned, looked up at an imploded gable, a collapsed porch. He glanced down the street before'e went up the driveway. Beside the house, he glanced over'is shoulder. Then'e grabbed the rail and climbed onto the porch.

Quiet. Light spilled through the kitchen and slopped over into the living room. Light penetrated between shutter boards and striped the sheets tacked over the windows. Shoeprints and footprints and pawprints smeared dusty hardwood. He looked down the hall, as'f'e expected t'find something other than impacted ceilings and shattered stucco and curled wallpaper.

He went back into the living room, knelt and even looked under the couch. But even the cat'd gone.

A large woman with a brocade smile approached as they emerged and descended the church steps into the parking lot. "You must be Mrs Holdfast and Allison I am Mrs Brown the leader of our local young woman youth group I *am* sorry we could *not* speak earlier I had meant to drop by one day earlier this week but things have been so hectic lately like you would not believe and unfortunately I was just completely *not* able to get around to it but I hope we can remedy that now we of course would love to have your daughter join us this evening so she can be introduced around and meet all the other young women I *am* sure she *will* have a great time." The woman smiled that same brocade smile.

Allison glanced toward'er mother.

"I..."

"Of course of course but you see this is the best way to get acquainted the best way of course I want to assure you it is a reputable organization of course and nothing but and there is of course no undue influence you will find *here*."

"I..."

"I think that'd—that would—be a very good idea," Rita said, and she glanced at Mary-Celleste.

"Yes." Jack nodded.

"Excellent we will see you this evening then and let me welcome you to our fair town I am sure you are going to find yourself very comfortable here." Mrs Brown turned, must've noticed someone else'n the parking lot, because she stretched upwards on'er thin ankles and raised'er arm and waved and trumbled off.

"You see," Rita said. "Everything's—is—going to work out. And—"

"Mr Moore. Mrs Moore. Yoohoo." An old woman, three or four cars down, stood behind an open passenger door and raised'er hand. "Yoohoo."

"Mrs Trundle," Rita whispered. She smiled and waved back. "Good afternoon, Mrs Trundle." Sideways t'Mary-Celleste she said, "Be careful." Then t'Mrs Trundle as they approached: "Lovely sermon, wasn't—was it not, Mrs Trundle."

The old woman nodded. "As it is every Sunday." She glanced down into the car. "George, get out and be polite."

The elderly man cut the engine and climbed out and put'is hand on the car's roof, as'f t'support'mself. "Jack."

Jack nodded. "Mr Trundle." He motioned t'Mary-Celleste. "This is my sister. She and her daughter have come to live with us."

"Oh, we have heard that," Mrs Trundle said. And she looked at Mary-Celleste. "It is good to know you got in safely. So many things have been happening to the trains of late."

"Mr Trundle," Rita said t'Mary-Celleste, "is the foreman on the line Jack works."

"But of course," Mrs Trundle said, "there is no need to talk work today. After all, it is the day even the Lord rested."

Rita nodded. "You're—you are—very right, Mrs Trundle."

"Of course," Mrs Trundle said t'Mary-Celleste, "I assume you will be coming to the womens meeting tonight."

Rita nodded. "Of course." And she glanced toward Mary-Celleste. "She's—she is—going to come with me."

"Excellent," Mrs Trundle said. "Well, do not let me hold you up. I am sure you are all ready to get home and have a bite to eat. We do not want to let the time slip away, do we?" She turned and looked across the car at'er husband. "We had better be going, George. After all, we do not want a citation." And'is wife turned toward'em, again, as'e dropped into the driver seat. She smiled. "See you this evening then. Toodaloo."

A dustplume rose'n the rearview mirror and obliterated clear sky. Sun reflected'n'is dark glasses. And with the windows down, his speed rolled a breeze through the car. Distant structures peaked through heatwaver. Compulsively, he glanced toward the gas gauge.

Nearer, paint-faded long buildings rolled by. Ninety-nine percent vacant space. He slowed and stopped'n front of the house. For a moment, he cast'is dark-lensed gaze round as'e looked overtop the car, then ducked back'n for'is hat.

“Anybody here?”

The cupola's roof'd gone. Every windowpane appeared shattered. Newsprint'd been pasted over lower windows, sucked'n-then-out by wind, as'f the house barely managed t'breathe. The front steps'd collapsed. But the front door remained, though the screendoor canted on one hinge, same as a distant barn door.

He called again. But again, vacant space swallowed'is breath.

"We should go down to the second tonight," Tracy said.

"What's happening down there?"

Two half-melted candles sat'n separate windows. The curtains remained still as a light breeze that'd found'ts earlier way through beneath the dome'd settled. Tracy slipped'er hand along Catherine's inner thigh. "I've heard they're having something down there tonight."

"Oh?"

"And I thought if we go down there..." Slowly, she traced'er fingers from Catherine's knees t'the inside of'er hips then back again. "You seem to get very *inspired* by them."

Catherine played'er fingers down Tracy's arm and stopped t'other woman's hand at the top of'er thigh. "When?"

"You don't need to worry about that," Tracy said.

"Oh?"

"You just have to worry about the price of admission."

Catherine cocked'er head.

Tracy pulled'er hand away. "You see..." And pulled'erself up the bed. "Since I know where it's at, I figure I'm kind of a guide, so to speak. And I figure a real professional doesn't do anything unless they're paid for it." And she straddled Catherine. "Don't you agree?"

Warm night. Tracy threaded'er hand between Catherine's sari and rested't on'er hip as they walked. She raised the candle'n'er other hand as they turned and passed into covered alleys that hid only smudged stars, as the moons'd already vanished'n the lateness of the night. Tight stairways. Up then down. And round under momentarily revealed stars. And curving up again. Above, a small archway glowed, flickered red then yellow then red... Silhouettes darted, flashed to, then away. And when they passed through, dancers whirled by nearnuf t'kiss. Overhead, the dome's metal-carbonfiber superstructure'd've reflected firelight and faintly revealed the dust-tinted translucence that'd've dimmed and blurred stars and rendered the night a fraction gray[†], reflected'n the water below, vast matrices that subdivided starry sky.

Spectators hugged the balcony's edge as the dancers whirled, expanded, contracted'n a ring round the fire as they twirled and flung their skirts so firelight flashed against their legs before they disappeared beneath contracting fabric waves and awaited the next step and turn as they rounded four chairs set backs t'the fire and the men who sat upon'em.

Catherine's heart beat with the music. And when't seemed nothing'd go faster, the music'd, and the dancers with't. Round round round round. Till when't all seemed not-sustainable by players and dancers alike—then pushed just a little further—

And stop.

Exhausted, sweat dripping from their faces, four young women fell'n the seated men's laps. And the rest, rivulets cascading down their arms t'drip from their fingers, retreated t'firelight's edge and

stood there as their chests heaved. And claps'd've swelled and burst
and cascaded up and down round'em.

Catherine breathed hard, as'f she'd danced as well.

The balcony's length'dn't've been judged'n the dark. But faint
music carried as'f from far away. Pinpricks, perhaps bonfires, seemed
forever'n the distance. As'f repeated infinitely.

The fire, the bodies. How'd'tn't've seemed as'f the world might
ignite then and there [...]

Black water rippled and reflected wavering stars as Brittney drew'n'er oar and laid't inside and beside'er, rippled again as she eased the anchor over the side. She slipped off'er seat and deeper into the hull. June already lay curled at the far end, head against'er pack.

Brittney reached for'er own pack and pulled't under'erself.

The boat gently drifted with the current, drew taut against the anchor line

and sometimes'n the night, because they faced away from one another, their

Water overflowed from one cistern t'another while 'is screen cast a ghost-glow over the rippling surface. It'd've taken 'is eyes a moment t'adjust whenever'e looked up. But something flashed and drew 'is attention back t'the screen. "God fucking damn." And the power indicator throbbed till the screen blanked and submerged the cisterns into darkness.

He ransacked 'is cargo shorts pockets for a flashlight so'e'd make 'is way through interlocked corridors and cubicalae and up helical or, perhaps, switchback stairs, t'emerge from a corridor into midday brightness. His stomach growled as'e entered the square and approached the blue-plastic tables and chairs that still remained'n their makeshift commissary.

Tracy glanced up, stuffed the rest of whatever she was eating into'er mouth before she wiped'er hand and fingered'er tablet again. A cord ran back from't t'where other phones pig-tailed into a powerstrip spider-array distended from charge controllers wired t'solar panels lashed t'a small balcony above. Zeb rooted the laptop's power adapter from one of 'is pockets. Liquid still remained'n a coffee pot and'e reached for a cup and half-filled't.

He scowled. "What the fuck is this shit?"

"Rooibos."

"Shit." And'e splattered red-brown liquid across paving stones and tossed the cup into a corner.

"You're a pig," Tracy said, without looking up from'er tablet, "you know that?"

No response.

"We could use your help up here, you know."

Hands'n'is pockets, he walked back toward the charging table.

"You've gotta live here too, you know."

"I got my fucking job."

"Ha. Mister History Teacher."

"Fuck you."

Her faced blanked. "Oh fucking damn it come on—" And she drew'er fingers across the tablet's screen and tapped't, depressed the power button with'er thumb. "Shit." Tube-metal legs scraped paving stones. "Shit shit shit shit." She dropped't'n a bucket set against a nearby wall, stood over't a moment with'er fingers interlocked across the back of'er neck. And when she looked up, she glanced at everything plugged into that spider-array. "This epoch's about to change," she said. "You'd better be ready."

"That why you're between the fucking queen bee's legs? Getting ready for the fucking glorious return of fucking despotism? Maybe you'll fuck your way into a high enough fucking position in the fucking harem you won't fucking starve to death—at least until the inevitable fucking revolution."

"Led by you, I suppose. A crank. A strung-out, half-assed, historiographer's nightmare."

"AT LEAST I'M FUCKING TRYING TO HOLD ONTO THE TRUTH."

"Take your fucking truth and shove it up your tight ass. Napoleon's about as much use here as fucking bug squat."

"Go lick the fucking queen bee's cunt and I'm sure it fucking won't matter a fuck to you anyway."

"You know what," she said, "for all your proud atheist stance, you're nothing but a fucking secularized render of seven thousand years worth of anti-body ideology."

"Fucking whore."

"Better than being an establishment whore in a rebel t-shirt."

"AT LEAST I HAVE THE TRUTH."

"Yeah," she said, and laughed. "Your little *audiences*." She turned and started across the square. "You ain't got a fucking clue about that either, do you?"

“WHAT THE FUCK’RE YOU TALKING ABOUT?”

She’dn’t pause as she passed through an archway. “You fucking figure it out.”

He'd tried t'brush off. But orange-red clung t'is jacket, welded t'is polished shoes, his pants legs, and'd seeped into'is shirt and combined with sweat into diffused stains that probably'd've gone all the way through t'is undershirt. So there was no reason for'mn't t'brush'is hands against'is pants before'e reached into the cabinet for a glass and turned on the faucet.

"You're filthy."

He turned, leaned against the counter and glanced at'er before'e tilted back'is head and drained the glass. "That's what happens when you go out in the country."

"Why in the world were you out there?" She set a silver tray on the counter, stacked with glasses'n which liquid residue clung down'n their rounded corners.

"The ladies must have been over."

"Yes," she said. "It was a rather pleasant afternoon."

"Recovered our status then?" Ron turned and set the glass on the tray with the rest. Orange-red mud streaked'ts sides. And'e looked down at'is hand, reached for a towel.

"Don't use that," she said. "Go upstairs and wash up."

"What are we eating tonight?"

"We're eating at the Jones's. Mary's invited us."

He shook'is head as'e walked toward the hall. "I think I'll bow out. Say I'm sick or something."

"You have to come."

He stopped'n the doorway. "Not so far as I know."

She looked at'm a moment, then turned t'attend the dirtied glasses. "You're going," she said.

He stood'n the doorway, silent.

"Let's have an understanding," she said. The faucet hissed into the stoppered sink. "You can do whatever you want out there. I don't care. Just so long as nobody knows. You can have whatever disgusting thing you want. So long as I get what I want." One-by-one, she moved the glasses into the water. "And Mary's invited us to dinner tonight and we're going to go." She lifted a dish rag. "We do have an understanding, don't we?"

"You know, Bea, you seem to be losing your subtleness in your old age. Might wanna watch out for that."

"Oh," she said. "I can be very subtle. In fact, I can be so subtle you probably wouldn't even know what I was talking about. But after all, we both have a chance to get exactly what we want, don't we?" She rinsed'er fingers. "And it would be sad if something had to happen to that, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Good." She inverted the last rinsed glass on a towel laid beside the sink. "Now, you get washed up. I promised Mary we'd be there at seven." She reached behind'erself t'dis-tie'er apron. "Oh, and when you have time," she said, "you need to give Josh a call. I want him to take care of our yard before Wednesday."

"Anything else?"

She'dn't look back at'm. "Not at the moment."

A little bit sore and a little bit stiff, she rolled over and climbed off the bed. She sighed. A slight crustiness peeled from'er skin as she rubbed the inside of'er leg. Her sari lay crumpled beside the bed and she lifted't t'wrap't lightly over'er shoulders.

Air burst from the fountain at the bottom of the stairs, precursor t'the jets soon t'follow as distant pumps forced water through stone-carved interlocks. She adjusted'er sari and squatted over the basin as water first pattered into't, intermixed with'er own and carried the collective away as she sighed.

It'dn't've yet been noon. Harsh, yellow sun peeked between buildings. And't'd've only been a relief t'pass into a covered alley or t'drop into a cool underground passage.

Optical illusion, then as now, made the square seem too large and hid the steps till she'd already started t'descend. She shielded'er face from the sun, but thankfully, the barrels on the roof below'd've'd t've been warm by then, even'f the black-stone cisterns'd yetn't been repaired. And she passed down'n among the columns, wound'er way absently betwixt bamboo screens and splashed through water pooled'n worn ruts and dark-mud footprints trailed after'er. She glanced back at their skeletal strangeness as she stopped beneath the shower head. She slipped off'er sari and hung't over a bamboo screen. Eyes closed, she reached and tugged the rope. And warmth cascaded over'er face, ran down'er and routed across the floor. She released't only t'rub'erself, used that damp, thin layer of grit that'd adhered t'er skin as an abrasive, before she tugged the rope and the nail-punched, blue-plastic showerhead spilled warm rivulets down'er body.

Finally, she sighed, released the rope and wiped water from'er face.

She waddled'er sari as she passed deeper amid the columns and she'd've near dried by the time she'd dropped't'n a wash bucket. Seemingly distracted, she'd've looked up'f something'd sloshed. Pamela'd've glanced at'er, turned'er face away, looked down into the wash bucket'n which she'd submerged'er arms t'er elbows. She removed'er arms t'adjust the towel wrapped round'er.

She cleared'er throat. "Everything got dirty before I realized it."

"It happens," Catherine said. She submerged'er own hands into tepid wash water, glanced over. "You look tired. Were you all night at the festival, too?"

Pamela seemed t'shake'er head, or maybe't'd just been a natural consequence of'er movements as she worked'n the wash bucket.

"I don't think I saw you."

Damp hair fell around Pamela's face, but she'dn't move t'sweep't back and droplets plopped from semi-curved ends into the wash water. "I wanted to..." This time she'd shake'er head. "But we're very busy right now. And..."

"Are you alright?"

"Huh?" Pamela looked up, blinked. "Oh. Yes. I'm sorry. It's just..." She shook'er head. "Never mind."

"Am I making you uncomfortable?"

"What?" Pamela shook'er head, but'dn't look up. "No."

"I could—"

"No, no."

For a while, only water slosh ate into the silence.

"It's gotten to seem...pointless."

"What?" Catherine looked up and across at'er.

Pamela paused, shook'er head, as'f she'd just realized she'd spoken aloud. Water sloshed. She took a breath. "I don't know," she said. "It used to be really exciting...at first. But then... Then it just became a reminder? I guess..."

"The festivals?"

Pamela nodded.

"A reminder of what?"

Pamela shook'er head. "Nothing." And she withdrew sopping fabric, wrung't over the floor so the water routed down carved grates

and she pulled't apart again t'hang't over a line strung between two columns.

"How's the gardening going?"

"Fine." She glanced down and adjusted'er towel before't'd peel away.

"And Troy?"

"Fine."

Catherine pulled'er sari from the washbucket, raised't as'f t'examine't. Rivulets cascaded over the slat bench and trickled down'er arms. Pamela sat on an empty bench. "Can I ask you something?"

Catherine let'er sari sink into the water. "Of course."

"Does... Does he... I've heard... I've heard mensometimes dothings with other men and..." She cleared'er throat, worked'er shoulders. "Does he... Is..."

Catherine looked around.

"I mean... Um..." Pamela shook'er head and looked at the floor.

Water dripped from Catherine's fingers as she walked over t'the bench and sat on the opposite end. "May I ask you a question?"

Pamela looked up.

"You've never..."

Pamela shook'er head.

Catherine nodded, glanced toward where puddles'd formed beneath Pamela's clothes on the line. "We've got some time," she said. And she leaned forward and glanced round. "Would you like to have a talk?"

She skimmed a vial through the water and peered through't as she capped't. Then she put't with the rest, in the pouch inside'er backpack. She glanced at June. "Bored yet?"

June shook'er head.

"Liar."

June's face heated, but she produced a faint smile.

"Does this branch end in one of the wells?"

"Nope," Brittney said. "Goes all the way to the ice fields." Brittney took up a paddle again and languidly pushed'em against the current and motioned for June t'bring'n the anchor. "We'll stop round the next bend. There's a chalk mark where I check the level."

"Can I help?"

"Yeah," Brittney said. "Keep an eye out for the hollipop."

"The what?"

"Big long scaly thing," Brittney said. "Two, three times longer than this boat. Spiked tail. Razorback fins. Six-inch-long needle-esque teeth. They can unhinge their jaw so they can swallow things larger than their heads."

"I've never—"

"WATCH OUT—" Brittney jerked back, pulled the paddle from the water, and pointed with't. "It's—"

But June'd already jerked'er arm from the hull and twisted. "Where?"

"Disappeared, I guess."

June looked up from the water. Her eyes narrowed. Brittney smiled. June'dn't.

"Oh, come on," Brittney said. "It was just a joke."

June scooted round t'face upstream.

"Look, I'm sorry."

"No, you're not."

"I am."

"Then why are you still smiling?"

"How do you know?"

June glanced over'er shoulder.

"Because you're cute when you get mad."

June looked back upstream. "You're just making fun of me."

"Alright," Brittney said. "I won't do it anymore. Promise."

"I don't believe you."

"Well, if you didn't trust me, why'd you want to come out here with me in the first place?"

"I didn't say I didn't trust you."

"You—"

"I just said I don't believe you right now." June looked out over the hull, at where ripples echoed away from where the prow wedged through the water. "There's not really anything that lives in the water, is there?"

"There isn't going to be much of *anything* living in this water. Not for a long time. At least, not this branch and anything downstream."

"That's bad, isn't it?"

"Depends," Brittney said. "Get ready to set the anchor."

Each house must've'd at least two circuits, it's the only way t'explain how anything'n a refrigerator'dn't've spoiled on Sundays. So besides the dis-shuttered windows—which the boys must've done late the day before—and f't'd'd such a thing, the only light'n the kitchen'd've come from the refrigerator when Rita momentarily opened't t'get the pie. It'd already been pre-proportioned when she removed the lid. "It's Cherry," she said as she took'er seat.

Crowded round the small table, they'd've required a couple folding chairs. Allison's'd've squeaked as she cut'er pie with'er fork. But the translucent gelatin core separated from the crust as she tried t'bring't t'er mouth.

"Things," Jack said, "should be quieting down this week." He chewed and'is mustache wavered as'is lips moved. "Or at least I think so. So I should start getting home a little earlier again. Then I can do a few more things around the house."

"That'll be good," Rita said. Gingerly, she brought'er fork toward'er mouth.

"Uncle Jack, what exactly do you do at the plant?"

The boys snickered. And their father eyed'em. "What do you find so funny?" Blank faces. "Well? I'd better not have to ask again."

One finally said, "She doesn't know much, does she?"

"Do you want to finish the rest of that pie?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then both of you had better be quiet."

He brought a bite of pie t'is mouth, chewed, swallowed. "I weld," he said. "We work on an assembly line. As a vehicle comes down the

conveyor, each of us has a specific job. I weld the secondary points on the front left lower side of sub frame A-2." Another bite.

"But they've been so busy these last few weeks," Rita said. "I don't know how he's found time to sleep."

"They're shipped now," he said.

"What was?" Allison said.

Uncle Jack shook his head. "Since you boys are done, you can go into the living room and sit."

As they pushed back their chairs, one after t'other said, "Thank you, mother. It was very good." And Rita nodded as they passed through the doorway.

Mary-Celleste looked at Allison. "Why don't you go have a seat, too."

Jack wiped his mustache as he rose, crumpled his napkin beside his plate. "I think I'll go to bed a little while." And he scooted back his chair.

"I'll wake you when it's time to go," Rita said.

"Better make it a little earlier this evening," he said. "I don't want to cut it close and have to worry about parking, like this morning."

Rita nodded.

He paused two steps from the doorway. "Did you tell them?"

Rita shook her head.

He glanced toward his sister. "Don't go out," he said. "There's a fine for anyone out unnecessarily on Sundays. Understand?"

"I don't guess I have anywhere else to be right now, anyway."

He looked at her a moment before turning and going through the living room.

"Well," Rita said, and seemed to try and smile. "We can just put the dishes by the sink. And I'll do them tomorrow morning."

Mary-Celleste looked across at her. "Is the water on?"

"Of...course," Rita said. "Why?"

"Just making sure," Mary-Celleste said.

“I’m sure you’ll agree,” she said, and motioned with’er fork. “There’s nothing quite like it.” She smiled. “But please, Councilman, do try some. I’m sure you’ll find it delightful.”

Ron poised’is fork over’is dessert dish. Pure mechanical.

“I must say I’m surprised.” Beatrice touched’er napkin t’the corner of’er mouth. “Where in the world did you find cherries this time of year?”

“Oh, well,” the woman said. “You just have to fall into these things, I guess. It was a real stroke of luck. Nancy, you know, my new cook, she just happened to run across someone who had a jar of preserves. Can you imagine? Well, I sent her out to snap it up right then and there.”

Her husband brushed’is mustache before’e set’is pipe stem between’is teeth. He nodded. “Yes.” And’e struck a match.

“We,” Beatrice said, after she’d taken another bite and touched’er napkin t’the corner of’er mouth, “are planning on getting a cook ourselves.” She glanced toward Ron. “Possibly even a maid.”

“I can’t recommend it enough,” the woman said. “I can’t tell you what it’s done for my time.” Her eyebrow arched as she looked across the table. “Councilman, you’ve hardly touched anything. Is there anything wrong?”

“No.” Ron absently set down’is fork.

“You’ll have to forgive him,” Beatrice said. “He’s spent all day driving out in the country. It takes it out of him.”

“Completely understand,” the man said round’is pipe stem. “Those long drives.” He motioned with’is pipe. “It wouldn’t be a bad idea if you got yourself a driver. Maybe even make it part of the

office. The head of the town council shouldn't have to worry about such things."

"You know," the woman said, "I never thought of it that way. But I do think you're right."

"I've managed fine so far."

The hostess waved'er hand. "Oh, but that's beside the point. Really, it's not about what you can or can't do. It's about what you *should* have to do. Isn't that right, dear?"

He nodded and replaced'is pipe between'is teeth.

"Of course," Beatrice said. "That's a lovely idea. Maybe someone should bring it up at the next council meeting."

"Yes," Ron said. "We can go into that right after we figure out what we're going to eat."

"Yes," the man said. "We did have to discuss something along those lines, didn't we?" And'e tapped'is pipe's stem t'is temple. "We were thinking of organizing some sort of potluck or something the other, weren't we?"

Beatrice cut'er eyes toward Ron.

"Something like that," he said.

“Ooooooh oooverrrr heeeerrre.” Mrs Brown’d’ve telescoped upward on’er skinny ankles and must’ve seemed t’momentarily bob’n the air as she stuck’er arm straight up and waved. “Ooover Heeerre.”

The steeple reflected a bloody sun.

Mrs Brown’s mouth warped into’er usual brocade smile. “Good I so *hoped* you would be early now there willll be plenty of time to introduce you to everyone I assume you have *not* met many people since you have been here have you?” And she swallowed Allison’s hands’n’er own. Mrs Brown laughed, turned’er brocade smile on Mary-Celleste. “Of course I willll have her back to you by the end of the evening I would *not* want you to think I was running off with her or anything.” And still smiling, she pulled Allison along behind’er before Mary-Celleste’d’ve’d time t’say anything.

Rita smiled, or at least appeared to. “I’m—I am, sure she—will get along well.” She nodded.

Jack nodded t’er as they went’n, said’e’d see’em later.

“This way,” Rita said, and took’er sister’n-law by the arm and led’er down the opposite hallway.

Allison and Mrs Brown’d’ve turned onto a stair, then along a white-plastered corridor, passed closed doors, Mrs Brown ahold of’er hand the whole time. “I am sure you are going to love meeting everyone they are all wanting to meet you I am sure they have heard so much about you and it *willll* be interesting for them to get to talk with someone from so far away it is this one right up here.” And she opened the door and beamed’er never-ceasing brocade smile. “Good evening girls we have a new visitor and I want you all to make her feel as welcome as you can everyone this is Allison.” And she raised Allison’s

hand'n'er own. "Of course I know that you *willlll* make her feel as welcome as she can be so since everyone is here I *willlll* just introduce you all around of course as I said this is Allison and this is Sarah and Kate and Sherry and Brandy and Jennifer and Jewells and Melinda and Joanne and Philomina." And she turned'er brocade smile upon Allison. "You can have a seat over there next to Kate I think that would be the perfect spot and I know everyone else thinks so."

Kate smiled, slid t'one side on an old twinseat.

"There we go friends already now I am just going to pop out for a minute I believe Mrs Frisby promised there would be some cookies and lemonade for later and I think I *willlll* just go see how that is coming along you girls take care for a little bit and make sure to make our new member feel welcome here."

Mrs Brown closed the door behind'erself.

"You think," Sherry said, "there will be any cookies left?" She glanced up from'er needlepoint with a faint smirk.

"Oh," Sarah said, but'dn't take'er eyes from'er cross-stitch and moved'er thimble thumb beneath'er hoop. "I am sure there will be exactly ten or so. Though, I will not hazard a guess as to how many Mrs Frisby will have actually made."

Faint laughs.

"Did you bring anything?" Kate said. She looked up from'er needlepoint.

Allison shook'er head. "I didn't know I was supposed to." She glanced over. "That's very pretty."

"It is alright," Kate said. She set't on the seat between'em and leaned forward t'pull a shoebox from beneath the twinseat. "Here. You can do something with this."

Allison grabbed a hoop and some fabric and arranged them'n'er lap and nodded, but said, "I don't have any idea what to do."

"It does not matter," Philomina said. A striped muffler snaked across t'other couch betwixt'er and Joanne and both worked knitting needles at their respective ends.

"Yes," Sarah said. "Idle hands and all that, you know."

Kate took up'er own work again. "Just do a few flowers or something."

"So you are," Brandy said. "You are from up north?"

Allison nodded as she moistened some blue cotton thread between'er lips and prepared t'thread a needle.

"How come..." Kate said, but she'dn't glance up from'er work as she spoke. "Why is it people from the north talk so...different?"

Sarah rolled'er eyes and shook'er head.

Allison paused. "I don't... I never thought about it." And at the moment she'd've probably been tentative bout glancing up from'er work and possibly seeing someone else looking.

Jewells cast a line across'er knitting needle. "What is it like up there?"

"I don't know," Allison said, eye still on the needle's. "I mean, it's not as big as this place, I can say that."

"The country," Sarah said.

"Did you have chickens?"

"No," Allison said. "I didn't live on a farm."

"Oh, I thought it was all farms up that way."

"You are so dense," Philomina said. "They have got a town up there. Otherwise, where would the train stop?"

"Wait a minute." And Jewells looked up. "Is that the town that burnt down?"

T'other girl's heads went up. Maybe the hair on the back of Allison's neck prickled. "We...did have a fire," she said. "But that was a long time ago. I was only a baby when it happened."

"Did you ever see...her?"

"Shut up, Brandy," Philomina said. She shook'er head as she looked down at'er work. "She just said she would have been too young to remember back that far."

"I saw her," Sherry said.

"You have not."

"I did too."

"Where?"

"On the train, when me and mother and father went to visit my aunt Stella one time."

"Liar."

"I saw her," Sherry said. "She was right on the train."

"And how do you know it was her?" Kate glanced up from'er work. "And how did she get on the train if she had no clothes on?"

"She had clothes on."

"Ha," Kate said. "Then it could *not* have been her."

"My mother says she saw her," Brandy said. "It was—"

"Well I for one," Melinda said. "I for one think the whole thing is a made-up, anyway. Nobody could be that way in real life."

"But the reverend..." Jewells said.

"I did not mean—"

"You said she was not real."

"I did not. I just—just said somebody could not be all the things they say."

Sarah looked up from the depths of a high-backed chair "And what do you think, Aaaallison?"

"I...don't know."

One girl whispered something t'Melinda. And Melinda glanced at Allison.

"What I mean is—"

"Are you going to tell?" Melinda said.

Allison glanced at'er. "Tell what?"

"Of course," Sarah said, "if you repeated anything said here to Mrs Brown—or anyone else—there would be all of us against you. We could say you were trying to poison our minds, if we had to."

"I...wouldn't tell...anything."

Sarah nodded. "Good."

Kate's expression'd softened with the rests' and she said, "So what do you do for fun up north?"

"I don't know," Allison said. "The usual things, I guess. Sewing. Knitting. I have some water colors. Books."

"What do you read?"

Allison shook'er head. "Nothing," she said. "Nothing special. Just whatever, you know."

"Really?" Sarah said. She glanced up and Allison looked down and tried t'focus on'er needlework.

Kate looked over. "Maybe—"

"Is the floor shaking?"

Laughter sublimated t'smiles so when Mrs Brown backed into the room and turned with a foil-covered plate'n one hand and a pitcher'n t'other'er brocade smile responded'n kind. "Now see I

knew everyone would be getting along just dandy and that you would welcome Allison here just the way as if you had known her your whole lives and I have got a treat we have got some lemonade and all of you have each a cookie.”

And all but Allison’d’ve’d t’smile afresh t’contain’emselves.

[“Bon jour.”]

She'd stood there with'er arms folded over'er chest as'f cold for who knows how long and glanced over'er shoulder as Zilog walked up along the wall. Below, water reflected the city and crater's edge'n that way which makes't seem creation's folding back'n onto itself.

Zilog stopped, hands'n'is pockets, and looked at't with'er. Dome material slightly foxed the distant landscape. And maybe't'd've seemed as'f they looked up from inside a giant blister at diluted sky and an anti-glare-coated sun.

[“Une ampoule,”] he said, seemingly t'mself.

“Hm?”

He shook'is head. [“Ça va?”]

“Yes,” she said, after a moment. “It's a day.”

Headlights flared as cars backed from their spaces and meandered round pedestrians toward the street. Rita said, "I—I am sure she—will—be along any minute." But Mary-Celleste still scanned the parking lot. Rita motioned.

Coming outa the church, Allison raised'er hand after she'd finished placing'er bonnet. "Mother, this's Sarah Hoyle."

"Nice to meet you, Mrs Holdfast."

Mary-Celleste nodded.

Sarah smiled. "Mr and Mrs Moore. How are you this evening?" As she'd emerged from the church, she'd slipped'er scarf over'er head and smoothed't as she stood there.

Jack nodded. "Well. How's your father?"

"Oh, he is fine. Mother and father are somewhere around." But she'dn't make any motion t'look for'em.

"I hope everyone's—everyone has been getting along well," Rita said, and looked at Allison.

"Oh, wonderfully." Sarah still smiled. "In fact, I wanted to come out here and ask you—"—and she turned t'Mary-Celleste—"—if it would be alright if Allison came over and stayed at our house tonight."

"That sounds like such a lovely idea," Rita said.

Jack nodded, but said, "I'll need to know what your father says about it first."

"Oh, I am sure it will be no problem." She looked over the crowd, rose t'tiptoe and waved. And Jack and Rita glanced over their shoulders as a couple approached.

"Moore," Mr Hoyle said, and nodded. His wife smiled, stood there ahold of 'er arm.

"Daddy, this is Allison. Can she come over with the rest of the girls tonight? I already told her it would be alright."

Mr Hoyle glanced over at Allison.

"My niece," Jack said.

Mr Hoyle nodded. "Yes, I heard something about that. And you must be the sister, then."

"Yes," Jack said. "My sister, Mrs Holdfast."

Mrs Hoyle nodded. "It is nice to be able to finally meet you. They must have had you hidden away somewhere."

"It's—it has been hard to get out," Rita said. "These last few days—"

"Well, we should remedy that. The two of you should come by the house tomorrow. We will be having a small sort of informal get-together. You know, some of the wives of the A-line and such."

"Oh, we will be sure to be there."

"Good," Mrs Hoyle said. Then she looked at Mary-Celleste. "I have no doubt you can regale us with some quite interesting tales of our neighbors up north."

"So can she come? Please, daddy."

"If that is alright with everyone else."

"I cannot see why it would not be." His wife smiled.

Rita nodded. "It sounds to be a marvelous idea. And we can pick her up when we come by tomorrow."

"You see," Mrs Hoyle said. "Everything works out."

"Maybe..." Rita said. "We could go home and get some clothes. Or whatever she needs—"

"Oh, that will be alright," Sarah said. "We can loan her anything she needs. It is just one night, after all." And she turned t'er father. "She can come with us now, right? She can ride home with us."

"I'm sorry," Mary-Celleste said. "It just seems a little sudden—"

"What she means," Rita said, "is—"

But Mrs Hoyle motioned with'er hand. "Perfectly understandable. But I can assure you we will take good care of her."

"And besides," Rita said, and seemed t' try and smile more as she glanced at'er sister'n-law, "it's—it is—only one night."

“Yes,” Jack said. “you two take care and have fun.”

Sarah tugged Allison’s arm. “Come on. The car is over here.”

Mrs Hoyle glanced over’er shoulder as the pair moved toward a parked car. “And we look forward to seeing you tomorrow.” She turned toward Mary-Celleste. “I am sure we will have many interesting things to talk about.”

Mr Hoyle nodded.

His wife smiled. “Better be going, dear. We do not want to get a ticket, do we.” And she looked over’er shoulder after they’d turned. “We look forward to seeing you both tomorrow.”

Rita nodded. “We’ll—we will—be there.”

The boat drifted at anchor'n darkness.

June lay on'er back, looked up at the woven roof. "It's too bad you can't take the roof off to be able to see the stars."

Brittney looked up at the same. "I guess you can take the roof off and cut it down into screens for a toilet stall."

The boat faintly undulated as June shifted.

"You still there?" Brittney said. "June." After a moment, she stretched and prodded June's bare foot. "June."

"Stop making fun of me." She prodded back with'er toes.

Brittney parried, hooked'er foot on June's ankle. "I'm just pickin'."

"You're being mean." And she pulled'er foot away and thwapped't against Brittney's.

"Ow."

"Did I hurt you?"

"Who's being mean now?"

"I'm...sorry," June said.

The boat rocked as Brittney shifted'n the dark and moved up t'lay beside'er. "You take everything too seriously."

June'dn't reply.

A whisper: "Are you going to share your pack?"

They drove into two-tone night.

"You'll really like the ladies," Rita said. In the front passenger seat, she clutched'er bag on'er lap. "And I'm sure Allison is going to have a wonderful time. She'll get to meet all the girls. There'll be lots of friends. You'll see, tomorrow. Isn't that right, Jack?"

He nodded.

"Yes," Rita said. "And of course, you'll get along with the ladies quite well, I'm sure." She stared straight ahead as she talked. "And did you see how enthusiastic the Hoyle's daughter was? That will really mean alot."

Jack nodded.

Mary-Celleste looked out the window into blue-black night, same as she'd since they'd left the church parking lot. "I may not go tomorrow. I think I feel sick."

"Oh, no." Rita turned, looked over'er shoulder. "You can't do that."

Jack's eyes flitted toward the rearview mirror.

"Besides," Rita said, "I'm sure you'll feel fine by tomorrow. If you sleep on it—"

"And I may feel worse."

Rita blinked as they passed through the luminescent wash from a cobalt streetlamp.

"But everything's so perfect. I'm sure if you—I can give you something when we get home."

"I don't think it's that kind of illness," Jack said. And Rita turned t'look at'is profile, turned, again, t'er sister'n-law.

"But everything's working out so well."

Mary-Celleste looked away from the window. "How?"

"Well... If everybody gets along... If everybody gets along, only good things can happen, right? And if the Hoyles—"

"It's very important that everyone get along," Jack said. And he glanced into the rearview mirror again.

"Yes," Rita said, and nodded. "I'm sure this is just the start of it. If the Hoyles' daughter likes Allison... That's something."

Mary-Celleste spoke slowly, deliberately. "How many times have you been invited to see these ladies since you've been here?"

Somewhere'n the shadowlands between streetlamps, Rita lost her pained smile.

"So, really, you're selling my daughter to get yourselves ahead."

The breaks faintly whined. And Rita caught herself and looked over at her husband as he turned and peered across the seat. "You think you know everything, don't you."

"You could tell me I'm wrong."

A window lit and yellow light diffused across a sidewalk and through the driver side windows. "This is reality," he said, and turned and plied the gas. "And you have to live in it just like we do."

Rita regained her seat, bag'n her lap again. "Don't worry," she said. "I'm sure you'll really like the ladies." She paused. "You'll—*will* like the ladies."

Streetlamps'd just started t'light when'e closed the front door. Mechanically, he worked'is tie and opened'is collar as'e followed'is nose toward the kitchen. "Whatever it is, Bea, it—" He paused'n the doorway.

The woman at the stove looked over'er shoulder and nodded. "Councilman."

He nodded'n kind. "What—" But paused. "Aren't you Gerald Palmer's daughter. L...Laura, isn't it?"

"No, I'm her cousin."

He paused.

"Esmerelde."

He paused. "Oh." He nodded t'himself. "Sorry."

"Oh, it's okay. Everyone does say we look alot alike."

"Right..." He glanced round the kitchen. "This is my house. Right?"

She partways smiled. "Of course it is, Councilman."

"Right." He paused. "Would you...happen to know where my wife is?"

"You might try the living room."

"T-thank you." But'e paused as'e turned and went into the hall. "Whatever it is...it smells good."

She smiled.

He must've been too tired and simply'ven't seen'er when'e passed, because when'e backtracked t'the living room, there she sat on the twinseat, small wicker basket on the cushion beside'er filled with thread spools as she rested a cross-stitch hoop'n'er lap. She looked up. "You're home late."

"Things got busy." He stood'n the doorway, hands still'n'is pockets. "And I went to see Mrs Coreman on the way home."

Beatrice took up'er hoop and needle again. "Yes, I'm sure you did." And she pulled the thread till the knotted end stuck. "Anyway, dinner should be ready in just a little bit."

"I take it we have a cook."

"Yes," Beatrice said. "She came very highly recommended by Mrs Sanders."

"And is she staying here?"

"Of course not. She has an apartment, or whatever it is."

"And is someone coming to pick her up later?"

"I have no idea. Why in the world would you ask?"

"It's late. And if she's staying in those apartments on Backstreet... it's a long walk."

"I'm sure she has something arranged."

"But you don't know."

"That's none of my business," she said. "It's nothing to do with me."

"Oh."

She placed'er hoop'n'er lap, looked up at'm. "And what do you mean by that?"

"Just trying to figure out how things stand."

"We've already had this discussion," she said. "And I don't see the point in repeating it."

He might've replied, but instead'd've looked over'is shoulder as footsteps approached from down the hall. "Dinner's ready, ma'am."

"Good." And Beatrice set'er hoop on the thread basket. "Set the table. Mr Lindercott and I will be down in a bit."

"Yes, ma'am." And she turned and disappeared into the kitchen.

Beatrice stood, smoothed'er dress and picked-free an errant thread and dropped't on'er cross-stitch. "Well," she said. "Go on. You can't expect to eat dinner looking like that."

He glanced down at'is wear-wrinkled suit.

"At least change your shirt." She added, "And your pants."

"We're eating here alone, Bea."

"You're going to have to learn to observe *some* propriety, you know," she said as she passed'm and mounted the stairs. She paused

partway up and looked down at'm. "Sometimes, I don't think you have ever taken your position in the community seriously."

"I guess not."

"There's a certain amount of integrity you have to uphold."

"You too, I should imagine."

She shook'er head. "Come up and get changed so we can eat. We're not going to discuss this anymore tonight."

"Whatever you say."

"Really—" She leaned over the railing just enough t'look down the hall toward the kitchen. In a lower voice: "Sometimes I don't know how you manage anything." A few more steps and she disappeared onto the second floor.

Ahold of the railing as'e mounted the stairs, maybe'e said t'mself, "Sometimes, I don't know, either."

“You’re the one who took off to the socket,” Britt said. She paddled on.

“Come on.” And Sarah took Allison’s hand and pulled’er from the car almost as soon as they’d entered the garage. If a light’d been left on’n the kitchen, there’d’ve been no need t’grope’n the dark. For a moment, as Sarah pulled’er along, Allison must’ve been perplexed at already knowing the house so well and at how’t’d’ve been all wrong. Her shoes clopped across linoleum and thudded dully on living room carpet and the same on the steps. And whisked through’t all as fast as she was, she’d’ve only been left with a vague impression of’t being the same but somehow just *that much* better than Uncle Jack’s house. And after Sarah pushed-open’er bedroom door and reached’er arm into the darkness for the light switch, Allison must’ve triedn’t t’gasp as the overhead bulb flashed on.

“Of course,” Sarah said, “the first thing we have to do is find something for you to sleep in.” And she finally released Allison’s hand and crossed the room and tugged a dresser drawer. “Do you mind things with blue flowers?” She raised a nightgown that dis-furled t’the floor. “Aunt May got it for me but I hate it. But I think it will fit you just fine.” She laid’t across the bed. “What else?” And she turned round t’look over the room, but finally focused on Allison. “Is there a problem?”

“Is this all...yours?”

“Huh? Of course it is. You—”

But a car door slammed below. And Sarah’d’ve tugged aside a discretely unfastened, heavy curtain and’d’ve looked down on the street. “Here they are—” But Allison’d’ve only just’d time t’turn toward the cacophony that rose from downstairs and t’step aside before they poured through the doorway. Mrs Hoyle smiled as she brought

up the rear, pillows stacked t'er nose, Sarah, just before, discretely repositioning the curtain so't still appeared not-movable.

"If you need anything, just ask, dear."

"We will, mother."

And with a smile and a nod, Mrs Hoyle closed the door behind'er-self.

Of those young women from the church basement, only Brandy and Kate and Sherry, or maybe, Philomina, would've come. And their sleeping bags'd've been laid down with such casual certitude, it'dn't've been anything but familiar routine.

"Here," Sarah said, and held the blue-flower-print nightgown. "You change first. The bathroom is at the end of the hall."

Allison'dn't say she knew that, but stood there a moment with the offered clothing'n-hand.

"Well," Sarah said. "Go on."

Finally, she moved. And muted conversation flurried behind'er. And she might've even've half-turned t'try and catch some of't as she continued toward the end of the hall. And even though she'dn't've'd to, when she gripped the brass knob, she might've worried she'd gotten the wrong door, that something different lay beyond'n *that* house. But like everything downstairs, it'd've only been the same and different. And when she groped for the light switch, it only'd've been'n the same place. So light splattered over white porcelain and white-blue-patterned linoleum or tile and she looked round a moment before she stepped'n and closed the door.

Piling the nightgown on the toilet lid, she started t'disrobe. She turned toward the mirror.

She'd've scowled.

Something bout the layers and layers of underclothes...

Knock. "Why are you taking so long in there?"

Allison glanced toward the closed door. "Sorry." She looked round for the nightgown. "I'll be out in just a minute." She slipped the nightgown over'er head. The sleeves'd've gone past'er hands. It'd've been more total fabric than she'd'd on before. And she crouched and scooped'er clothes into'er arms, grabbed'er shoes with'er fingers. So she'd t'contort'er whole body t'turn the doorknob.

Sarah stood there. "What took you so long?"

"Sorry," Allison said.

"Well, come on. We are just about to start."

And as soon as they were both through the doorway, Brandy or Kate'd've squeezed by, bedclothes folded'n'er arms. Sarah pointed t'the dresser, and by the time Allison'd've deposited'er clothes there and turned, Brandy or Philomina'd've returned and Kate or Philomina'd disappeared. Then, at some point as Allison'd've looked round the room, Sarah'd've appeared'n a high-lace-collared, pink-white nightgown and lacework fringe'd've drooped over'er hands as she grasped the doorknob.

"Here," she said t'Allison. "Sit on the bed."

Allison stared at multi-pink patchwork and finally settled at the foot of the comforter. The dolls mounded at the far end shifted and their eyelids faintly bobbed.

"First," Sarah said, "we have to find out a few things."

"Yes," Brandy said. "Tell us what up north is like."

Allison glanced round at t'others, seemed t'think a moment, then shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, what do you want to know?"

"Are you really from the town that burnt down?"

"Well...there was a fire," Allison said. "But only part of it burnt down."

"So you really are from the same place as *her*."

"I guess," Allison said. "But that was a long time ago."

"Is it true," Philomina said, "that, all those people she killed, nothing grows on their graves?"

"Or," Brandy said, "that policeman's family—did they all get cursed, and not just him? Did the mother really get her mouth sewn shut?"

"And the wife turned really old and withered up, like when Deirdre looked in the mirror and—"

But Brandy'd've waved for'er t'b'quiet. "But he was the one she hexed and she killed off everybody when he ran away from her, right?"

"That was something else," Kate said. "You have everything all confused."

"No, I do not. I—"

"You do, too. Just confusing things with that one about—"

"I am not."

"She is," Sherry said, and she'd've glanced at Philomina if she'd been there. "Right?"

And Philomina'd've nodded if she'd been there.

"Yes, you have it all mixed up with that one where Veranda meets the man who finds a castle in his basement and—"

"Do you..." Allison's breath caught. "Do you mean *The Underground Palace*?"

T'other girl's must've half-forgotten she'd been there. And they'd've turned with narrowed eyes.

"Do you know what that is?"

"Well, I..." Allison's face heated.

"Well?" Sarah said. And she rested'er hand on the bed so'er night-gown's ruffled sleeve concealed'er fingers.

"I..."

"That is," Sarah said, "are you the right sort?"

"The right sort?"

"Yes. The *right* sort."

"I don't understand."

Sarah motioned'er head and Brandy stole toward the door, opened't just enough t'peek into the hallway, then closed't again, nodded.

"A secret," Kate said. "We—"

But Sarah raised a hand for silence. Fixedly, she looked down at Allison. "So what is *The Underground Palace*?"

Allison shook'er head.

"What if we went and told everyone?" Sarah said. "What if we went and told everyone you had been reading *The Underground Palace*?"

"Plea—don't do that!"

"But why?" Sarah said. "If you don't know what it is, why are you so scared everyone else will find out?"

Allison lowered'er head.

"So do you know what it is?"

Allison nodded.

"So what do you think?" Sarah said. "Give us your review."

But Allison'd only shake'er head.

“Come on,” Sarah said. “What was your favorite part?”

Allison’s face’d’ve burnt.

“What about,” Philomina said, “when she finds the door behind the tapestry and—”

“Shut up,” Brandy said. “*We* all know *your* favorite part.”

“You shut up.”

“Everybody be quiet,” Sarah said. She looked at Allison. “If you tell anyone about this, no one will believe you. And we can always say you were the one who came to us. Understand?”

Allison’dn’t’ve nodded, but she’dn’t’ve shaken’er head, either.

“So I guess the only question that remains is do you want to be a member of our club?”

Allison’s tongue rasped along’er desiccated mouth. “Club?”

“More of a library,” Kate said.

“Do you still have a copy of *The Underground Palace*?”

Allison shook’er head.

“You can borrow it if you want,” Sarah said. “That is, if you want to be a member of the club.”

“I still...” Allison tried t’swallow. “... don’t understand.”

Sarah nodded t’one of t’others. “Show her.” And Sherry’d’ve knelt beside the bed and produced a cardboard box from underneath, worked-apart interlocked flaps, removed odds and ends t’get down t’bottom, then wedged’er fingers’n t’remove that. Then she’d’ve offered Allison a collected stack of pages and the corners of the first few sheets’d’ve been warped and curling back onto’emselves. Foxed edges’d’ve fuzzed from being thumbbed.

“You still have not told us what your favorite part is.”

“So...have you been out boating with anyone since I’ve been gone?”

"How is the soup?"

"What?"

"I said, how is the soup?"

"Fine, I guess... Very good, actually."

"Mrs Greene has recommended someone as a maid. She'll be here Monday morning. I guess we'll just have to make do until then." She smiled faintly before she sipped another spoonful.

"I'm sure we can manage."

Kitchen sounds.

"Why are you so distracted this evening?"

He looked up from 'is bowl, spoon limp between 'is fingers. "It used to be," he said, "everyone ate together."

She touched 'er napkin t' the corner of 'er mouth, shook 'er head. "What are you talking about? We're both here."

"We are? Then who do I hear in the kitchen?"

"She is a little loud, isn't she. I'll have to have a talk with her about that."

"Is she just supposed to sit quietly while we eat?"

"You just can't accept the way things are, can you?"

"The way things are?"

"Yes," she said. "The way things are."

"Oh. Yet when you go to church it's all about how things should be and tradition."

"T—"

"So, I'm curious—which is it? Do things need to change or do they need to stay the same?"

She laid'er napkin by'er plate. "Some things," she said, "will stay the same until they change."

"I see." He returned'is spoon t's place among other cutlery. "I just thought since my mother, my grandmother, my great grandmother—they all managed, so it had to have been a reasonably stable kind of way of life."

"Things change." She glanced toward the kitchen door. Her voice lowered. "And we're not going to discuss this anymore. You'll have to learn to keep your voice in check."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Anyway," she said. "You should eat your soup before it gets cold."

He pushed back'is chair. "I think I've had enough for tonight. I think I'll take a short walk."

"It's dark."

"Things can be pretty at night. They can look completely different than they do in the day."

"Where are you going?"

"Just round."

"I'm sure."

"And I'm sure you're sure." He stood. "In fact, I'm sure you know everything, anyway, so I don't know why you bother to ask me. Maybe you can tell me where I'm going."

She glanced toward the kitchen door. "Well, don't stay out too late, dear." She added, "You should probably take your keys. You wouldn't want to get accidentally locked out."

"No," he said. But'is fingers already played over'em'n'is pocket.

“Did you miss me?”

(Another?) Night:

He stepped out under the porchlight, paused a moment t'eye cobalt-lit streets. A tarp-covered truck passed, lights off. He watched't turn at the intersection.

She hauled up the depth gauge and dropped wet line and counter-weight into the hull. "Got that?"

June nodded and scribbled into a small field notebook balanced on'er knee. "Got it." She sat there and rustled back and forth through pages as Brittney hauled'n anchor and started t'paddle again. "Could it be seasonal?"

"If anything, it should be higher this time of year." She leaned over the hull and looked past the thatched roof and the sun struck'er face. "Be nice if we still had satellite telemetry."

June glanced over'er shoulder, upstream. "How far are we going to go?"

"Just to the next fork. Not much farther. We might even get there before dark if you'd help paddle."

June's face burned. "Sorry." And she reached for a paddle.

"You don't have to take everything so seriously, you know?"

"I'm just trying not to get in the way."

"You're not in the way."

June shifted round and struck the paddle blade t'water.

"Watch it—" Droplets splattered inside the hull.

June drew the paddle back and laid't across'er lap. "I'm not much good at this."

"No," Brittney said.

"Sorry."

"Stop apologizing."

June's shoulders slumped. And Brittney lost the remainder of'er smile.

She paddled a long time'n silence.

"Why," Brittney said, "did you want to come up here in the first place?"

June sighed. "I don't know." She looked out over the water, up canyon walls. "I guess I thought maybe it'd tell me something."

“About what?”

June shook'er head. “Dad... I guess I'm just wondering why people make anything.” She shifted, looked upriver. “If you think about it, I mean, all of this was made. Everything around, even when it doesn't look like it, has been constructed.” She straightened. “What does that mean?”

Brittney shrugged.

“Don't you care?”

“From what I've ever seen,” Brittney said as she paddled. “From what I've ever seen, people get pissed when everything's meaningless. And they get pissed when everything has a purpose that isn't them. So...” Shrug.

“But what about history?”

“What about it?”

“Don't you ever wonder about how things came to be the way they are?” June looked back.

Brittney shook'er head. “Nope.”

“Oh.”

“I prefer to concentrate on where I'm at, not where someone else's been.”

She paddled'n silence.

After a while Brittney said, “Is that the only reason you came out here, history?”

“Well... I guess. Since I came back... I wanted to do something with you. You know... We haven't done anything together in a long time.”

June paused and Brittney paddled'n the following silence.

Finally, Brittney said, “Why don't you tell me what you find so interesting about history.”

And as June turned, something'd've settled over or into'er face. “It's just, you know, how everything leads up to the moment. The Now. I mean, just think about all the ways things could've gone. Or think about the way something *only* could've gone. And you have to wonder, is *anything* changeable? We think we have so many choices around us. And how much of the past *could've* been different? And if it *couldn't've* what does that mean for us now?” And as she continued, her hands burst with small, precise gestures. And all shyness and

not-certainty must've seemed t've evaporated and left mostly fine-tuned, passionate intention.

"I..." A shy smile. "Sorry," she said. "I can get...carried away sometimes."

Brittney smiled. "Haven't changed a bit."

But June just shook'er head.

Brittney motioned. "Fork's just ahead."

Compulsively, June glanced over'er shoulder. "What's that?"

"Don't know."

"It's some kind of...boat, isn't it?"

"Raft." Brittney pulled'n'er paddle. "Hand me my bag." And when June did, she dug out'er battered old binoculars, the ones with lenses remaining only on one side. "Definitely a raft. Looks lashed together overtop old barrels."

"Who?" June turned on'er seat.

"No idea."

"See anybody?"

"Nope."

"They may've drowned."

"Maybe." Brittney dropped the binoculars on'er bag, took up'er paddle again. "I guess we'll find out."

"Is it safe?" June glanced back over'er shoulder.

"We'll find out." Brittney kicked'er pack t'one side. "Maybe you should move back to this end. Bring the paddle."

Ahead, the raft floated seemingly at anchor against the far canyon wall. Brittney paddled'em into the wider area where the river divided multi-ways. Atop the boards tied over lashed barrels, a lopsided tarpaulin tent wobbled'n the breeze. A tarp flap fluttered.

Britt paddled t'maintain a steady position afloat amidst the widest section. "Anybody there?" She waited. "ANYBODY THERE?"

June hunkered down. "I don't like this."

But Britt watched the raft. "IS THERE ANYBODY THERE?"

A dirty hand shoved from beneath the tarp and jerked't aside. The raft bobbed as men eased out low along cord-lashed planks.

"Who?" One squatted on the raft's edge t'keep balanced and'is sharp eyes peered from deep within'is tangled hair and beard.

"I know who I am," Britt called. "Who're you?"

T'other two, as dirt-smeared and hirsute as the first, shifted and the raft bobbed. The one glanced at'em and barked something, then turned toward Britt. "You from?"

"What?"

"You from?"

"What the fuck's that mean?"

"I think," June whispered. "I think he's trying to ask where you're from." And she glanced toward where'e crouched on the raft.

"Depends who's asking," Britt called. "Where you from?" She paddled t'keep the boat acenter the forks.

June nudged'er. "You shouldn't be so flippant. He might—"

"North."

"That's a direction," Britt said. "Not a place." And June nudged'er again.

"Both," he called, voice hoarse. "All way."

"All way? You mean the pole?"

He nodded.

"You floated all the way down here from the pole on that thing?"

Nodded again.

"Are you crazy or stupid?"

"Brittney!"

He laughed—bent forward and coughed over the water and the raft bobbed. "Called both."

"You got a name?"

Nodded.

"Well?"

The raft bobbed as'e coughed. "Yours mine."

"What?"

"I think," June said, "you give him your name, he gives you his."

Britt glanced at'er. Habitually, she'd squint one eye when flummoxed, but she'dn't squint then. "Brittney. Brittney Ellison."

"Jacobs Trent."

June gasped, tugged Brittney's sleeve, but she shrugged'er off.

"Where you headed?"

Trent shrugged. "Where?"

"You first this time."

Trent squatted there awhile, appeared t'look at nothing at all.

"There...used to be a town " And'e looked up at the canyon rim, worked'is jaw side-t'side. "... down...up north... Still?"

"North by the rail line?"

He nodded.

"Yeah, it's still there. Can't get to it by river, you know."

One of t'others grumbled, but Trent shook'is head. "You from?"

June nudged'er and Brittney said, "Nowhere in particular."

"Many nowhere particular?"

"Maybe."

"Find ourselves," Trent said.

June said, "I think—"

"I think I do too," Britt said. She called, "You could."

"You send world edge."

Britt paused and June'dn't seem t've any suggestion. "Could be," she said after a while.

"Maybe," he pointed, "there." He coughed. T'other two turned their matted manes'n'is direction. "Stars above below?"

June finally burst, "Are you the same Trent Jacobs who ran away because of the test?"

Something'n the depths of'is face must've shifted, a faint expression that'd've flickered away too quick.

But under'is sharp-eyed look, June went silent.

"Food nowhere particular? Water?" he called. And'is bearing'd've shifted'n some indefinable way.

"If you're not out for any harm," Britt called, "I would say you could get what you need."

"Command nowhere particular?"

"No one particular."

"Nathaniel," June said. And repeated louder, "Nathaniel Walcott and Catherine Stowe."

Trent paused, seemed t'concentrate, as'f t'bore'is eyes through'em. One of t'other men said something, but Trent ignored'm. "Spare?" he finally said.

"Sorry."

"Pass?"

"Be my guest."

Trent motioned t'the two men. But one growled and eyed the far

boat, said something. And Trent stood and the raft bobbed and bared its teeth amidst its tangle beard. And the man stared a moment, but dropped its eyes and turned away. Wielding long bamboo poles, they shoved the raft away from the wall, steered amid the channel.

“Don’t fall off the edge,” Brittney called.

And Trent looked back as they disappeared beyond the fork.

“Looks like he already has.” She elbowed June, who turned, blinked. “Set anchor.”

She oscillated between too fast and too slow, overcompensated and shifted from one t't'other and the resultant herky jerky motioned'dn't've been anything less than painful. And as'f t'add t'er issues, Rita carried a small covered pastry carrier'n both hands. Because of't, she'dn't adjust'er hat brim, so't sat low over'er eyes and she'd t'tilt back'er head.

"This's where line managers for the autoworks live," she said as they turned the corner.

Silently, Mary-Celleste glanced at façades that'd've been indistinguishable from any they'd yet passed. And't must've somehow added t'Rita's nervousness and continually prompted'er t'dredge up yet more idle conversation: "Mrs Rhinehart, there, grows chrysanthemums. You'll be able to see them at—her husband manages line F. They're the ones that make those large-type cars. You know? That's one of the prestige lines—of course, not that what Jack does on the A line is any less important. Trucks are needed all over the place. It's the first ever they started, you know. It goes all the way back to—well, nothing would be able to get done without them, would it?" She motioned with the pastry carrier. "That's it right up there." She stopped'n front of the cast-iron gate that barred the steps, glanced at Mary-Celleste, who worked the latch t'allow'er through. "Please," Rita said'n a low voice as they went up. "Please, remember—"

But the door opened and Mrs Hoyle pushed-open the screen. "Mrs Moore." Mrs Hoyle smiled. "Please, both of you, come in." And she held the screendoor for'em t'step into the foyer[†]. "The ladies are right through there if you want to take a seat."

Rita paused, pastry carrier'n-hand.

"Oh," Mrs Hoyle said. "There was no need to bring anything."

[†] See *Babylonia: Ancient Middle Eastern Mytho-Poetics, A New Framework*, chapter 13, for more information on variations in ark construction and dimensions throughout the history of Middle-Eastern flood myths.

She still smiled. "Let me just take that into the kitchen. You both go through."

Rita glanced at Mary-Celleste, seemed t' try and smile as she led the way into the living room. But halted just through the doorway and Mary-Celleste must've almost collided with'er.

Ladies looked up'n silence. And they'd've probably've looked up'n a way too indicative of'em having just looked down before the two of them'd entered, as'f t' appear faintly surprised, or at leastn't overly expectant. Rita must've tried t' produce a smile again as one of the ladies tried t' glance round'er.

"Please," Mrs Hoyle said as she appeared behind'em. "Please, have a seat."

Of the two free chairs, Rita, still tryna smile, took the nearest and glanced at Mary-Celleste as she crossed open space t' reach one of the only other available. All eyes on'er.

"Of course," Mrs Hoyle said. "Where are my manners?" She stood near Rita's chair. "This is Mrs Moore. Her husband works on Line A.

"And this is Mrs Holdfast. Who has just joined us from the north."

Saucers'n one hand, tea cup handles pinched with the fingers of t' other, they looked at Mary-Celleste.

"We were just discussing," Mrs Hoyle said, "how nice the weather has been." She moved toward'er seat. "Have you heard they are predicting a much lighter season than usual. They think we might not even have another storm at all for the rest of this year."

"Yes," Rita said, and nodded. "I've—I have—heard that."

"One can only pray, though," Mrs Hoyle said. "You agree, Jean?"

"Hm?" Her eyes'd've seemed t' bulge. "Yes, of course."

"Yes," Mrs Hoyle said. And she looked at Mary-Celleste. "Of course, they say the weather up north is worse. What do you think, Mrs Holdfast?—or is it okay if I call you Mary?"

"No," Mary-Celleste said. "About the weather, that is. Of course, I haven't been here very long, so I can't say from experience." Her voice held neutral. "I prefer Mary-Celleste, if you don't mind."

"Of course, dear. Of course, we want to do whatever we can to make you feel at ease here."

A woman'n a nearby high-backed wicker chair turned, cocked'er head as she spoke. "How are things up there?"

"As well as can be expected, I would say, all things considered."
A frizzled-haired woman nodded. "You can only expect so much."
"Least not the way it is these days," someone said.

"Out of that place, I mean," the frizzled-haired woman said.

"Though," Mrs Hoyle said, "I do not think we should castigate our neighbors so freely."

But t'other woman just shook'er head.

"Of course," Mrs Hoyle said t'Mary-Celleste, "you understand why that town can put some on edge. And of course, there is nothing personal meant by it."

"We do have to consider," an emaciated woman said from the couch, "that there was more than one thing to come out of it."

"Yes." Mrs Hoyle nodded. "There is a point." And she nodded t'the frizzled-haired woman, who'd've set down'er tea and'd've crossed'er arms and'd've rested'er elbows on'er wicker chair. "The same place also produced the fine reverend. And of course, where would we be without him?"

"And," the woman said, "if they would have gone up there and leveled the whole place fifty years ago, none of it would have happened and there would be no need of the good reverend."

"And if there had not been a storm last week, there would be no dust in my dishes," a woman said, and'er head listed side-t'side as'er words melodiously flowed one into the next as'f she weren't quite singing but weren't quiten't.

"Of course," Mrs Hoyle said, "you cannot change the past. But we can change the subject. I would not want Mrs Holdfast—excuse me, Mary-Celleste—to think all we ladies do is sit around and have theological debates."

"Do you ever..." And't really must've seemed as'f the woman's eyeballs'd pop and bounce across the carpet. "Do you ever see *her* up there?"

Silence.

Mary-Celleste looked at'er. "Who?"

Air sucked between the woman's teeth.

And Mrs Hoyle'd've pursed'er lips, cleared'er throat. But shoes clomped downstairs and almost everyone'd've glanced toward the doorway.

"Good afternoon, mother." Sarah lightly bowed'n the doorway. "Am I interrupting?"

Mrs Hoyle glanced at the bulged-eyed woman, lightly rested'er hand on'er chair, then turned, again, toward'er daughter. "No, dear. What do you need?"

"Oh, nothing, really," Sarah said. "We were just wondering if—"
But'er mother raised a hand. "Is Allison with you?"

Sarah nodded. And Mrs Hoyle leaned forward and glanced round'er and through the doorway. "Come in, dear." She motioned. "Everyone, this is Mrs—Mary-Celleste's—daughter, Allison."

Faintly, Allison nodded, glanced toward'er mother.

"Mother, may we go down to see if the new fliers have come?"

Mrs Hoyle looked up at'er daughter. "You know you cannot go down there alone."

"But Allison is going too."

"No. It is out of the question."

"But we want to see if there's anything about new dresses so we can find Allison something for the bazaar."

"I said no."

Standing there, arms limply at'er sides, Allison must've wished t'disappear, or at least t'drift back into the hallway.

"What if we went with Mrs Bocker?" Sarah said.

Mrs Hoyle sighed. "You can call over there and see if she has been out yet. But I do not want you nagging her."

Sarah smiled and turned and pushed by Allison into the hallway. One-sided conversation drifted'n over'er shoulder till Sarah's shoes resounded on carpet and hardwood. "She s—"

Mrs Hoyle raised a hand. "You may go. But you are not to leave Mrs Bocker. Do you understand?"

Sarah smiled, nodded.

"Then have a good time."

And Sarah grabbed Allison's arm and pulled'er round and into the hall so they'd collect their bonnets, but at least't got'er out from under the living room's collective gaze.

Mrs Hoyle shook'er head as the front door slammed. "I do not know what you can do about young people, sometimes."

"A challenge," the emaciated woman said.

“Strong will,” the fizzled-haired woman said. “It takes *strong* will to form them right.”

“Oh,” Mrs Hoyle said. “Very much agreed. Very much agreed.”

The singsong woman tilted’er head toward Mary-Celleste. “You have such a lovely daughter. Is she your only one?”

“Yes.”

“Well,” someone said. “I guess it is a relief to have to only had to ...I believe they go up a mountain, up there, do they not?”

Mary-Celleste nodded.

“Yes,” Mrs Hoyle said. But’er attention seemed concentrated on the bulged-eyed woman. “Well, there are plenty of things we are happy to get over and done, even if we like the results.” But by then, the bulged-eyed woman’d’ve slid t’couch’s edge. And Mrs Hoyle’d’ve cleared’er throat.

“I hope you do not mind,” Mrs Hoyle said t’Mary-Celleste. “Sarah is quite taken with your daughter. I am afraid it is a bit like having a new china doll. She is already dressing her up.” And she shook’er head and laughed. “But, of course, Mrs Bocker will be a more than adequate chaperon, I can assure you. And of course, I will make sure Richard drives her home later. I hope you will not mind.”

Light speckled the ground beneath a thatched awning. Chop. Chop. Chop.

“We’ll need to make up some more brine.”

“There’ll be enough to finish out this batch.”

Catherine set down the pitcher, lifted one of the smoothed stones that’d just fit through the crock’s mouth t’ensure all the cabbage sank beneath the waterline. She dried’er wet fingers on’er sari, then reached for twine and cloth and fixed the one with t’other round the crock’s lip.

“I had this...strange dream,” Pamela said.

“Something good?”

“I...don’t know.”

Catherine wiped’er fingers. “Do you want to share?”

“It was...” She gathered a couple handfuls of cabbage and deposited them’n another crock. “I dreamed that he—Troy—had built the gardens underground. You know, deep down there in what they call the catacombs. Where all those large rooms with...what do you call them? Vaulted ceilings? But anyway, he’d made all the gardens down there.”

“Must’ve been dark.”

“They...climbed up and down through the air vents—aren’t there air vents?—that go up through the ceilings, and installed mirrors. So the whole place was lighted.”

“There is some beautiful tilework down there,” Catherine said. “That would have to be a pretty sight.”

Pamela shrugged as she gathered chopped cabbage. “I guess. I don’t remember.”

“So why did they build the gardens down there?”

“I don’t remember.”

“At least we don’t have to haul everything up and down all those narrow, twisty steps.”

“I guess.”

“Though, it would be a nice place to go off alone with someone, wouldn’t it?”

“It was just a dream,” Pamela said. “That’s all.” She turned. “Could you bring the brine?”

The moons drifted overhead as'e made'is way between house and garage. Concrete paving stones formed islands bordered by thin grass and raw dirt. Yellow light filtered between kitchen curtains.

Bent over the stove, Esmerelde whirled. "Oh." She cleared'er throat. "I'm sorry, Councilman. I thought everyone had gone up and..."

"No," Ron said. "It's my fault." He allowed the screendoor t'close.

"I was just finishing." She glanced at the stove, laid'er rag down and reached behind t'dis-tie'er apron.

"How's your father?"

She took'er things from the coathanger behind the door. "The croup, again. Dust, you know. The doctor's tried. But there's... You know how it is."

"I'll come round and see him when I can."

"I'm sure he'd like that." She pushed-open the screendoor. "Councilman..." She looked over'er shoulder. "I really want to thank you for the job." She paused. "Well... Goodnight, Councilman."

"Goodnight."

Shadow dropped over the water as the sun passed beyond the canyon rim. Brittney hauled'n the depth gauge. June scribbled. "Got that?"

June nodded. And without a word, she closed the book, tied't, slipped't into'er bag.

Gear stowed, Brittney sat back and eyed'er. "What's the matter?"
"Nothing."

"Something's going on. You've barely said anything all afternoon."

"I said it was nothing." June leaned forward and opened'er bag.
"You want something to eat?"

Brittney shook'er head, watched as June nibbled something.

"What did I do?"

"Nothing."

"I did something."

June shook'er head.

"Fine." Britt reached for'er canteen.

Having put whatever she'd been eating away, or'ving finished't, June sat forward, elbows on'er knees, wrists crossed. "You shouldn't have let them go ahead."

Brittney swallowed, wiped'er mouth with the back of'er hand.
"What?"

"You shouldn't have let them go ahead. The raft."

"What was I supposed to do?"

June glanced toward the bottom of the hull. "I don't know." And she said, "What if they wait until we catch up with them and..."

Brittney offered the canteen, but June shook'er head. She recapped't. "Would you rather they were coming up behind us?"

“Well...no. But—”

“Well, they can only be in front or behind.”

“I know, but—”

“W—”

“Will you let me finish!”

Brittney raised'er hands. “Go right ahead.”

“I'm just saying we don't know what they might do.”

“What about that Trent guy?”

“Huh?”

“You knew him.”

“I said I knew *of* him. That doesn't mean I know anything about who he is now.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I'm not asking you to *do* anything. I'm just...” June looked at the thatched roof. “I don't know.”

“Well, we're done here,” Britt said, and leaned forward and flipped'er bag shut. “If we get started, we can make a few hours before dark.”

Cane'n one hand, parasol'n t'other, the woman probed forward with one then the next.

"Shouldn't we help her?" Allison whispered.

But Sarah shook'er head. She called, "Can we give you a hand, Mrs Bocker?"

"No, dear." And she probed forward with the parasol tip. "I am quite perfectly alright. I have been walking along this sidewalk every day except Sunday for ninety-one-and-some-odd years¹⁰⁴⁸ to get my mail, and I am not about to need any help now."

"You see," Sarah whispered.

So, with Sarah's arm entangling Allison's, they continued'n Mrs Bocker's wake. Traffic passed. And a truck swamped'em with a wind gust that rippled their skirts and threatened t'pull off their bonnets. "Hey now—" Mrs Bocker extended'er parasol toward the then distant truck. "You be more careful now." She shook'er head as she touched the parasol t'the sidewalk with a dull clack. "Drivers these days. I will tell you—"

"Thank you, Mrs Bocker," Sarah said. "But we were just going to go down to [???]."

"Now you look here," and she turned and brandished the parasol. "I will not have any gallivanting off to who knows where. You hear me? What would your mother say? No, Miss. No." And she parried the air with't as she spoke. "You are going to come right along with me to the post office. That is that."

"But—"

Horizontal parasol stroke. "Now, let us stop wasting time and get going."

Mrs Bocker turned and started down the sidewalk again. Sarah muttered.

“What was that, dear?”

“Nothing,” Sarah said. “I was just commenting on the weather.”

“Yes,” Mrs Bocker said. “The wind has come up a little.” She raised’er cane tip onto the post office’s first step. “Must probably be just one of those afternoon blow-ups. That is the way it is this time of year.” She eased onto a step. “Of course, we will start home as soon as possible. Just in case.” And she paused’n front of the doors t’collect’er breath. “Sarah, dear. Would you hold the door for me? Thank you, dear.”

Sarah rolled’er eyes at Allison as Mrs Bocker tap-clicked’er way’n. “Well,” Mrs Bocker said. “Do not let the dust in. You were not raised in a barn.”

“Yes, Mrs Bocker.”

Mrs Bocker moved ahead, along post-office-box-filled walls.

“Mrs Bocker, I am sure that moth—”

“Here we are.” And Mrs Bocker leaned’er cane against a post office box as she dug into’er pocketbook for a tiny key on a small chain. “Now, let us see. Oh, good. My catalog.” And she clicked the door shut and turned the key. “Here you go, dear.” And handed the catalog t’Allison. “Would you mind carrying these for me?”

Allison nodded, took’em.

“But,” Sarah said. “Really, we—”

“Better get going,” Mrs Bocker said, and reached for’er cane. “Never can tell what the wind might blow up.”

“But—”

“Hush now. You come along.”

A knock. And when'e'd looked up, Ruth'd poked'er head through the door. "I didn't know..." She opened the door farther. "You hadn't said anything about buzzing you for lunch today... So I didn't know."

His lower back twinged as'e straightened'n'is chair. "Thank you, Ruth."

Eyebrows furrowed, she closed the door.

He pushed back'is chair, rubbed an eye, stood, stretched, put'is hand t'is lower back, rubbed'is neck.

"Sorry," he said as'e went out.

Ruth looked up from'er desk, papers'n-hand. Her brows furrowed again. "Are you alright, Councilman?"

"Fine." He turned toward the coat closet. "Just had some things to do and didn't get to bed till late last night. And if I don't go to bed on time, I roll around till almost dawn or so." He removed'is jacket from the closet. "Don't worry about it. Just have to do better tonight."

He looked round the room as'e fitted the coat over'is shoulders, glanced beneath the desk, where short legs air-gapped the carpet, and Ruth's feet sat straight and flat on the floor'n the way all secretary's mothers demanded, just as their mothers'd and'd enforced with a ruler fwack t'the top of the head. "Baldur decided to stay home today?"

Ruth looked up. "Hm?" She blinked. "No," she said. "In fact, I don't know where he's gotten to." She shook'er head as she tamped a short stack of papers. "I went to let him in last night and he wasn't there. And he wasn't on the step this morning either." She shook'er head.

"Well, you know how they can be."

"Maybe so."

"Well, I'm sure he will be back round again. Probably just making the circuit." He took 'is hat from the closet. "Can I drive you down to the diner for lunch today?"

Absently, she shook'er head. "I need to finish a couple things first."

Ron said, "This is probably the point where I tell you not too work too hard."

"And this is where I tell you to go to lunch and take it easy a little while." She glanced up. "You do look like you could use it, Councilman. If I may say so."

He sighed. "I guess we just don't listen to each other, do we?"

"Maybe not."

"Well..." He opened the door. "If I see him I'll tell him to report back to the office at once."

"Who?"

"Baldur, of course," he said from the doorway. "Who else?"

She shook'er head. "Maybe you should go home and take a nap, Councilman. There's no meetings the rest of the day."

"Maybe I'll do that," he said. "See you, Ruth." And'e stopped and turned and pointed. "And remember not to work so hard."

She nodded as she scribbled on a notepad beside'er typewriter.

He paused on the outside steps. Sunlight broiled across the backs of 'is hands and neck and 'is cheeks. And'e shifted 'is hat brim down over 'is eyes.

Desiccated rubber squealed against dry glass as the wiper opened a fan shape'n the dust-impregnated windshield.

The service bell dinged as'e pulled over black tubing, but none appeared till'e'd climbed outa 'is car. The attendant scratched 'is head and replaced 'is sweat-stained peaked cap. "Fill it up, Councilman. Right away."

Ron nodded. "Just one ration."

"Yes, sir."

When'e pulled out, he sat at the intersection longer than necessary, glanced both ways, tapped 'is fingertips against the steering wheel. Then'e turned.

The car lurched as asphalt transitioned t'hardpan. Ahead, a bridge spanned a gully. Wind'd've routed the road beyond

t'b'indistinguishable from landscape. Dust plumed'n the rearview mirror. He pulled off the road, stopped. Heat-hazed mountains lay barely discernible through the dust-impregnated windshield, somehow infinitely distant. Maybe'e'dn't even try t'focus on'em as'e gripped the steering wheel.

"Why—"

—slammed the dash above the instrument panel. Dust motes swirled through the interior.

"Why—Why—Why—Why—"

Wood, steel, foam, fabric, springs, recoiled from assaults as'f they'dn't happened. More dust danced through sunlight. He coughed, hacked, shoved open the door and spat, looked down at dirt and'is spittle's faint moisture-dark mark on't before't'd vanished. Breath ragged, he straightened and scooted down onto the seat's edge, dis-buttoned'is pants, pulled'is semi-erection through'is underwear.

"You want me to do that?"

Sweat soaked into'is undershirt.

"Like that...like that...yeah, like that...you going to make me pay for this...huh...let's see you make me pay...yeah, I'm gonna pay...I'm gonna pay...yes...uh..."

—crunched forward...settled back again. After a while, he fished'is handkerchief from'is back pocket and cleaned'mself and redid'is pants, scrunched beneath the wheel and wiped the floorboard. He tossed't through the still open door.

A light breeze re-dusted the windshield.

The soft sounds of their feet went into the darkness, but the catacombs are too large for such delicate sounds t'echo.

"Are you sure it was supposed to be down here?" Pamela whispered.

Catherine raised'er candle. Footprints led through heavy dust and hinted at the minute tilework that might've lain beneath. "This way."

Such a feeble light never'd've hoped t'touch those vaulted ceilings. They crossed darkened void with barely a hint of up or down while the archway receded into blackness behind'em.

"There." Pamela pointed t'where'n a newly entered chamber a distant passageway glowed. Noise carried through't as they approached. Warm air forced over'em. Pamela paused, touched'er chest as'f t'control'er heart. Then Catherine took'er hand.

It must've seemed as'f they'd stepped inside the sun. Wax dribbled from candles stuffed'n recesses and cracks, splattered and caked where floor met wall. The vaulted ceiling writhed with light.

Sweat slicked their palms, but even'f Catherine'd wanted t'loose'er grip, Pamela'dn't've let'er. Drum beats barrummped through their chests. Perspiration trickled from their armpits, down their sides.

But't'd've been nothing'n comparison t'the dancers, who turned, whirled, women whose sheen-wet hair spiraled out and droplets cast from their bodies burst into mist as they stamped their feet and splashed and splattered wet-slick mosaic floors.

And danced round men as naked as they, bodies slick with oil and sweat. The women rounded'em faster and faster t'pace the drums. But the men stood fixed as statues. So they danced faster. Faster till none'd tell where drums began and hearts ended. Then—

Silence. Silence on the brink of collapse. And the women stilled. Stilled wherever their feet touched, even'f only their toes. Stilled wherever their hands or arm rose or fell. Stilled however they thrust their chest or hips. Stilled. Themselves statues then, too.

But from somewhere: a faint recorder. Dry. Hollow. But't grew. Multiplied. Wind-sound. Now the men spread their arms, moved on the balls of their feet. Round the women. Fingers skated on slick skin. They paused. Leg thrust out, in pose, arm raised and curled, hand offered, as'f'e begged'er t'dance. But she held there. And'e whirled away, turned, bowed'is head, offered'is hand. But she held there. And'is arms fell, his head drooped.

The recorders ebbed. All still.

Not a sound.

Even the audience'd evaporated, left only performers, left only their world.

only reality remained

And'ts inhabitants stand there, automatons run down. A universe seemingly distantly along entropy's long tail. And there is nothing—had been nothing—to save'em.

Outa darkness: a high, sharp warble, bow drawn over strings. It fades. Returns. Fades. Grows. Pulses.

Something moves amidst the dancers, stops and starts when strings come and fade. A long staff taps'n accompaniment. Hunched, sheet covered, a figure moves acenter'em all. Head drooped, his long white beard touches ground. And warbling strings stop and leave'm seemingly still as the rest.

All still. All quiet. The whole world's run down.

The tiny flame atop the staff withers and winks out.

Darkness.

Spark-burst. Explode. And one two three strings rush'n atop each other.

The figure retreats, arms wide, head back as'f t'look beyond anything that'd possibly dare b'above, and spins and spins and spins and sheet fabric arches away and crumples at the dancers' feet. And'is beard. Then still, naked youth revealed, staff gripped mid-center so't's braced along'is forearm as'e points. The first couple. A drum starts, a hand taken. A recorder, a head lifted. And amid woodwind-percussion interplay, they circle one another. He aims'is staff t'the next and the next, till they all turn. And as they turn round'm, he throws back, jabs upward as'f'e expects t'wound the sky. Over and over. And recorders and drums resound and fall'n time t'is thrusts. Then, arched t'the balls of'is feet, he stabs as'f't's the fatal blow. Yells.

And draws down into'mself till'is forehead and outstretched staff touch stone.

Dancers whirl till't seems they can only fly apart. But they've their own laws of physics here. And just when't seems most evident they must—will—can only—separate, must b'ripped apart—torn asunder. Implosion. Mouths and arms intertwine. Collisional forces knock'em from their orbits, tangle'em among sheets, where collided bodies grope and penetrate.

Woodwinds and percussions are this universe's only sounds. And rapid forceful penetrative collisions continue beneath their auspice. Till one-by-one friction rises t'meet'ts natural consequence. Explosion. Explosions that leave victims compacted together, inseparable. States indistinguishable from what must b'death or'ts nearest kith or kin.

Silence.

The youth rises, lifts'is head, sets'is staff point t'stone, looks round at destruction, smiles as bows draw softly over strings.

He turns. Softer strings, different than'is own. She's crouched there, behind'em all. Invisible till now. And'er strings are tears. He goes t'er, but she shrinks away. Bows draw softly over'is strings. He offers'is hand.

But she shakes'er head.

His high-whined strings fade. He looks t'is staff. Back t'er. His strings hold two beats, then draw one long note as'e lets go. The staff clatters away.

She looks up. Her strings play questioningly.

He offers'is hand.

Strings build, intermesh. She rises. Softly, he touches the blue tear-trails that etch'er cheeks, smears powder, looks at'is fingertips, touches'em t'is own cheeks.

Strings build, crescend as they turn round. Round and round.

But they slow. And'e goes t'is knee, draws'er down. Strings punctuate'is kiss, her touch, their fall t'the ground, her ascension of'is hips, their undulated motion. Quickening pace, till drawn notes peak and hold and shudder and fade.

And, for the minimalist of moments, that universe held, then, as smoothly as't arose, evaporated there till what residues remained were merely dancers collapsed across tile-work floors who drew ragged breaths as they pulled apart their sticky bodies and helped each other rise on not-steady legs.

And since the crowd existed once again, the vault'dn't'ven't shaken from their applause and't must've seemed as'f even the city so far above'd t've noticed.

He looked up, tried t'find the white picket fence's perimeter. Sand-blasted the same as the markers, in some places only bare wood remained. Maybe'e wondered why none'd been out t'paint'em yet.

"They're horrible, aren't they?"

Ron turned.

"The markers, I mean. So many of them, they have a certain effect, don't you think?"

"I can think of preferable feelings," Ron said. And'e turned back.

Mr Flett's cane tapped hardpan. "Yes," he said. "Of course. I merely refer to aesthetics." And when Ron'dn't reply, he said, "I come out here, sometimes, to reminisce, you know. It's good to catch up."

"Catch up?" But Ron'dn't look over'is shoulder.

"Well... Ahem, just an expression, you know."

"I guess it's a good thing they can't talk back, right?"

Mr Flett must've blinked, paused. "I don't follow."

"Otherwise they might say something we wouldn't want to hear."

"Well, I... I don't think I would put it quite that way."

"No," Ron said.

"Um..." Mr Flett cocked'is head and narrowed'is eyes, as'f'e'd trouble discerning something out near the sun. "Forgive my intrusion, Councilman, but are you feeling well? I must say you appear a trifle...pea-kud, as they say."

Ron stood silent a moment, hands still'n'is pockets as'e looked down.

"I've always wondered what they meant."

"What?"

Ron nodded. "The markers."

"I'm sorry." Mr Flett shook his head, touched the corner of his mustache. "I don't follow."

"The symbol," Ron said. "What does it mean? Why that particular way of putting three bits of wood together over a grave?"

"Well... That is just the way it is."

And Ron looked up toward distant mountains. "Sounds like it would've been the archaeological society's turf, hm?"

"Well... Ahem... Yes... Ahem..." He shifted as a man with an itch in a place propriety left him not-able to scratch might. And he cleared his throat. "Yes... Well... Ahem. I just wanted to say, since we crossed paths this way and such, that I appreciated your wife's invitation for tonight." Ron glanced over his shoulder. Mr Flett must've attempted a smile. "I must say I'm looking forward to it."

"Yes," Ron said, and turned back to a particular marker. "A lot of people going to be there?"

Mr Flett paused. "Ahem... Are you sure you are well?"

"As well as anybody else."

Faint light filtered between curtains, drowned out by dust-haloed streetlamps and taillights. A brown paper bag crunched against'er chest as she ascended the steps. Maybe't'd've been better t'go'n through the garage and through t'the kitchen, but the garage'd've already been closed. She knocked. A curtain parted, flopped back. A lock clicked. And Uncle Jack looked out. "It's late."

"I'm sorry."

"Was it Mr Hoyle who dropped you off?" He must've been somewhere'n the house where'e'dn't've heard the car pull up.

She nodded.

He held the door for'er. "Alright then."

Her mother stood by the couch. "Why are you so late?"

Allison stood with the brown paper bag pressed t'er chest. "I'm sorry."

Rita looked up from'er chair under the lamp. "How was everything?" She tried t'smile. "I'm—I am sure you're—you are getting along with the Hoyle's daughter wonderfully." Added, "Aren't—right?"

"I guess."

Her uncle closed the door and passed'er and dropped into'is usual chair. "That's good." He looked up at'er. "What's in the bag?"

"Just my clothes. The ones from yesterday."

"And where did you get this dress?"

"Sarah said I could have it. She said she didn't wear it anymore."

"Now, you see," Rita said. "Everything's—is—going along just fine."

Jack nodded. "Well, go upstairs and put your things away."

She nodded and turned. Mary-Celleste moved as if to follow, but her brother raised his hand. "How did it go today?"

"Oh, it went very well," Rita said. And she nodded to herself.

"Good." He leaned back and removed a rubberband from a fresh newspaper and spread it across his lap. "Do we still have any of that pie left?"

"Yes," Rita said. "I think so. Do you want me to check?"

"Whenever you get a minute."

She rose and moved toward the kitchen. "Would you like me to make up a glass of milk to go with it too?"

"I don't think so."

"Are you sure? We just bought some more powder—"

"I said so, didn't I."

"I'll—I will check then."

The paper crackled as she shifted through the next few pages.

"Don't bother to get a plate. If there is any, I'll just eat it out of the pan."

"Are you sure?"

He looked overtop the paper. "Just bring whatever's left in here. And a fork." And he snapped the paper rigid, again.

"I want you to take us home."

He didn't look up from his newspaper. "We've already discussed this."

"You can make up whatever you want," she said. "You can say we have another brother and I went to live with him."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because they'd find out about it," he said.

"How?"

"They just would."

"I'm not going to stay here any longer."

He glanced up, closed the paper, half-folded, half-crumpled it into his lap. "I'm getting tired of your talk-back."

"We're leaving on the train in the morning."

"I already told you—"

"I'll sneak on if I have to."

"God—" And he jerked up. "I don't see how Jeff ever managed to deal with you. You've been a pain ever since back then."

“Since when?”

“You know when. Never able to shut up. Never known what’s good for you. Never known when you’re well enough off—”

“Maybe I just know more than you.”

She probably’dn’t even feel’t at first. Only a sound. Later there’d’ve been pain. But likelyst’n’t just then as she regained’er balance and glared at’m.

“Everything alright?”

“Mother?” Allison paused atop the stairs, but Mary-Celleste’dn’t turn.

“It’s fine,” Jack said over’is sister’s shoulder. “Where’s the pie?”

“I’ve...it’s...it is out,” Rita said, through the kitchen door. “Just let me get a plate down.”

“I told you not to worry about a plate.”

“But—”

“Just do what I say.”

Silently, she nodded, then disappeared from the doorway.

Jack looked at Mary-Celleste. “I know,” he said. “And you’d better learn. That’s—”

Three rapid knocks.

Jack turned. Rita appeared through the kitchen doorway. He motioned. "Go sit in the corner." But Mary-Celleste just stood there. "Now—"

Three knocks.

"I said now."

"Go back in the kitchen." He motioned t'is wife, glanced upstairs. "Go back to your room." Only after they'd retreated did'e moved toward the door.

"Evening, Mr Hoyle." Argile'd've smiled the kind of smile'e'd've especially developed for Mr Gunther. "I hope we're not intruding."

"No. Not at all."

"Not interrupting dinner, I hope," Ceili said, with'is own Mr Vandermeer smile.

"Wouldn't want to intrude."

"No," Jack said. "We've already eaten."

"Good," Argile said. "We wouldn't want to intrude."

"No."

"We," Argile said, "just wanted to make sure the new additions to our fair town are well."

"Settling on their feet."

"Getting along okay?"

"Yes," Jack said. And'e nodded as'f'e'd needed the motion t'pump words out. "Yes, everything's going along well. Still a little settling in to do, but—my sister, she's feeling ill at the moment—"

"We're sorry to hear that."

"Very sorry."

"Yes," Argile said. "Though, it seems a bit odd." And'e'd've tilted'is head'n that Mr Vandermeer way. "Mrs Holdfast seemed well enough when we saw her last."

"Yes, she did."

"I..."

"Of course," Argile said. "We suppose it can be excitement. It sometimes does that to people who aren't used to it."

"We hope she'll be feeling better soon."

Jack nodded. "Very soon, I'm sure. In fact, I'm sure it's nothing at all."

"That's good to hear."

"Yes."

"We won't take up anymore—"

"Of your time then."

"We just wanted to make sure—"

"Everything was working out."

Jack nodded.

"Good." Argile turned as Ceili held the screendoor. "However..." He turned back. "If we might..."

"Yes!" Jack said.

"We happened to notice the door," Ceili said.

"Yes," Argile said. He smiled'is Mr Vandermeer smile.

"It does squeak some."

"Doesn't it?"

"Though, we're sure you just haven't—"

"Gotten round to it."

"Yes," Jack said. "I mean, yes, I just noticed that today and was going to take care of it after dinner."

"No rush." Argile stepped out and allowed Ceili t'close the screen-door, the hinge producing a faint metal-on-metal squeal.

"No rush."

"Good evening."

"And take care of your sister."

"Yes."

“Have you slept yet?”

“No.”

“You didn’t take anything they were passing out, did you?”

“They weren’t passing anything out.”

“Maybe.” Overhead, a frayed blue tarp rippled as wind found its way through the dome. “You’d better drink that before it gets cold. It’s probably—literally—the last pack of instant coffee on the planet.” She sipped. “When it gets cold, somebody’s going to steal it to degrease something.”

“You should’ve been there.”

“I’d liked to have been there to help cleanup, anyway.”

“But this was absolutely different from everything else. It...”

“You should *really* drink that before it gets cold.”

Someone ran into the square, huffed. "... a... boat's coming in."
He bent double and propped his hands on his knees and breathed hard.

Every light'n the house must've been on when'e pulled into the driveway. Even so, habitually, he removed'is keys from'is pocket as'e walked up the front steps. Food smells and hustle bustle pitter patter over hardwood and carpet spilled over'm as'e opened the door.

"And take that one up."

From the den, Esmerelde appeared'n a two-tone dress, flower pot clutched t'er chest, and ascended the stairs as green silk fronds tickled'er cheeks.

"And the other two," Beatrice stepped into the hallway and called upstairs.

She turned. "You're here. What took you so long?" But she waved'er hand before'e'd answer. "Never mind. Just go up and get dressed. Everyone should be here soon."

"Why?" He glanced upstairs.

"Don't be obtuse. What's wrong with you? Didn't she give you my message?"

"Who? Ruth?"

"Of course Ruth—what's wrong with you?"

"Nothing." And'e glanced up again as Esmerelde descended, paused on the first landing.

Beatrice motioned. "Well, go get the other one. Hurry up."

And she pattered down the steps and passed between'em into the living room.

"Now, hurry up. We need to start getting the [canapés] out."

"And just how formal should I be?" Ron said, and glanced over'er dress.

"Everything's already been laid out. All you have to do is put it on." And Beatrice turned and moved toward the kitchen.

Ron shifted t'allow Esmerelde and another potted plant upstairs.

He followed'er up, felt'er brush by'is back on'er way down as'e opened'is bedroom door. The lamp'd been left on. And'e slipped from'is jacket and hung't over a bedpost. Hung'is shirt over t'other. And after'e'd dressed, he sat on bed's edge, looked down at'is stocking feet, then toward'is new-shined dress shoes, which for some reason'e'd placed next t'the, then, orange-red-caked pair'e'd worn earlier that day.

A train whistle carried from the distance.

He bent forward and reached for'is shoes.

And'e clicked-off the lamp as'e went out.

Commotion rose t'meet'm. Intermingled voices. Laughs. Beatrice's laugh. And she glanced at'm through the living room doorway as'e stepped onto the landing, and she must've been talking t'someone, because she turned and smiled and nodded'n another direction before she entered the hall.

"What took you so long?"

"I didn't think I took long."

"Well," she said, "come on down." And she intertwined'er arm with'is as'e dismounted the stairs.

He glanced at'er. "What are you wearing?"

Her fingers stroked through softness and she adjusted how the fur lay over'er shoulders. "This? Nothing. Just something I picked up today." She tugged'is arm. "People are expecting to see you."

"Really?"

"Don't start this."

"Start what?"

A low voice: "Remember our agreement." And she smiled. "Evening, Mrs Holtcraft."

The woman looked up from the punch bowl. She seemed t'smile. "Ah, you found him." Carefully, she cupped'er glass'n both hands. "And just where have you been hiding?"

"The attic."

Mrs Holtcraft's head tilted back as she laughed. "So witty. You always were witty, you know. Even as a little boy. I can remember—"

"Now, don't go boring him to death." Mrs Rue appeared, smiled up from a dress that was all blue ruff. "Least of all tonight." And she placed one of'er white-lace-gloved hands beside'er mouth. "But better watch it," she said. "Or one of these days it's going to creep up on you and you'll be as old as we are."

"Talk about killing him with boredom," Mrs Holtcraft said. "And you try to do the same with fright."

Ron faintly smiled.

"Anyway," Beatrice said. "You ladies enjoy yourselves. There are still a few more guests to arrive yet." And she glanced over'er shoulder. "Where's... There." And she motioned. "Make sure all the [hors d'oeuvres] are out." And she turned back t'the ladies. "You have to do everything yourself if you want it done just right. If you'll excuse me for a moment, ladies. I'm sure Ronald would be more than happy to entertain you." And she smiled and released'is arm and vanished.

"Well now," Mrs Rue said. "How does it feel?"

He turned back t'em. "I'm sorry. How does what feel?"

Both laughed.

"Now, don't tell me," Mrs Holtcraft said, "the problems have started already. You're a bit young for that."

"I—"

"Oh, for heavens sakes, Dee." Mrs Rue shook'er head. "Pay no attention to her." And she motioned with'er punch glass and liquid threatened t'spill over'ts crystal sides. "But you don't want to stand round all evening. Come and sit."

"Yes," Mrs Holtcraft said, and took'is arm. "Sit down. Sit down."

They drew'm over t'where a small conclave of old ladies'd gathered, a field of lace-strewn party dresses, and insisted'e take a seat that put'is back t'the living room door. Which meant'e'dn't've been able t'see anything else of the room or hear anything over the ladys' chatter till someone dropped a hand on'is shoulder.

"Cornered already, I see." The man smiled beneath'is fresh-waxed and fresh-curled mustache. "Shall I offer my expert assistance in extraction." And'e touched a gloved finger t'is cheek as'e lightly bowed. "Of course, I hope you ladies can spare him for a bit."

Men huddle loosely'n another corner and raised their punch glasses as the two approached. Smiles. Nods. A hand on'is shoulder. Round

and round the room, group-t'group-t'nod-t'smile-t'smile-t'nod, before being pulled away for more of the same. Cacophony reduced t'electric buzz. Static hum that persisted whether any particular mouth opened or closed, independent of how passive, animated, horrified, scandalized, mystified, merry, perturbed, jovial, or complacent any singular face appeared at or'n a singular moment.

Then, Beatrice was beside'm again, had taken'is arm as they, the room, swirled out into the hall behind'em, so many fluid-suspended particles that flowed into the dining room, washed into corners, accreted one rapid sedimentary generation of social hierarchy after another.

Only when Esmerelde leaned forward and lifted the cake cover'd they start t'sing. And finished with held smiles.

And Beatrice smiled too. "Happy Mountain Day, dear. Blow out the candles."

Tracy laughed. “Oh, fuck.”

Roped-together boats drifted downstream and’d begun t’form a faint arc, tethered where the first’d been tied off. Standing’n the last, a cow called, “Muuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu,” as’t floated past.

Tracy laughed. She groaned. “How’s anybody going to get that thing up here? What were they thinking?”

“Muuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu.”

Tracy shook’er head.

Newcomers looked up, wide eyed at the city walls, and their mouths hung agape.

Bleary eyes hidden behind taped plastic sunglasses, he emerged into daylight, laptop balanced against his side.

“Morning.”

Zeb glanced round, scowled. “What the fuck do you want?”

A toga-wrapped young man smiled.

“Fuck off.”

But when Zeb started down a narrow passage, that young man fell into lockstep behind. “You move around a lot, don’t you.” And when Zeb didn’t reply, that young man said, “They say there’s some secret society that’s out to stop you from writing your book. Is that true? And that’s why you keep moving around so much in the city and don’t stay the same place two nights in a row—so you can hide what you’re doing from them—because they can look down from the sky.”

Zeb stopped where the alley bifurcated, turned. “What the fuck’re you talking about?”

“The assassins. You know. The ones that dress all up in black and with the hats that come down over their faces. The eyes in the sky tell them where to come after you at night and you can’t see them and they cut off your head with this machine they have and carry it back in a basket.”

If Zeb blinked, none’d’ve known through his dark glasses. “What the fucking fuck—” And he turned and started up an alley at a brisk walk.

“Don’t worry,” that young man called. “I won’t tell anyone where I saw you.”

But when Zeb looked back again, he’d’ve gone.

Beast heads that might've otherwise been waterspouts faced inward six ways round the chamber and hammock cords strangled two. If't'd been past noon or late morning, all the thin, vertical windows on one side'd've glowed. She shifted, half-awake, and the hammock swung listlessly over piles of fabric, colored dresses, staffs, parasols, suits, blankets, hats, bags of feathers, beads, sequins, plaster shells, tapestries, brooms, a collection of two-or-three-dozen candleholders, stuffed animals, coiled wire, rope, a box marked **EXPLOSIVES**. A faded poster'd've hung on the wall, the reclamation copyright symbol ripped from the corner, tacked between two windows with concrete nails.

And when she woke, she'd've just lain there staring at nothing'n particular for a long time, and'dn't've even bothered t'look for the scuffling sound that grew below. Only when the trapdoor opened'd she look over.

"Sorry. Wake you?"

She sat up and the hammock rocked side-t'side. "What're you doing?"

"Well, since you're up anyway, have you seen the hand drill?"

"What do you want it for?"

"Just things."

But she just lay there'n'er hammock and looked at'm.

"So..." He cleared'is throat. "You hear there might be a front building?"

"Why should I care?"

"Well, I was just tryna... Hey, how'd the show go last night?"

"You weren't there?"

“Nah. Sorry. Got tied up at the last minute.”

“I’ll bet.”

“No, really, how’d it go?”

“It went.” She grunted and shifted. “Downstairs by the door. In the box marked wedding cake toppers.”

“Thanks.” He stepped down and let the trapdoor drop.

Melissa sighed. After a while, a fluttering passed through one of the slit windows. And she looked up t’see someone’s former pet, a very yellow bird, sitting there on the sill, the small thing’s body only barely able t’fit through, as’f’t were’n fact light or color given some physical form, sunlight glinting brightly from’ts near iridescent feathers. And’t started t’chirp and shifted’ts head side-t’side.

She sighed, grunted, pitched’erself outa the hammock onto the narrow walkway between everything and opened the trapdoor and dropped down through’t and closed’t after’erself.

bamboo and wire birdcages, thirteen incomplete china sets—some represented by only half a tea cup saucer, silverware dangling from yarn, paper planes, more rope, wire, dis-used spools, batting, blue-plastic barrel overflowing with fabric swatches, glass jars filled with chess and checker pieces, half-empty paint buckets, cast-iron bed-frame, jars of soot, lampblack, oils, scrap plank boards, plastic water bottles, jars of buttons and LEDs, milkcrate stuffed with variously colored electrical wires, blue-plastic-capped test tubes, stuffed squirrel, bamboo scaffolding, jars of broken pencils, BB gun with shattered stock, hats, leather scraps, balls of twine, lanterns, boxes of half-melted candles, empty thread cones, fruit baskets stuffed with blue-paper contour maps, shelves of wood-carved toy animals, rusted typewriter, shoes, glass light globes, shoe boxes of crayons, gloves, solder spools, typewriter tools dangling from stretched twine as on a clothesline, brooms, more hats, suitcases, outdated petri dishes with dried-black lambs blood, tiny drawer cabinets with so many knuckle-sized resistors with hand-lettered markings and desoldered piezo buzzers, one-hundred amp copper knife switches, glass cup of squirrel-gnawed walnut hulls, more hats, small rotary hand drills, one with rusted chuck holding bent nail, coffee mugs stuffed with dental probes, old rags, filing cabinet with PVC plumbing elbows and electrical boxes, squeezed-out glue tubes, canning jars of dirt and sand, tin boxes of worn pen nibs, wooden typewriter case, welding rods and worn strikers, half-used jars of white paste, radio with tubes and wires spilled out the back, stuffed crow, irregular pieces of shattered picture glass, plastic taped-up tub of quilt piecings, cast-iron stove door, multi-colored glass rocks, car headlight, yet more

hats, sealed boxes of disintegrating nitrile gloves, bent screwdrivers, empty stain cans, crutches, coffee cans of bent nails, mowing scythe, cracked-eyed, molting teddy bear, wheel chair, airbrushed trout replica, stacked blue-plastic chairs, pine-cone-filled peach basket, electrical junction box, bucket of dried stucco, label maker, LED printer cartridges, cracked magnifier, machetes, tin plate mounded with lug nuts, yet more hats, all length bamboo rods, red and blue checker pieces, smudge pots, small anvil, broken sewing machine, parasol rack, re-rolled paper streamers, black-powder-filled mason jars, block and tackles, jar of pennies, railroad spikes, stacked catalogs with flowers pressed between pages, rows of empty ink bottles, ketchup bottles, pop bottles, brown-glass, blue-glass, clear-glass bottles, washing powder measuring cups, busted wrenches, froze sockets, makeshift lightning jars, still more hats, paper mâché masks, rusted pot piled with rusted pot metal toy cars, egg timer, bolts of blue rayon, cork-board-pinned butterflies with transparent wings where their colorings dried and dusted away, empty mason jars, broken pocket knives, mason jars filled with shards of broken colored glass, hand-saws, small curio cabinet minus drawers, naked one-eyed china doll cracked along the top of head, rubber balls, yet still more hats, lone drawer used as a box full of eye glasses, pale blue porcelain dollhouse bathroom furniture, blue chair with ripped cushion

She eyed the terrarium before she passed through the archway, even paused and squinted into't. Empty.

Hot, stifled air settled into the alleyways, maybe the sign a front'd come through. Sweat'd've trickled down'er spine by the time she'd entered the commissary. And she ambled toward the coffee pot.

"I thought you weren't supposed to drink caffeine."

Melissa turned, filled cup'n-hand. "What we're using now doesn't have any."

On one of the blue-plastic tables: crunch crunch crunch.

And she watched as the tortoise stretched'ts neck and beaked off another cabbage chunk.

"What're you doing with her?"

"Because you never feed her." T'other woman settled on'er elbows, chin'n'er hands as she watched.

"I feed'er."

But t'other woman just sat and looked and listened: crunch crunch crunch.

She woke early. Her nightclothes stuck t'er sweat-clammy skin as she glanced over t'see'er daughter still asleep. And deftly moving the sheet, she shifted off the mattress, glanced t'see that Allison remained asleep and knelt and pulled'er bag from beneath the bed. Deep inside, under almost everything else, she located a small pocketbook, disfastened't, extracted wadded bills, folded'em over'n one hand and stuffed'em'n'er shoe. Above, Allison shifted, perhaps mumbled. And Mary-Celleste quickly closed'er bag and pushed't back into place.

She touched'er cheek as she stood. But there'd've been no outward trace by then. Though, whenever'er tongue'd've probed beyond'er teeth, she'd've likely winced, so she'd've tried t'keep'erself from doing that.

"Mother?" Allison's eyes opened only t'slivers, barely detectable'n the palest morning light.

Mary-Celleste held'er finger t'er lips and eased onto the bed and leaned toward'er daughter. "Be very quiet."

"Why?" Her eyes opened wide, but'er head'dn't leave the pillow.

"Just do as I say. Understand? We're going to go out a little later. And I need you to make sure you're ready."

"Ready for what?"

"Whatever I tell you to do—"

Mary-Celleste glanced round. Somewhere, an alarm clock might've been slapped off. Movement below.

"Whatever I tell you to do, understand?" Mary-Celleste whispered. "Do you understand?"

Allison nodded as best she'd as she lay there.

"Alright," Mary-Celleste said. "Go back to sleep now. I'll wake you later."

She moved t'get'er clothes off the bed and looked back at'er daughter when she neared the door and held'er finger t'er lips one more time before she went out into the hall.

But Allison'dn't've slept after that. She closed'er eyes, but nearnuf the morning light'd've been too bright t'allow even that. And after trying awhile, she'd've rolled over and looked at the ceiling. Below, the refrigerator opened and closed, grease sizzled'n a pan. Boys moved along the hallway and downstairs. And only when the general commotion seemed cover enough'd she push away the sheet and lean over the mattress and reach beneath the bed for the paper bag. Of course, it'd've crinkled as she opened't and she'd've paused¹⁴ and looked and listened but she'd've been the only one t'hear't. And'er hand snaked under'er dress t'extract the pages. If she'd tucked the curtain tail under the mattress, it'd've allowed enough light t'read by and she'd've moved'er pillow behind'er back and scrunched down as she thumbed worn page edges. Already, other thumbs'd've smeared letters at the extremities and she'd've'd t'squinted t'decipher'em, scanning over penciled overstrikes and erased extra letters where words'd been transcribed incorrectly and proved whoever'd done that copy'dn't been a skilled typist. But once'n rhythm, it'dn't matter. And'er eyes tracked over the page. And she flipped t'the next. And the next. Till footsteps topped the stairs.

She shoved the pages beneath'er pillow before the knob turned. "Morning, dear." Aunt Rita looked'n. "It's—Time to get up."

Allison nodded. "I'll be down in just a minute."

And after'er aunt'd closed the door, Allison rolled off the bed and squatted and jerked out'er bag t'bury the pages at bottom. Beyond the door, the boys ran upstairs and ruckus cascaded easily through the thin walls. Below, Uncle Jack's heavy tread started upstairs and that was enough t'bring silence.

¹⁴ The contemporary English use of 'froze' would better imply the immediacy and rigidity that seems to be indicated here. Although if the descriptions of those structures seemingly identified in fragment #1495303.32 are reliable, there seems to have been some mention of underground arrangements that might have been used in the manufacture of some sort of ice, so in some sense it might not be as anachronistic a description as some have argued. The second Gateway Edition does use this nomenclature.

Allison glanced over'er shoulder as she dressed, went back and checked'er bag, slid't under the bed again, went t'the door, looked over'er shoulder, went back and pushed't a little farther under with'er foot. The boys moved down the hall again, clomped downstairs. If she'd've looked over'er shoulder as she touched the doorknob again, she'dn't've done anything but force'erself t'go out.

The car rumbled from the garage by the time she'd entered the kitchen. And'er aunt pushed-open the screendoor, brown paper bag'n-hand.

"Breakfast is on the table," her mother said. And she glanced over'er shoulder from the sink. Rita emerged from the garage and closed the door. After that, the morning'd've passed as any other. Allison carried'er plate toward the sink and moved t'help dry. But'er mother said, "Why don't you go up and take care of the bed. I can handle this."

"Okay."

Rita looked up as she passed through the living room and mounted the stairs, an aggravated glint might've seemingly passed through'er eyes as shoe impressions marred the just-cleaned rug. And she'd've jerked the rug cleaner round and back and forth over'em.

Upstairs, Allison folded the sheets into place, smoothed'em with'er hand, then folded down the comforter and contoured't over the pillows. And't'd've sounded as'f'er aunt must've ascended the stairs and started the same'n the boys' room.

Allison glanced down, poked'er foot under the bed and touched'er travel bag. She smoothed the quilt once more, touched'er bag with'er foot once more and went out and downstairs. Slop slop carried from the kitchen and she leaned over the railing and saw'er aunt shift the mop'n steady circles. And at the foot of the stairs, her mother appeared from the short hallway that led t'er uncle's and aunt's rooms. "There's a cloth already on the coffee table," she said. "Do the banister when you're done with the furniture."

"Yes'm."

By the time they'd finished, early morning'd've burnt off and the front curtains'd've glowed warm gold. Allison'd've helped Rita finish drying the floor and she'd've stood and moaned and touched'er back, towel'n-hand. "I'll—I *will* take that," Rita said. "We should have

enough for a load.” And she gathered the small pile by the door into’er arms and pushed-open the screendoor with’er foot.

She’d’ve just returned when Mary-Celleste entered from the living room. “I thought we might go ahead and wash the sheets today.”

Rita glanced toward the stove, seemed t’contemplate. “I guess we could wash a few.” She nodded t’erself.

“I thought we might go ahead and do them all at once.”

“All? That would take too long.”

“Well,” Mary-Celleste said. “I was thinking, since Jack won’t be home till evening, we could use the whole garage for a clothes line. That way we could get everything done at once and wouldn’t have to worry about them for the rest of the week.”

“I...guess. Yes, I guess you—are right.” Rita nodded t’erself. “Yes...why d—We can do that. We can start them as soon as the towels come out.”

“I’ve already stripped yours and Jack’s.”

And somehow’t’d’ve progressed from there t’em struggling t’lift a dresser stuffed’n the upstairs closet enough t’get rags under’ts feet so they’d scoot’t down t’Mary-Celleste’s and Allison’s room as Allison held open the door.

“I think it—would be best on that wall.”

But’t probably’dn’t’ve allowed the door t’open on t’other side and probably’dn’t’ve left much space for’em t’get by one side of the bed.

Rita huffed as they pushed’t into place. “Tilt it back so we can get the rags out so they don’t look so tacky.” And Allison knelt and tugged’em free. “There. Now we can start getting this stuff out. I haven’t been through some of this in ages.”

Drawers stuck. They jerked. And things compacted down into’em puffed out and so they’d never’ve closed. So they piled armfuls across the bed. “Wouldn’t...” Allison said as she looked over the mound. “Wouldn’t it just be better to throw this stuff out?”

“You never know when something might be useful,” her aunt said. “Just when I throw something out, then I’ll—will figure out something I could use it for.”

“We can put some of it in our bags,” Mary-Celleste said, “and put them in the closet.”

“That—is a good idea.”

“I can do that,” Allison said. “Put out the clothes, I mean. And—”

Rita cocked’er head. “I think the launderer’s—launderer is finished.” She cleared’er throat.

Mary-Celleste nodded, said t’er daughter, “You can start putting things away.” And she turned t’follow’er sister’n-law. “We’ll be back up to sort this stuff when we’re done.”

And Allison’d’ve forced’erself t’breathe again as they passed down the stairs. She squeezed by the dresser and knelt and pulled out’er bag and dug down into’t, paused, craned’er neck looking round the room. But there’dn’t’ve been many, if any, good hiding places’n such a small space.

“That’s not good, is it?” June leaned t’see past the thatched roof. Wind’d’ve scattered dust over the canyon edge and’t’d’ve sifted down onto the water.

“Could be,” Britt said. “Might just be a normal wind.” She shifted’er paddle t’steer into a bend. “Either way, we’d better pick up the pace a bit.”

“I thought you didn’t get nervous.”

“Only round dust storms and attractive women.”

June looked over’er shoulder. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What?” But Britt just looked past’er.

“Are you saying attractive women and dust storms have the same characteristics?”

“Maybe.”

In the darkened living room, streetlamps'd've rendered sheer white curtains pale cobalt.

"Are you still up?"

Streetlamp light through the front door'd've rendered'er night-gown the same.

He returned'is gaze t'the curtains. "I'll be up in a minute." And'e fingered one aside t'look out. "You know," he said, "sometimes I can stand around in the middle of the night, look at the streetlamps through the window, and it can seem as if no time has passed at all."

She moved toward him'n'er ghostly, pale-blue nightdress. "Are you sure you feel alright?"

"Everyone keeps asking me that." He released the curtain.

"You're tired," she said. She'd move behind'm.

"Hm."

"You could sleep in," she said. "You don't have to go in so early tomorrow. Everyone would understand."

He slipped'is hands into'is pockets. "I'm sure you're the talk of the social circles now."

She moved toward the door. "You..." Stopped, turned. "You should show some gratitude."

"Gratitude?"

"Yes. For everything I've done for you to help you get where you are. Do you think you did all this by yourself? Were you at the ladies' clubs when everyone was just starting to talk about what we'd do to have a new councilman? Were you the one dancing round having to make sure not to say too little or too much? always having to worry about what you'd said, because one word more or less might ruin

everything. How many luncheons did you go to? How many teas? Do you think they just came up and asked you to stand for councilman out of the blue?—that the idea just popped out of the sky?”

“I guess I never thought about it.”

“No,” she said. “You didn’t. And you still won’t. You’ll just go on and on as if—”

They turned toward the kitchen, toward shattering glass.

“What was that?” A lock clicked. Shoe patter echoed. She whispered, “Someone’s in the house.”

Pots and pans and china clinked.

“Stay here.” He moved past’er into the hall.

“Wait!” Still only a whisper. “Call the police.”

“Just stay here.”

“Wait—” But’er voice’dn’t carry down the hall. She moved toward the phone and lifted the receiver—

Whisper snatches. Flashlight luminescence licked round the door-frame.

“Who’s there?”

Sudden silence.

“I said, who’s there?”

Pots and pans jangled across the floor. Plates and bowls shattered. Yells. A flashlight’d’ve blinded’m.

In the living room, she’d’ve screamed because’e’d. And others hurried gasping into night.

Zeb jerked the table and pulled't nearnuf t'the charging station t'allow the laptop power adapter and cord t'stretch between'em. He jerked two or three plugs from the powerstrip t'make room. And'e drug over a chair and sat down and opened'is laptop and waited for't t'boot.

He glanced overtop the screen as the desktop loaded.

Zilog looked down at the table. ["Sais-tu—"]

"Speak fucking english, you fucking retard."

Zilog scratched'is beard. "Do you know whose this?" He pointed down at a half-filled coffee cup.

"How the fuck should I know?"

Zilog glanced round. He lifted't, sniffed't, sipped't. "Mmm. [Café instantané]." He sighed.

"Can't you go fucking do that some fucking place else?"

["C'est le commissaire."]

Zeb scowled, but typed.

Slurp.

Zeb's fists clenched.

"I want," Zilog said *-slurp-* "to ask of you a favor."

"Not fucking interested."

["Bon."]

Zeb looked up from'is laptop. "What the fuck's that supposed to mean?"

"In [English] you would say—"

"You know what the fuck I mean."

Slurp. Zilog shrugged.

Zeb growled. "You fucking said it's a good thing I'm not fucking going to do what you want."

"[Oui.] I would agree that is an adequate summation of our conversation." *Slurp.*

"Then why did you fucking ask?"

Zilog shrugged. "I thought perhaps you say yes and hell freeze to ice [mon café]."

Zeb grit's teeth.

Slurp. "I forget. What is it you are to do with the [chef-d'oeuvre] when complete?"

Zeb looked back down at's laptop, pecked at the keyboard. "The fucking outranet will be back up, eventually. I'll fucking post it and then the shit'll fucking fly."

"Ah, and watch the take-them-down notices appear like flies [sur un cadavre]."

"They can't fucking scrub everything."

"[Est-ce pourtant important?]"

"It's the fucking truth."

"Ah, [la vérité, la justice, la manière] NorAmeriCo." *Slurp.*

"Fuck off."

Slurp. Zilog shrugged, turned. *Slurp.*

"THIS'S WHY YOUR FUCKING PEOPLE GOT FUCKED IN THE FUCKING WAR—"

Slurp.

She'd've barely seen over the sheets piled'n'er arms and'd've'd t'turn sideways t'fit through the doorway as'er aunt held open the door into the partition between house and garage. The launderer'd've spun and spritzed, gurgled. And'f't'dn't been set on the concrete slab that'd perhaps once been the back porch, it'd've probably shaken down the house.

"Is that it?" Rita said.

Allison nodded.

Her mother appeared from the garage, empty basket'n-hand. "Did you see what time it was?"

"Afternoon," Allison said. "I think."

Mary-Celleste nodded t'erself, set down the basket. "Maybe we should look at having a bite to eat."

"Hm?" Rita looked away from the launderer. "Oh, yes. While we'r—"—She paused and clenched'er hands, breathed—"—While we *are* waiting." She cleared'er throat. And she eyed the launderer again as't pinged and twup-twup-twupped and half-danced.

"Don't worry about it," Mary-Celleste said. "I'll take care of it." And she motioned for Allison t'follow and Allison stood there'n the kitchen as'er mother opened the refrigerator, glanced inside, closed the door, raised t'tiptoe and'd the same with the cabinets, till every possibility'd been exhausted, as'f on a checklist. She turned and glanced at'er daughter, but motioned for Allisonn't t'follow as she pushed-open the screendoor.

"I noticed we're out of some things," she said t'er sister'n-law.

"Hm?" Rita looked away from the launderer. A faint cooked smell'd've permeated the space where the main coils'd've warmed.

"Yes," Mary-Celleste said. "There's only one piece of bread. And we used all the egg powder this morning. And we could probably do with a few other things."

"We..." Rita glanced at the launderer, watched't hop. "... can go out later."

"It'll take us all day to finish this," Mary-Celleste said. "And we'll need things to make dinner."

"Well...I guess we can turn-off the machine."

But that'd've meant they'd loose, who knew, how much time. And'f they were left sitting wet too long they might mildew. And'f that'd happened they'd've t'b'laundered again. And that'd b'even harder t'take care of. And the water bill, Rita mouthed. She shook'er head. "I d—do not—like to leave the machine running when I—am not here." And she glanced at't again. Electric pops.

"That's alright," Mary-Celleste said. "I can go down to the store with Allison. Between the two of us, we should be able to carry what we need. And like I say, it won't take long. So when we get back, the sheets should be out and ready to hang. That way we can get two things done at once."

"Are you...sure?"

"Of course," Mary-Celleste said. But'er words'd've been half-drowned'n thwup-thwup-thwup as the launderer churned. "This way it allows us to get everything done."

Rita'd've eyed the launderer, but nodded.

So Mary-Celleste'd've returned t'the kitchen and told Allison t'go upstairs and get ready. But what'f, before they'd yet gone, the doorbell'd rung. Rita'd've pulled open the screendoor and poked'er head into the kitchen as't rang again.

And there'dn't've been anything Mary-Celleste'd've done but open't.

"Good morning." Mrs Hoyle'd've smiled and stood there'n definitely a hat, probably a white one, with'er arm crooked t'hold a purse. "Not disturbing anything, I hope."

Rita'd've quickly moved through the house t'peer over'er sister'n-law's shoulder. "As a matter of fact," Mary-Celleste'd've said. "We were going out for a bit."

"Oh?"

"Yes. We...have to pick up a few things from the store."

"But of course," Rita'd've said, "if you want to come in—"

"What luck." And Mrs Hoyle'd've continued t'smile. "We just came by to see if you and your daughter would care to go out with us." She'd've glanced toward Allison. Sarah, having waited on the sidewalk, would've risen t'er toes t'try and see round'er mother, through the doorway.

"We'd...really hoped to get back soon. There's still a lot of work that needs done here."

"Oh, surely there is not that much. Besides, it would be a quick trip."

"No," Rita'd've said. "No, it's—it is not that much. Besides, we won't—*will not* be long."

"Oh, we do not want to keep you from anything," Mrs Hoyle'd've said. And t'Mary-Celleste: "We can keep each other company on the way there."

Mary-Celleste'd've'd t'nod. "Alright."

"Fantastic."

But Rita'd've come t'the door after the pair stepped out. "I can—"

"And it was very good to see you, Mrs Moore. I hope your husband is well."

"Yes... Yes, he is. Very well. Thank you."

"Excellent," Mrs Hoyle'd've said. "It was nice talking to you, Mrs Moore. And of course, please, do not let us interrupt anything. So whatever you had planned, just go right ahead."

Gregor ripped more tape. "That too tight?" Morning sun filtered between living room curtains. Ron glanced down where'e'd rolled's sleeve past's elbow and puffed white encircled's arm.

"It'll be fine." But red'd've already soaked through. "You didn't need to bother coming."

Gregor bent over the coffee table and snapped's bag shut. "Yes," he said. "I'm sure Bea would have been happy to sew it up for you. Not that I'm disparaging her needlework."

"I'll let her know that."

Gregor lifted's bag. "You should've called me sooner."

Ron nodded aimlessly. "Yes, Doctor Falstaff."

Gregor's eyebrow arched, a trait't'd always been said'e shared with's father. "You sure you're feeling alright?" And'e glanced side-t'side at Ron's head. "No concussion when you went down?"

"Just this."

"Well, you'd better take it easy for a little while, anyway. Maybe take the day off."

"I'll take it under advisement. What're those?"

Gregor looked down at a small brown pill bottle'e must've forgotten was'n's hand. "For Bea. One every three or four hours if she needs to calm down. And two at bedtime if she has trouble sleeping."

"I'll make sure she gets them." Ron palmed the touch-warmed glass. "Thanks for coming by."

Gregor shook's head. "Any idea what went on?"

"Want to have a look?"

Councilman Taggart stood by the kitchen screendoor. A warm breeze blew through. Morning sun clashed with paled incandescent bulbs. The policeman stepped between overturned pots and broken

plates and t'd've been impossible t'tell'f'e'd been carefuln't t'disturb evidence or t'just avoid encrusting'is fresh-polished shoes with food debris. He looked up when they entered, thumbs hooked'n'is black leather belt as'f t'occupy'is hands from touching'is slicked-back, still damp hair. He seemed t've forgotten'is cap out'n the patrol car.

"Really a mess," he said.

"Thanks for the obvious."

"Ahmm. Sorry. It's just... well..." The policeman looked at the floor again. "Anyway... Did they get anything important? Valuable, maybe? Any idea what they were after?"

"Pretty obvious," Ron said.

The officer shook'is head. "I don't follow."

Gregor glanced toward Ron. "You think there'd be someone hungry enough to try this?"

Ron shrugged.

"Do you know who it was?"

Ron glanced at the policeman.

"Well... I just thought you might have someone in mind."

"Sure," Ron said. "Should I give you their address? Or do I need to drive you over there myself?"

"Well, you could just wr—" The officer rubbed the back of'is neck. "Oh. Sorry." He cleared'is throat. "So... What're we supposed to do about it?"

"Nothing at the moment," Ron said. And'e rubbed'is eyes, which must've felt as'f they'd boil away. "Everybody's probably already heard about it by now, anyway. And if they haven't, they will by breakfast. So—"

"Oh!"

Taggart'd turned as the screendoor opened behind'm. His mustached'd've puffed as'e looked down. "Who're you?"

"It's alright," Ron said. "She's here... She works here." And'e turned t'the policeman. "There's nothing more for you to do here."

The policeman glanced toward Taggart. Taggart jerked'is head toward the door. He nodded. "Yes, sir." And'e stepped between shattered plates and spattered mashed potatoes and pushed by Esmerelde and out the back door. Taggart's mustache'd've twitched as she stepped'n and looked wide eyed round.

“You can go, too, Jim.”

Taggart glanced at ‘m.

“I’ll be taking off,” Gregor said.

“I’ll show you out.” Ron glanced back at Esmerelde and motioned the two men through. “Don’t worry about salvaging anything. We’ll just throw what we have to away,” he said t’er. Then’e turned and followed both men down the hall.

“Remember those tranquilizers,” Gregor said as’e opened the front door. “And you could use a few yourself if you need some help getting to sleep tonight. In fact, I’d recommend taking the day off and taking one or two this afternoon.”

Pots skittled and scraped, clanked’n the kitchen, the sound carrying down the hall.

“I gave Bea a mild sedative earlier. She should still be out for a few hours. If you want, I can have Genevieve come round a little later.”

“That’ll be fine.”

“Refreshing, is it not?” Mrs Hoyle said as she lifted a wire basket with’er free hand. “They do it with a kind of cooling machine. My son—who has a gift for these kinds of things—says it works something like an automobile radiator, or a refrigerator. Can you imagine building a house like a refrigerator? Who thinks up such things? He says they are going to replace ice cars with them so they don’t need the blocks of ice anymore. Do you not think that will be something?” She shook’er head. “Not in all the stores yet, of course. But that is probably not far away. Just think if they could make one small enough to put in a house.” She scanned a nearby aisle. “The things they can come up with.

“Things are really going to change, you know. It is going to be a whole new world. Things we could not even dream of before.”

They passed deeper into the store, down narrow aisles.

“I probably should not tell you this. But they are coming up with all kinds of things these days. Things they have never built before.

“But coming down here, everything must already be a big change for you.

“Of course, some things always remain the same, right?”

A light breeze drifted through and curled a drape so't caressed'er shoulder blade. Hand on a window column, arm locked straight, was the only way she'd manage t'stand with'er legs spread as she balanced between the two.

Tracy rose and kissed'er. "I told you," she said.

"Oh, yes." And Catherine gently placed'er hand on Tracy's sternum and pushed'er back, stepped outa the younger woman's grasp and turned and looked down at'er. "And now I think she's owed for the favor."

Catherine offered'er hand, helped'er rise and led'er t'the bed. She touch Melissa's shoulders for'er t'sit, then bent and touched Melissa's knees and parted'er legs. And she turned and touched the back of Tracy's neck. "I think you'd better pay now."

"Wasn't my—"

"But you invited her."

But Melissa'd lain back on the bed and'er foot grazed up Catherine's calf. "You." And Catherine looked down as Melissa rose and took'er hand, guided'er t'the bed beside'er. "Lay back." And she straddled Catherine's shoulders. And Catherine's hands rapped round'er thighs.

"It's okay," Tracy said. "You can put a woman on top here. We'll make sure you don't get any bad reviews."

Melissa's eyes flashed at'er—but only'n the moment before they'd closed.

Why'd'e followed't? Had'e just seen't one too many times? At too many strange hours? Because't'd passed'm beyond town limits as't headed deeper into the desert? Had'e noticed the smoke? Or'd the wind blown't askew? How close'd'e'd t've come t'notice the smell? Or'd've'e smelled raw gasoline? Did'e notice smoking fur? Fiery tails? Charred teeth? Skulls? How many'd been there?

How many times'd the gas can hit him'n the head before'e blacked out?

And at some point, Sarah'd've wheedled'erself and Allison permission t'cross the hall and go t'the dress shop while their mothers attended the store.

"What about this one?" Sarah'd've said as she held a dress against Allison so the wire hanger crook'd hovered just under'er nose.

"I don't really *need* one, though."

But Sarah'd've shaken'er head. "Not right, anyway," she'd've said. And several dresses later she'd've likely added, "Of course, you do—what about this one?—You *have* to have something new for the auxiliary. Do you want to go in the same old thing? No, no, no." Many she'dn't even've taken off the rack before shaking'er head. "Look over there."

But sometime later, if the store'd been empty, she'd've raised t'tip-toe and glanced over the racks and the only other person'd've probably been a woman hunched over on a stool by the cash register with a newspaper spread on the counter.

"Did you get a chance to read *Wolf Castle* yet?"

"Kinda," Allison'd've said. "I just started."

"Have you got to the part where they take her to the castle?"

Allison'd've'd t've shaken'er head.

"You should. You will *not* believe it." And Sarah'd've pulled another dress from a rack. "Here. What about this one?"

"I don't have any money."

"Nonsense." Sarah'd've glanced up and down, glanced from Allison t'the dress. "No, I think this would be perfect. It just matches your eyes."

"But I don't have any money."

"Just put it on your uncle's account. How do you think it works?"

Allison'd've shaken'er head. "I can't do that."

"Of course you can. Does he want you to go to the auxiliary wearing some ratty thing?" And she'd've taken Allison's arm and walked toward the front of the store with the dress.

"Wrap this up. You can put it on the Moore account."

Then later, as they'd walked home, Mrs Hoyle'd've asked'f Mary-Celleste intended t'enter a pie'n the auxiliary auction. "Why, I am sure there are some fine pie recipes from up there in the north." And then she'd've invited'er t'a tea, or something of that sort, with t'other ladies the next day. There she'd've met a woman named Mrs Pimrose who t'other ladies looked down on because'er brother worked as a conductor on the railroad. "He always loved trains. Even when he was a little boy. He had a set with a wooden engine and cars and wore the wheels off them." So Mary-Celleste'd've arranged t'leave Allison with Sarah while she intercepted Mrs Pimrose and ended up being asked'n for some more tea, or something of that nature, even though they'd already'd some. "I know we have just eaten... But would you like to come in for something to drink or...anything?" And Mary-Celleste'd've sketched out how she'd planned t'go visit another brother she'd somewhere else and with Jack's work schedule she'dn't know what she was gonna do bout getting tickets...and Mrs Pimrose'd've eventually suggested'er brother'd buy the tickets and escort Mary-Celleste and'er daughter onto the train. Mary-Celleste'd, of course, refuse'er kind offer. But Mrs Pimrose'd've insist. So that'd b'that. And she'dn't've'd t'worry bout Rita because after they'd gotten back from the shopping the day before she'd've been nervous and probably'd've only said, "So, how was the trip?"

"It was a walk to the store. What was it supposed to be?"

"I d—did not know. You were gone so long I thought you would've—would have been back before now."

"Mrs Hoyle and I talked awhile."

"Oh." And Rita's demeanor changed. "I hope everything went well."

"Yes."

"Good." She tried t'smile.

"In fact, she invited me to a luncheon tomorrow. And she wanted me to bring Allison."

"Oh," Rita said. "Oh, well that's—that is good." And she nodded. "Anyone else?"

"What?"

"I mean, did they say if you should bring anyone else?"

"I don't think so," Mary-Celleste said.

So there'd've been no need t'worry bout anything but how t'get'er and Allison t'the station. And they'dn't've helped but cross paths with Ceili and Argile and they'dn't've let anything bad happen.

“Must’ve paddled the whole day and night.”

Catherine looked away from where June lay on a cot, her face lax with sleep and serene exhaustion. Catherine held’er arms, sari draped over’er shoulders as’f she were cold.

Tracy shook’er head.

Catherine bent and pushed June’s hair back behind’er ear from where’t’d fallen across’er face. Tracy touched Catherine’s shoulder and she looked up. She motioned and they moved toward the door. “Any idea about this one?” Tracy whispered.

A swath round stitches’d’ve been cleaned and the cleanliness’d’ve somehow made the stitches seem more painful t’observe. Several of’is fingers’d’ve turned black, probably, from where they’d been stomped, and’d’ve been splinted. Catherine shook’er head. “It’s too long ago... I...” She shook’er head. “I don’t know.”

“Well, I guess it don’t matter one way or the other.” Tracy shook’er head. “I think she mumbled something about having to pull his shorts back up when she found him. And—”

The doctor stepped between’em, set a bucket down by Brittney’s cot. “You might want to watch your feet the next few days.”

Standing there, Catherine must’ve shivered.

“You alright?”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on,” Tracy said. “Let’s let them get some sleep.”

High beams shot out over night-washed sand and a shadow opened ahead and the driver swerved t'miss't. He bent forward so's chin almost touched the steering wheel, as'f that helped'm see into the cone-shaped swath the headlights carved outa the dusty night. "You think there's any point being out here?"

Wind'd've continued as't'd done all day. Sand-lines'd've snaked across the landscape. Slowly, dunes'd've been broken down t'b'rebuilt somewhere else.

"Wind's bad."

"Weather said no storms for a while."

"I didn't say anything about a storm."

They drove on. "See anything?"

"Not yet. How far out you gonna go?" He, too, bent and peered through the windshield. "Look at that."

An upturned roof lay splintered, a wrecked boat adrift'n the desert.

The driver shook'is head. "A little farther." Sand and wind shifted round the car. "I think there's a place we can turn, up here."

"Spooky."

"Huh?"

"Back then," the passenger said. "Don't you remember?"

But the driver'dn't reply.

"Like when everybody was out looking for Trent. Remember?"

"My parents didn't let me go out."

"It's just like... It's like something's... wrong. The last time things like this happened..."

"Coincidence." Flat ground seemed t'open just beyond the headlight's periphery. "We'll turn, up here."

Sarah pushed-open'er bedroom door and motioned for Allison t'hurry.

"Did you finish it yet?"

Allison nodded.

"Really something, right?"

Allison nodded, again. "Here." And she crossed the room t'prop'er foot on a chair and shifted'er skirt enough t'remove the ribbon that held the bound pages against'er thigh.

"How did you think of that?"

"You ever read the one called... *The Witches Consul?*"

"Oh, yes." Sarah nodded. "I know what you mean, the part where she sneaks out the—yes." And she took the book and knelt by'er bed and pulled out the shoebox and tipped'er fingers through't as'f there were some kind of filing system and slotted't'n place.

"How did your uncle like the dress?"

"I haven't shown it to him yet."

"A surprise then," Sarah said, and smiled. She motioned for Allison t'sit on bed's edge. And she glanced over'er shoulder as'f t'check the door before she sat beside'er.

"Tell me," Sarah said, voice low. "Is it really really true? Did your mother know... *her?* I mean, really know."

"Um... What do you mean?"

Sarah leaned closer. "Your mother... She is the one they say went up the mountain with her, right? I mean, in real life."

Allison shook'er head.

"Then that would make you the baby they came down with."

"No," Allison said. "No, my father went up the mountain with my mother."

"Are you sure?" Sarah's face fell.

Allison nodded. "What in the world made you think—"

"Never mind," Sarah said. And she shook'er head and stood and looked round absently. "Real life," she said, "can be so boring, right?"

"I—"

"I mean—nothing interesting ever happens. Everything is the same old thing. Just boring." She moved toward the window, folded'er arms across'er chest, as'f she were able t'see through those heavy curtains. "Just think if you *were* her. If you came down off the mountain with *her*. That would be something, right?" She still looked at the curtain. "Have you ever read *The Daughter Child*? About the girl *she* helped bring down from the mountain." And Sarah turned and seated'erself at'er vanity. "It was written in secret by a neighbor. And it tells everything about her—the little girl. How she could point at something and make it fly across the room. And how at night all the birds would gather on the roof of her house and just before morning they would all fly away just before anyone could see them and—"

"How did the neighbor know they were there then?"

Sarah shook'er head. "Obviously, she saw them. Besides, that is not the point. But it goes on and the girl—as she grows up—it ends up that when she puts on clothes, she starts itching. And the itching becomes a horrible rash. And then big running blisters. So she cannot wear anything at all. And the only thing she can do is stay locked in her room all the time—naked. And her parents, they have no idea what to do, right. They have to have a carpenter cut a special door with a gap at the bottom, so the mother can slide plates of food under the door into her room. And because she has to go around naked all the time, they get afraid someone might see through the window, so they have boards nailed over them. Then, day or night, the only light left is the lamp beside her bed and—"

"How does she sleep on the bed if she can't touch the fabric?"

"It only matters if the fabric is from *clothes*. But she stays in the one room for years and years. Eventually, everyone gets used to not

seeing her at all. A lot of people do not even remember she lives there anymore. No one hears anything. And her mother never sees a shadow pass when she puts her food under the door—”

“Did she die?”

“She—”

She turned as the door opened and Mrs Hoyle poked’er head through. “You two having fun?”

“Yes, mother.”

“Good. Lunch is about to start.”

“Okay,” Sarah said. “We will be down in just a minute.”

Mrs Hoyle smiled, nodded, then closed the door.

Sarah rolled’er eyes, stood, stuffed the cloth back’n the shoebox and covered’t and pushed’t under the bed with’er foot.

“That was close,” Allison whispered.

But Sarah shook’er head. “No worries. No one will ever find out.” She took Allison’s hand. “Come on.”

“Wait,” Allison said as they came t’the stairs. “I...need a minute first.”

“Why?”

“I have to...you know.”

“Alright,” Sarah said. “But hurry up.”

And Allison nodded and turned t’open the bathroom door.

Downstairs, Mrs Hoyle glanced round at the two of'em from'er chair and watched'em till they ascended the stairs with their plates.

"Anyway, I don't see why things have to be so secret," one of the ladies said. "My B—"

"Just the way things are anymore."

Mrs Pimrose nodded. "The way I hear it," she said, "they have the trains running north again and the reverend came in this morning for a special meeting with Mr Perkins."

"How did you find that out?"

"Recall," Mrs Hoyle said, "her brother is a conductor."

"Oh, yes. I forgot."

Mrs Pimrose glanced toward the floor a moment. "Well, he is definitely in town."

"Perhaps he has come to do a service tomorrow."

"I doubt it," Mrs Hoyle said. She lifted'er saucer and cup. "He never has before. In person, that is. And why should he start now?"

"He—"—a woman turned toward Mary-Celleste—"—does all his sermons over the radio now, right? Even the ones up there in his first church?"

Mary-Celleste nodded as she sipped'er tea. "Of course—"

Mrs Hoyle and t'others'd've turned as someone came fast down the stairs, went toward the kitchen. "There is no need to run."

"Sorry," Sarah said as she passed, red-gelatin-filled dishes'n each hand, spoons pinioned between'er fingers. "We forgot dessert."

"There is still no need to run."

"Sorry, mother."

Mrs Hoyle shook'er head as'er daughter ascended.

And she pushed'er bedroom door shut with'er heel. "Here." Allison accepted a refrigerator-cooled dish. "You have to eat it before it starts to get warm and melts."

The gelatin'd've already begun t'sweat as Allison carved'er spoon into't. "Are you going to tell the rest of the story?"

"Hm?"

Allison swallowed. "The one about the girl who was locked in her room. You didn't finish it."

"Oh," Sarah said. "That." Her spoon tinked against'er dish. "Never mind about that." And she set't on'er nightstand. "Here." She knelt t'pull out the shoebox. "Here, you take it. And—take this one too."

"What's it about?"

"A surprise," Sarah said. "Go on. Take it. You can carry them out the same way you carried the other one in." And she plopped'em on'er bedspread and lifted'er dish, in which a green gelatinous mass floated'n a same-colored puddle. "Well, hurry up. Before someone comes in." And she kicked the box under the bed. "Do you have somewhere to hide them?"

Allison nodded as she retied the ribbon. "Yes, I've got a place." And she lowered'er foot and'er dress rustled down round'er ankles and brushed the tops of'er shoes.

The door opened. "Allison, dear." Mrs Hoyle poked'er head'n. "Your mother is ready to go."

"Mother," Sarah said, hurried, as'f she'd t'rush the idea out before't escaped. "Can Allison stay the night?"

"I think not."

“Why not?”

“She can not spend all her time over here.”

“She is not spending all of her time over here.”

“And I am sure she has plenty of responsibilities at home,” Mrs Hoyle said.

“B—”

Mrs Hoyle shook'er head. “Not tonight, dear.”

Sarah followed'em down last, sulked. Still on the stairs, she said down into the hall, “Mrs Holdfast, would it be alright if Allison stayed the night?”

Mary-Celleste glanced toward the door. “Well... She can stay for a little while.” And t' Allison: “If you want to.” And when Allison nodded and said yes, her mother turned t' Mrs Hoyle. “I hope that'll be alright with you. I have a couple errands to run, before it gets too late.”

“Of course,” Mrs Hoyle said. “Of course.”

Mary-Celleste nodded, glanced at Allison. “I'll be back in a little while.” Then t' Mrs Hoyle: “You're sure it's no trouble?”

“Of course not.”

And down the front steps, she'd been just'n time t'catch sight of Mrs Pimrose'n the distance and raised'er hand and called, "Mrs Pimrose." Mrs Pimrose stopped and turned.

Mary-Celleste hurried t'catch up. "Would you mind if I walked along with you for a bit?"

Mrs Pimrose smiled. "No, not at all. I would be glad for the company."

They'd walked a little while before Mrs Pimrose asked, "Where is your daughter?" And when Mary-Celleste told'er, Mrs Pimrose said, "They do seem to get along well, don't they."

Mary-Celleste nodded. Finally she said, "If I may say, the ladies seem a very tightly knit bunch round here."

"Oh, yes. But that is the way it is everywhere, right?"

"I suppose so. Which's why I have to say I can't understand why they're so interested in me."

But Mrs Pimrose'dn't reply.

"I feel like such an outsider, you know, sometimes," Mary-Celleste said. "It just seems like everything down here is so different, sometimes."

"You get used to it."

"I suppose." They'd walked awhile longer before Mary-Celleste said, "So your brother's a conductor. That must be an exciting job, going round to all the different towns."

"Yes..." Mrs Pimrose said.

"Do you feel okay?"

Mrs Pimrose nodded. "Fine. What would make you think otherwise?"

"You just didn't look very well there for a minute."

"No. I am fine."

"I just thought," Mary-Celleste said, "it seemed a little strange."

"What was that?"

"Your brother. If I may say, everyone seemed rather...dismissive of him. I would've thought he had a very respectable job. At least, it's that way where I'm from."

"Oh," Mrs Pimrose said. "Of course, it is a respectable job."

"Does he have a mustache, your brother?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I think I met him when we came in on the train."

"Most likely," Mrs Pimrose said.

"Then, if you don't mind me asking, of course, why the...you know, today?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Of course, if you don't want to talk about it, please, don't let me intrude. Like I say, things are so...[alien]...here sometimes. And I just don't know what I should say."

"No," Mrs Pimrose said. "That is okay. Nothing. Just... Like you say. Like you say, everything is very tightly knit. Everyone works in the plants, you know. So..."

"Your husband?"

"Yes," Mrs Pimrose said. "And my other brother, John. But Roger..."

"I don't mean to pry."

"Oh, no. Not prying at all," Mrs Pimrose said. "In fact, I am probably telling you more than you want to know. I have that problem, sometimes."

"Oh, no," Mary-Celleste said. "What about your brother?—if I may ask."

Mrs Pimrose shook'er head, looked off above rooftops as'f seeing something beyond, blinking as'f the wind'd blown grit into'er eye. "He always loved trains," she said. "Even when he was a little boy. He had this wooden engine and cars and wore the wheels off them." She shook'er head. "But after mother and father died, he quit working on the line. There had been a wreck shortly before that, and an engineer and conductor had been killed. So he got a job with them." Her

gaze settled on distant sidewalks. "And he has been on the trains ever since."

"He must've really wanted to do it."

"Oh, yes. More than anything."

"It must've hurt," Mary-Celleste said. "Him going off like that."

But Mrs Pimrose shook'er head.

"But I can see what you mean," Mary-Celleste said. "It must be hard sometimes."

But Mrs Pimrose remained silent.

"I'm sorry," Mary-Celleste said. "If I—"

"No," Mrs Pimrose said, voice low. "No." She cleared'er throat. "No, I was just thinking. It must be very bad to feel so out of place sometimes. I am sure it feels almost unbearable, on occasion."

Mrs Pimrose stopped, looked up a set of front steps. "I know the two of us have just eaten... But would you like to come in for something to drink or...anything?"

Even with the heat, she'd've wrapped'erself against the night and walked ahold of'er arms as [goose]-flesh spread beneath'er fingers. Narrow passages'd've led deep between tightly clustered towers that'd've seemed t'pierce between stars and'd've hid the moons. So the only way she'd've been able t'guide'erself'd've been by skating'er fingers tentatively along the walls.

Smooth jointed stone. Rough plasters. Bare mudbrick

Darkened switchbacks. Dim distant glow. Voice and sound carried
round a corner'n a way light'd only wish t'travel.

“Pass that over here.”

“Not much left.”

“Better be some.”

“How’d it get on with that one?”

“Which?”

“The one at the gate. The one with the ass.”

“Ha—ha—ha—fucking tight that one. Didn’t think I was going to be able to get it all in.”

“Be crying over that a few days.”

“Ha—Ha—Ha—you fucking believe it. Know what—Ha—said—Ha—Ha—said *how could anyone like that?*—and know what I said—Well, I sure did—Ha—Ha—Ha—Ha— ”

“You drank it all.”

“Sucks to be you then, don’t it?”

Metal rattled, skipped over stone. “God—I hate this fucking place.”

“Turn down that light or you’ll run the batteries down.”

“You fucking do it.”

“Hey—you—yeah, you. Got something for yuh.”

“Where’d you get that?”

“Around.”

“What you want for it?”

“Yeah. How much?”

“Tell you what. I’m feeling awful generous tonight. And I happen to have *just* enough. Might be willing to share.”

“What’s the catch?”

"Not much. Just come over here and use your mouth. All there is to it."

"Fuck you."

"That's the idea."

"Better watch it. Too much teeth."

"You're right. I'll just take a regular old piece of ass instead. Better?"

"Shove it up your own ass."

"Tell you what. Anyone wants to plow that ass with something gets a hit."

"Broom handles or fingers count?"

"I said something, didn't I?"

"Everyone? Or jus' the person that does it?"

"Of course, I expect you to work for it. No goldbricking round here. This isn't socialism."

"I'll do it."

"There we go. First up."

"Fuck you—fuck all of you."

"Tell you what. I'll even go ahead and let you have some before it starts. Feel better? Think of it as...a free ride while everybody takes a ride. Free ride right out off this fucking rock and back to daisy fields and green meadows, snow-capped mountains, cool streams, long beaches where the surf crashes into eternity. The Green Hills of Earth. All you ever need, right here in this bag. And all you gotta do is something you won't even remember doing, anyway. So what do you say?"

"How do I know that's the real thing?"

"Me? Cheat you? I'm hurt. I'm really hurt. I think I'd just better go where my gifts will be appreciated."

"Wait!"

"Oh?"

"I want to test it first."

"Only fair. Only fair. Samples are always available. Always available Tick tock. Limited time offer onlyWell? There now. Good? What's that? Didn't quite make it out."

"... yes..."

"So you're taking my little offer? Can't hear you."

“...yes...damn it...”

“Well then... Looks like your fellow performers are all ready to go, too.”

“What was that?”

“What?”

“Thought I heard something. Over there. In a passage.”

“Don’t worry about it. Come on.”

but she'd already enshrouded'erself'n darkness and retreated into interconnected labyrinths.

"I'm still not easy about this," one of the councilmen said.

"The majority carried," Taggart said, still bent over papers spread on the table before'm.

"And I still dissent."

"And it's duly noted," Taggart said. He leaned forward t'grab a pencil.

Another councilman: "You can bet Ron'll have something to say about this when he gets back."

"*If*," Taggart said. "If we'd done this sooner, he might be here now."

One of the councilmen turned, leaned against the table as'e looked at the large oaken plaque hung on the wall, where red-stained flame propelled a poplar rocket betwixt ashewood stars, toward a red oak semi-orb. "This just doesn't make any sense."

"It will soon enough," Taggart said. He gathered'is papers. "I'll have everything I need shortly."

“Squeak”

“Squeak”

“Squeak”

“I’m chasing the rats away with a broom,” she called as she swept through the commissary.

One or two glanced up. But most’dn’t’ve bothered.

"You must miss him quite alot," Mary-Celleste said as she held'er cup out while Mrs Pimrose wielded the samovar. "Since he has to be gone so long."

Mrs Pimrose nodded. "Yes. It can be difficult at times." She took up'er own cup and saucer again. "He was supposed to visit last week, but with everything that has happened on the northern and southern lines... He had to go on a special run."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Oh," Mrs Pimrose said. "Everything is alright. In fact, I just got a call from him this morning. He will be coming down at the end of the week."

"What day is that?"

"Friday. Why?"

"Just curious," Mary-Celleste said. She sipped'er tea. "He'll be attending the auxiliary then?"

"No. After Sarah—his wife..." Mrs Pimrose shook'er head. "He does not care for social functions."

"At least you'll get to see each other for a little while."

"A little while. He will not stay long. Just a half hour or so." Mrs Pimrose sighed.

"Back on the train then?"

Mrs Pimrose nodded.

"I guess I'll probably be seeing him then," Mary-Celleste said.

"Really?"

"Yes, I was considering a short trip. I have a brother in the next town. And it's been a long time since he's seen Allison. And I thought after the auxiliary would be a good time to go for a visit."

"How nice," Mrs Pimrose said. "I did not realize you had another brother."

Mary-Celleste nodded. "He had to leave to find work shortly before our parents died. It hurt them greatly, of course. But there wasn't anything else that could be done."

"Yes. Yes, I understand. What does he do, your brother?"

"A repairman," Mary-Celleste said. "That's what father was, of course."

"It is good that some traditions can be kept up."

"Yes," Mary-Celleste said. "He sent a little money back to us a while ago. But with everything that's been going on, it's been hard to keep in touch."

Mrs Pimrose nodded. "Yes. Yes, I know what you mean." She sipped'er tea. "Are you planning on going to stay over there, with your brother?"

"I don't think so," Mary-Celleste said. "I'm finding it very nice here. And the longer I'm here the more people I find things in common with. So, no, I don't think so. Just a visit. A day or two at the most."

"It is always good to see family."

"Yes." Mary-Celleste sipped'er tea. "It's only..." She shook'er head.

"Only what?"

Mary-Celleste shook'er head again. "There's no need to bother you with it."

"No. No, please go on."

"Well," Mary-Celleste said. "I've been worried I won't be able to go."

"Why not?" Mrs Pimrose sat forward.

"It's just that—where we came from—I could've bought a train ticket whenever I wanted. But here, of course, I can't do that."

"Your brother could buy it, of course."

"That's the problem, you see," Mary-Celleste said. "With his schedule, working all hours, he just doesn't have the time. And I'm afraid if I wait much longer this year, the storms will get worse. So I guess I might just have to put the trip off."

"There should be no need to do that."

“What else can I do?”

Mrs Pimrose’s mouth tightened and she leaned back into’er chair, tea cup and saucer held balanced’n’er lap. “I would think there would have to be something you could do.” She shook’er head. “You know,” she said. “If you wanted, I could have Roger get you a ticket. There should be no problem with that.”

“No. I couldn’t put you through the trouble. Or your brother. I’m sure he’s busy enough.”

Mrs Pimrose shook’er head. “I am sure he would be glad to do it. Besides, it would be no more trouble than anything else. It is all part of his job, after all. And all he has to do is buy you a ticket and see you on the train, and he has to be there, anyway.”

“No, I couldn’t do that.”

“No, it would be absolutely perfect.” Mrs Pimrose sat forward. “He will be coming in just right when you want to leave. You see, absolutely perfect.”

“Well, yes, I mean... I still don’t want to put anyone out.”

“It would be nothing.” And Mrs Pimrose smiled.

“If you think it’ll be alright.”

“Sure it will. Besides, Roger has often told me he sometimes buys tickets for widows and such when they need to go on the train. No, this is perfect. Just perfect.” She sipped’er tea. Smiled. “Things just work out sometimes. Providence, would you say?”

And Mary-Celleste smiled and nodded.

Not-gathered sun lay as a smeared blood-line along a dust-swept horizon. But it didn't compete with'er eyes.

Zilog watched't, too, looked up where wind'd carried away dust settled atop the dome. "Ah. That if the superstructure be removed, the object of desire left freestanding. So?"

"I told Nathaniel, before he left, that he was running away. Except, I've been running away, too. Or running in place. I don't know."

He looked down at the horizon beyond the dome's blister-skin.

"I would suggest sleep," he said. "And not to worry. All bad things, they still remain when we wake."

"I thought you were supposed to hope they went away while you slept."

"Was für Gemüse gibt es?"

"Are you alright," Mary-Celleste said as they walked.

Allison shook'er head. "Just a little tired."

"It's not much farther."

"I wish they had benches," Allison said. "Like they do at home."

"We'll stop at the corner. You can lean against a pole a minute or two."

"I'm fine."

"I'm sure you are. But right now we might as well rest a minute."

"Won't we get home late?"

Mary-Celleste shook'er head. "It just seems late because of the dust. It's still a while before the curfew yet."

"Won't Uncle Jack be mad?"

"You let me worry about that." Just at the corner, Mary-Celleste touched'er daughter's shoulder.

"What is it?"

"Shhh." And Mary-Celleste inclined'er head. And she stiffened as she must've recognized, ifn't the voices'emselves, their inter-cadence.

"We will handle this."

"Yes, we will."

"You can't do that."

"We can."

"We have."

"I have a contract to keep up. You—"

"No one will blame you if you place it on your paperwork."

"We won't mind."

A door slammed. An engine started. A covered truck barreled through the intersection and turned at a more distant one.

Mary-Celleste took Allison's hand. "Let's go."

"Good evening, Mrs Holdfast."

"And Miss Holdfast."

Argile tipped his hat while Ceili put the kitty in the trunk and closed it.

"Though," Ceili said. "It's not the best evening."

"No," Argile said.

"Though," Ceili said. "The wind died down there for a moment."

"But it's back now, though," Argile said.

Mary-Celleste nodded. "You know what they say about the weather."

"We do, Mrs Holdfast."

"We do."

"Well then," Mary-Celleste said. "If you don't mind, we'll leave you, then. We still have a little ways to go, and we'd like to get home before dark."

"Permit us to give you a ride."

"It's the least we can do."

"No. There's no need."

"We don't," Argile said, "mean to imply you're any less than capable."

"In fact, we'd say quite the opposite."

"Yes," Argile said. "Quite the opposite. So, please—"

And Ceili moved to open a rear door. "It would be our pleasure."

"Yes," Argile said. "It would."

Mary-Celleste nodded. "Thank you."

Allison slid across the seat first. And Ceili closed the door after them. Argile climbed behind the wheel.

"You must be excited," Argile said, and looked into the rearview mirror. "About the auxiliary."

"This will be your first time," Argile said, after he climbed in, "won't it?"

"Yes," Mary-Celleste said.

"We hope you enjoy yourselves then."

"Yes," Argile said. His eyes flashed into the mirror. "Are you alright, Miss Holdfast?"

Mary-Celleste glanced at her daughter. "She's just a little tired," she said. "It's been a long day."

Ceili and Argile nodded. "We'll be there soon."

"Then she can get some rest."

"Rest's important."

"Everyone needs to relax sometime."

"And let their concerns drift away."

He brushed'is beard as'e walked, passed between shadow and sunlight, where dust lilted'n the beams, swirled by'is movements. "For the dance no time," he said, and brushed motes aside and stepped into a passage concealed by optical illusion. He'd've moved through interlocked connections with the same fluidity as when they'd been aberrant thoughts yetn't entered as vectors'n modeling systems. A rampart swept up onto the outer wall, passed through a turret. He stopped, looked up. "Too far for you to hear?" She'dn't reply. He shook'is head and entered the turret, climbed spiral stairs. She sat'n the window. "What you do up here?"

"Playing Humpty Dumpty," Melissa said.

"Ah. But away is the king's man."

"It's okay," she said. "I'm considering a one person show. Humpty puts herself back together again."

"Interesting conundrum philosophical," Zilog said. "Be the egg gendered in its inhabitant? Or be the egg its own self?"

"Or," he said. "What then if both selves be true? And why death of one must necessitate life of other?"

Melissa shook'er head.

"This actor mentality [je ne te comprends pas]. Nothing you know of it—yet attempt to be it."

"Maybe we can't know anything about anyone else anyway," she said. "So it's all pretense from the start."

"Disagree. How function we? Society? Socio-political organism?"

"Just a few scant observations plus some extrapolation and interpolation."

"Mmmmmmm. So you... Build Humpty Dumpties to try and

make others build own Humpty Dumpties. But never the two the same. [Est-ce ce que tu dis?]

"Maybe."

He shook's head, waved's hand as'f t'warn away a bird. "All hopeless then."

"Maybe."

"Ah, but what matters it? The sun, she explode. The universe, she end. Sin while [tu] can."

She glanced back at'm. "I thought you were an atheist."

"What has that to do with anything?" He offered's hand. "You come down now?"

She nodded, turned and shifted'er legs inside.

"Time next," he said as they walked down the stairs, "you tell when you play Humpty Dumpty again. I come play."

"Play what?"

"King's horse."

"Huh?"

"Does not say king's horse and king's man attempt reconstruction? So I be horse. Try put pieces together with hoof. Make Humpty Dumpty scrambled eggs—" His phone sang, and'e'd've'd t'shift'n order t'extract't from's pocket as'e walked, but the cracked screen went dead-dark as soon as'e swiped't.

"Ah."

"Batteries?"

He shook's head. "Nothing any good."

"Can't expect it to last forever."

["Vrai. "]

"Well," she said, "if you can figure out how to make a rock be a battery, I'm sure there'd be plenty of people interested."

"Ah."

"Charging station's not far away," she said.

"Ah. More magic [café] maybe."

"What?"

He shook's head, re-pocketed's phone. "Forget. New subject. How friends? Better?"

"I guess. Britt's still puking her guts in a bucket."

"Ah."

“They say a couple more weeks. But once her inner ear—or something the other—gets re-balanced, she should be up and around.”

“Youth in resilience.”

“That or she’s just hardheaded.”

“Then better to be so.”

She shook’er head. “New subject.”

[“Oui, ”] he said. “No more Humpty Dumpty. No more rock and head. Instead, we talk of [les poulet].”

“Chickens?”

“[Oui. Les poulet.] Have you not seen? They fill cathedral and to me come to know how to keep [les poulet] in.”

Hunched over with the rug sweeper, Rita looked up as if someone'd popped into the room and said boo when the kitchen door opened. "Oh. You're home late."

Jack brushed his cheek with the back of his hand as he removed his jacket, smeared red-mixed greasiness. Orange crumbled from the cracks at the corners of his eyes. Dust sifted onto the floor. "I'm going to take a shower."

"It's almost time. Y—"

"I'll be ready."

Orange sifted onto the rug as he passed.

A light glowed amid wood paneling on the far wall. Already, static hiss crashed into the living room.

“Jack—you’d better hurry.” She called up the stairs, hand agrip of the banister so tight’er knuckles discolored. The boys fidgeted on the couch and she glanced at’em. “Jack...”

He plodded downstairs, hair still wet. “Stop that.”

The boys sat silent.

He moved toward’is chair. “Do we have anything to drink?”

Rita nodded. “Are you sure you—”

“Just bring it in here.”

She nodded. Tiredly, he watched’is sister till Rita returned.

Proto-human voice carried through the grill mounted’n the wood-paneled wall: “... d evening, everyone. Let us open with a prayer...”

She [Catherine] passed over shadow-cooled stone and turned into passages the sun never touched. And finally, mounted the spiral stairs down into the cubicalae.

Dust-covered spider-cracked screens offered broken reflections. Bulged batteries sat stacked on metal shelves, leakage crystallized along their seams. But the room beyond housed the living. And tiny lights winked at'er, indifferent, the only light but for a sleep-darkened screen'n the corner.

Server warmth touched'er [goose]-flesh. She wound between equipment racks and splayed wire. "Dave." He'dn't look up. Nearby machines hummed, fans drew air across'er arm. "Dave."

"Hmmm."

"I need to ask you something."

"Hmmm."

"It's important." No reply. "Dave."

Something clicked.

He bolted up. "What's going on?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't realize you were asleep."

"No...I..." He blinked, reached and tapped a key so the screen lit. Light flickered over'is face. "Did you need something?"

"Have you heard anything from Nathaniel and Allan?"

Dave blinked, turned toward the screen and typed. "Probably would have if they were on S-band. But there's only the one satellite now and there's a power issue. I wonder if one of the panel's got smashed. It's that kind of—"

"Dave."

"Oh. Sorry." Keyboard clicks. "They're not close enough to be on LiFi. So... I don't know. But if the power'd stay steady enough on the satellite for long enough I could get on its REPL—"

"Thank you, Dave."

"Oh... Okay."

Mary-Celleste loaded the launderer and Rita looked through the screendoor as't started. Wump-wump-wump-wump-wump.

Lost'n'er own thoughts [Catherine?], her own footsteps masked any approaching sounds.

"The pieces are. They lack only to be arranged. The end is only the beginning."

She paused, glanced up at the quilt-encompassed figure. But a patchwork hood drooped over'er face so't must've seemed difficult t' imagine how the wearer'd see.

"Rei?"

Slender arms and long fingers snaked from beneath the quilt-covering and threw back the hood. The young woman smiled. "What do you think?"

"What's it supposed to be?"

Rei smiled. "That's a surprise." And she straightened, pulled'er hood back down and solemnly passed. "The pieces are. They lack only to be arranged. The end is only the beginning."

Rita watched as Allison push-pulled the rug sweeper. “Yes...” She nodded t’erself. “But make sure you get over there in the corner. And try to align all the lines. Here... Like this...”

[Light?] pictures cascaded over a mudbrick wall, which dimensionalized the projected image over their ill-fitted surfaces.

however, it is the females that constitute the group's legislative body. It is these aunts and sisters who will select the group's dominant male. Such attachment, however, can be transitory. And a male's position within the group can be vetoed if the selected male proves unsatisfactory.

It is on the grasslands that a different picture emerges. Here, the dominant male baboon reigns with supreme power. It is not just other males he must contend with, but the hosts of predators on these open plains.

But among their distant relatives, the chimpanzees, aspiring males like Tzani cannot afford such direct brutality. With a shared social bond through food and grooming, Tzani will gain the trust of other males who will help him challenge the dominant male. If he succeeds, these relationships will be crucial, not just in maintaining his own status as leader, but in patrolling and defending the group's territory from other, rival chimpanzees.

Co-operation for these young males will be key, as alone they will be prey for other chimpanzee males, who are known to periodically raid the territories of neighboring troops and kill isolated males. And though females freely move between groups after having reached sexual maturity, the lone male will find himself violently excluded.

Why this is the case, however, remains, like so many aspects of apes' social lives, a mystery [...]

"It's getting worse," Mary-Celleste said. And she released the curtain.

Rita stopped, leaned on the mop. "I'm—I am sure it—is nothing." She lifted't into the bucket. "They said there were—were not—supposed to be any more storms for a while."

"It may not be a storm," Mary-Celleste said. "But it could get worse before it gets better."

"What do you mean?" Rita knelt and rung out the mop head.

"I just think it would be a good time to go and get the few things we need."

"They'll—they will wait."

"Except with the auxiliary and Sunday, and if it's worse by Monday—"

"But they said it was—" She shook'er head and sighed. "They said it *was* not going to be a storm. You heard the radio."

"Anyway, we're going to be out of several things until next week, is all I'm saying."

Rita paused, mop water drooled across linoleum. "Well..." She glanced down at'er dress. "I can change and we'll—we will go out." Slop slop across linoleum. "We can take Allison too. She—has seemed rather out of sorts the last few days, d—do you not think? It might do her a little good to get out."

"I'd rather she not," Mary-Celleste said. And'er sister'n-law looked up at'er. "I'd just prefer that she wasn't out in this right now."

After a moment, Rita nodded. "Yes, I guess maybe y—you are right." She added, "We should make a list."

"I've got it on the table."

Tracy lay'n the bed. Late sunlight illuminated'er outline.

Pamela rose t' tiptoe, waved. And she ran up and took [Catherine's?] arm. "Can I talk to you?"

Another patch-quilt robe approached.

“Rei?”

The figure turned, pushed back the hood. Melissa glanced up at canyon-esque walls, up from the shadow world, t’sunlit airiness and semi-hazed dome.

“How long are you going to tease us all with this?”

Faintly, Melissa smiled. “You can come have something to eat with us if you want. We’ll show you round.”

Melissa led the way up the narrow passage.

“Aren’t you afraid I’m going to see behind the curtain and spoil the show?”

“Nope,” Melissa said. “I’ve never believed you can let the magic out of the thing by looking at its guts. If I did, I probably never would’ve made it past being one of the audience.”

Each clutched a paper bag t'er chest, tops rolled down t'keep out dust and wind. Because of'er scarf, Mary-Celleste only waved when she saw Mrs Pimrose on the opposite walk. And Mrs Pimrose waved as she adjusted'er hat against the wind.

"Sometimes," Rita said, her voice muffled through'er scarf, "I wish they—would—keep stores open late. That way the husbands could just drive us down after they get off work. It would make things so much simpler."

"Or," Mary-Celleste said, "if we could just drive, and had a car, we wouldn't have to worry about it."

"Why in the—"

But Mary-Celleste paused, squinted. A distant black car sat obscured'n haze.

"What—is the matter?"

Mary-Celleste shook'er head. "Nothing," she said. "Come on, let's get home."

But as they continued up the street, Rita probably noticed the car, aswell. Two figures emerged from a house, started down'ts front steps. Rita froze. The paper bag crinkled against'er chest. Then, jerkily, she started forward. "You don't think they heard us, do you?" Her voice barely carried through'er scarf.

"Don't be silly."

"Shhh."

In the distance, Ceili and Argile popped their coat collars against the wind, pulled down their hats and started up the next house's front steps and one or t'other produced a master key while t'other held the screendoor.

"We should hurry," Rita said. Her sister'n-law'dn't reply. "We should hurry up and get back."

Sheets and shirts and saris drifted lazily on criss-crossed lines as temperature inversions forced air up through the tower.
Everything so gently.

Late afternoon'd turned t'dusk and darkness preceded night. Dust dimmed streetlamps.

Allison let the curtain fall back into place.

Her aunt looked up from whatever she'd've been sewing. "Sit down, dear. You're going to wear a route in the carpet."

Allison said nothing, but plopped into a chair. Her mother moved'n the kitchen.

"No need to be so anxious," Rita said. "They—will be here soon enough." She looked up from'er work. "Have everything ready?"

Allison nodded. She'd already packed'er carpetbag with'er new dress and a change of clothes and set't by their dresser.

"Well, then you—you had better go up and bring them down. You d—do not want to have to run a—round and waste time when they get here."

Wiping'er hands on a dishrag, Mary-Celleste appeared'n the kitchen doorway and'er eyes followed'er daughter as she disappeared upstairs. "Where's she going?"

"I told her to bring down her bag so she would—not have to when the car got here."

Mary-Celleste nodded.

"How—is it coming?"

"Fine," Mary-Celleste said. "I've gone ahead and put the crust in the refrigerator."

Rita nodded as she attended t'needle and thread. "I would—not even try."

"Why not?"

Rita shook'er head. "All tha—"

She looked up and Mary-Celleste turned as the kitchen door opened and the screen slammed.

"Jack?" Rita set aside'er work and rocked'erself outa'er chair. Jack stood by the door and brushed'is hand over'is orange-red-impregnated shirt. But'e gave up and let the sweat-stained fabric be. "Where's your coat?"

"I hung it outside."

She nodded. "I'll wash them as soon as you change."

He fished a wad of orange-handprint-marked envelopes from'is pocket and dropped'em on the table. He futzed with one, smeared orange-red across't as'e worked'is thumbnail betwixt glued paper.

"Why d—you can worry about that later," Rita said

"Might as well see it now." He dis-folded the papers within. "We're going to have to start turning off some lights around here."

Rita nodded. "I know. We could do better."

His face set as'e moved t'the next page, jaw worked front t'back. "What's this?"

"What's that, dear?" And Rita stepped round and tried t'look over'is shoulder, but'e turned away.

"Have you been to the dress shop?"

Rita shook'er head. "No. Why?"

"Then what's this?" He flicked'is wrist and turned the page toward'er.

"I—"

"Why do you need to spend this kind of money on a dress?"

"I didn't!"

"It's right here."

"Jack. Please."

"I said—"

"It's my fault."

Everyone looked up at where Allison stood'n the living room doorway. "I mean..."

Mary-Celleste shifted, but'er brother said, "I'll handle this." And'e turned toward Allison, again. "Explain."

"I..."

"Now."

"It wasn't my fault. I mean..." But as she went on, the only thing

that might've given'm pause was mention of the Hoyles. And'e stood there a moment as'is jaw muscles subtly worked.

A horn sounded twice from the street. And everyone looked through t'the living room. Allison glanced over'er shoulder. After a few moments, it sounded again.

"That's probably them," Rita said.

Jack might've looked ready t'say something, but'f the horn sounded two more times'e'd've only been able t'shake'is head. "Go." Allison looked back at'm. "Didn't you hear me?" The horn sounded again. "Go on."

Silently, she went t'the stairs and lifted'er carpetbag. And Mary-Celleste followed'er t'the door.

"Take care," her mother said. "And bring your bag with you when you ride with them to the auxiliary." Allison looked at'er mother questioningly, her hand on the doorknob. "Tell them it's because you need to come home right after, okay. Do you hear me?" Allison nodded. "Remember, now." The horn sounded. "Alright," Mary-Celleste said. "Go on. And remember."

Voices ahead. Zeb dodged into a sidepassage, clutched his bag and fumbled for the projector and cords. He'd've'd t'connect't all and get set up with a good angle on a nearby wall before they all scattered, but'e'd practiced enough by then, so his instincts'd've been razor sharp.

“Napoleon’s dragon...”

he stopped²⁷

²⁷ (See #56.4867643.)

[“ A]nd [so] they crossed into the land of Peter’s bears. But the army was attacked by the bears and forced back to the river. Napoleon’s horse stumbled and went down in the attack and Napoleon was thrown into the river. He couldn’t swim because of all the armor he wore and he began to sink. The river was known for its fish and at the time a large balding eagle circled overhead and dived. But when it came up it carried Napoleon. But he weighed too much and the eagle could hardly fly and its claws cracked and broke against the armor and he dropped Napoleon in the heart of the woods and flew away. Climbing up, Napoleon looked around. His army was far away and scattered. It was late in the year and as night came it began to snow so that in a few hours it was well up to his knees. But he trudged through it and wrapped himself in his cloak. He walked that way for a long time, until spring came and the snows melted. The spring rains drenched him. And between the rains and the melted snow and the river his armor stayed wet so long it began to rust. Each day his armor grew stiffer and stiffer. And one day he found himself frozen and couldn’t move at all and stood there rusted solid in his armor, in the middle of the woods.”

“But how does the [dragon] come into it?”

“I’m getting to that.”

“Be quiet and let him finish.”

“Okay. So Napoleon is rusted there for a long time. And he doesn’t know how long, just that it’s a really long time. And one day he hears a bunch of saws and axes. They keep coming closer and closer as the days go by. Eventually, they pass him and turn off into the woods. And behind them come horses and men to pull the stumps. And behind

them come the horses pulling the scrapers. Last come the bricklayers, working their way along and building the last of the road. Eventually, they pass by, too. And no one ever notices Napoleon standing there, because he was just too far away in the woods, too hidden in the trees, to be seen. So he stood there a long time. He could just see the road through the trees. One day, he heard something approach, and the sound became so loud it rang against the inside of his helmet. Over the hill appeared Indians, big bows tied to their wrists, multi-colored feathers in their hair, marching in columns, led by the Queen of England. It was an army on the move. It took days for all of them to pass. But Napoleon couldn't turn his head to see where they were going. So he waited. Sometime later, he heard something from the opposite direction and eventually saw the Queen of England running back down the road with a handful of Indians. Some time passed and he heard another sound coming over the hill. A clank. When it got closer, he saw it was a group of stove makers. They pushed and pulled handcarts loaded with black cast-iron. Smoke curled from the chimneys. And the leader held up an arm to halt as they came upon one of the fallen dead Indians. 'This'll do,' he called back. And the others brought up axes and divided up the Indian and put various parts in various stoves. Then they went on. Sometime later the Indians came back for their dead, but there were only piles of ashes where the stove makers had emptied their drawers. So they left again. Then after a long time he heard something behind him again. And a column of bears passed. The land of bears had come out of hibernation in the spring and now traveled in summer. Their columns marched down the road on all fours. Some of them wore feather bonnets as war souvenirs. It took many days for them all to pass by. It seemed like the whole nation had come out to overrun the world."

"But what about the [dragon]?"

"I'm getting to that."

"Yeah, stop interrupting."

"So the army of the bears passed and Napoleon knew the whole world must be at war. Time passed and smoke rose in the distance. The woods were filled with the stench of death and fire. People fled. The stovemakers passed back and forth along the road and took up the pieces of bodies and added a little more smoke to the world. At

first it was the rich. When their coaches broke down they went on foot. But they had ridden in coaches so long they could barely walk, and bear skirmishers caught up with them and drug their jewels and fine clothes away. And they couldn't live long without them. So eventually the stovemakers found their bodies. Then came the poor, the destitute, people who looked to be little more than skeletons and who could barely walk. And the ones strong enough to pull carts pulled carts laden with those who could no longer walk. Children looked out silently from the backs of the carts with blank eyes. Bone-faced men and women stared with slack open mouths. One day after Napoleon thought everyone had gone, a lone cart came over the hill drawn by an old man and a young boy. They stopped on the road, and the old man fell down, only barely holding himself up against the wagon. And while the boy went to get something from the back, a girl climbed down and played along the road. 'Don't go far,' he told her. But she got angry at being told what to do and stuck her tongue out at him when his back was turned, and she went off into the woods when he wasn't looking. She weaved among the trees, grabbed one and turned round it, then went onto another and did the same. She might have kept on with that if she hadn't seen Napoleon. She froze there, looking up wide eyed at him and clutching her stuffed dog. 'Who are you?' she said. 'I am the emperor Napoleon,' he said, but his voice was muffled and didn't come out of the helmet very intelligibly. 'What's wrong with you?' she said. At first, he went into some grand soliloquy, but it was so long and sounded so strange from beneath his helmet she could only stand there puzzled. Finally, he stopped and, after a pause, repeated the single word 'oil' over and over again, until she finally nodded. 'So,' she said, 'you're rusted and can't move.' With that, she seized upon the ah-ha moment and whirled and ran back to the road and set her stuffed dog down on the cart and climbed up into the back. 'Where have you been?' the boy asked. But she didn't reply as she searched through the rags piled in the back of the wagon. 'What are you looking for?' Then she looked up and over the side and saw him standing there with the oil can in his hand from where he'd been lubricating the wheels. So she climbed down and ran up to him and grabbed it. 'Let me have it,' she said. He tried to pull it away. 'Why?' he said. But she jerked it from him and ran off the

side of the road, and he yelled and chased after her. He started to yell at her again, but stopped when he saw her standing in front of the rusted suit of armor, proffering the oil can overhead. 'What's going on?' he said. She replied, 'He's rusted up.' 'Oil,' Napoleon called. But the girl could reach no higher than his waist with it and had only oiled his ankles and knees. So she offered the can to the boy and told him to finish it. But he shook his head and said, 'What if he's a bad soldier.' With that, Napoleon launched into a tirade that left the inside of his helmet ringing and both youths confused. 'What's your name?' the boy asked. 'Neapolitan,' the girl said. 'Napoleon,' the emperor said, but it came out sounding like what the girl had said. 'See,' she said. The boy shook his head. 'I've never heard of anyone named that,' the boy said. Finally, after much wheedling, the boy took the oil can and liberally applied some to the rest of the joints in Napoleon's armor. And he worked himself side to side until he could move freely again and had stopped squeaking. 'You can come with us,' the boy said. 'If you want.' And Napoleon followed them down to the road. While they were away, the old man had died and the boy pulled him off to the side of the road and said they had better hurry because the stovemakers might be along soon, and they wouldn't care to add them all to the fire. So he helped the little girl into the back of the cart. She picked up her stuffed dog again. 'This is my dog,' she said to Napoleon. She looked over her shoulder at the scarecrow piled in the corner and said, 'That's my friend.'"

"But what about the [dragon]?"

"I'm getting there?"

"Is it going to be anytime soon?"

"Just be quiet or this *will* take all day."

"So Napoleon went with them and helped pull the cart until they came to the foot of the mountains. Here the brick road ended. Instead, there was a silk-covered road. But the sheets of silk were worn through with the boots and barefeet and claws of passing armies and were covered in powder burns and smelled strongly of smoke. It took a long time to travel east. They knew they were there when they came to the Great Wall. There were guards all along it. They had watched them for many miles as they approached. But as they got closer they realized the guards were made of clay and had been propped against

the top of the wall. As they came to the gate, the girl pointed out an old man sitting with his back to the wall on the side of the road. A tablet was on his knee, and he sat writing. They stopped. 'I am the emperor Napoleon,' Napoleon said. 'He means Neapolitan,' the girl corrected. The emperor had freshly oiled his armor that morning, so he could walk over to the old man without trouble. 'What are you writing?' The old man didn't look up, but said, 'Everything that I know.' 'That must be a burdensome job,' Napoleon said. 'Yes,' the old man said. 'And it grows more wearisome,' the old man said. 'How so?' Napoleon said. 'Because,' the old man said, 'they will not let me leave until I have bequeathed all of what I know to the coming generations.' Napoleon said, 'That seems quite a task. But I fail to see why it should be as wearisome as you claim.' The old man said, 'Because in all the years I sit here, some traveler ventures by and tells me of some other part of the world, some aspect of himself, of his troubles, of his hopes, of his successes, his failures, and then knowing that, I must add it to this. So the record grows without bound.' Napoleon nodded inside his helmet. 'I see,' the emperor said. The old man said, 'So please be off before you say more to me.' The emperor, seeing no need not to honor the request, nodded, again, inside his helmet and went back to the cart. But the girl stood with her dog and looked over the side of the cart and yelled, 'Are there any bears here?' The old man groaned and shook his head. 'Their ambassadors are here. But we have no war with them.' Napoleon turned again to him and said, 'You have heard of the war?' The old man nodded and said, 'There have been many travelers. If you desire to know, please consult the pages at my feet. But ask me no more.' But the boy said, 'Then is there safety inside?' The old man sighed again. 'Yes,' he said, 'I suppose there is.' Then he added, 'If you can stand that sort of thing.' Napoleon said, 'What do you mean by that?' The old man looked up, but his pen continued to move, and he said, 'Beyond is the land of steel. In every back yard a steel mill burns. Step beyond the gate and you will know. The smell is like war.' Napoleon said, 'How do people feed themselves if they only work steel?' The old man said, 'They do not.' Napoleon said, 'Then how does the country go on?' The old man replied, 'There are many people. And it will be long before all die. But—'—and the old man pointed up with his free hand—

‘—notice the empty sky.’ Napoleon said, ‘What of it?’ And the old man replied, ‘They are all dead, the carrion eaters. None can be swift enough to the carcasses.’ Napoleon stood there a moment in silence. The girl asked, ‘What does that mean?’ Napoleon shook his head inside his helmet and said, ‘We must go back. There is nothing for us here.’ The old man nodded and his long beard swept over the current manuscript page. He said, ‘Yes. I will go too as soon as I am able.’ The girl said, ‘Why don’t you go now?’ And the old man sighed and said in an irritated tone, ‘Because I have to write down all I know.’ And the girl said, ‘But do you have to do it here?’ The old man looked up, but continued to write. ‘What do you say?’ he asked. The girl said, ‘You don’t have to stop writing to come with us.’ She looked at the boy and Napoleon. ‘Can’t he come?’ she asked. The boy said, ‘If he wants.’ And Napoleon just shrugged inside his armor. The girl held her dog with one hand and motioned to the old man with her other. ‘Hurry up,’ she said. ‘You can sit by scarecrow.’ The old man, stiff legged, rose and ambled toward the cart and climbed into the back of it. The boy pointed toward the pile of paper and said, ‘What about those?’ as the old man eased himself onto the rags beside the scarecrow and put the tablet across his knee once more. He said, ‘It is only required of me to record what it is I know. No more.’ So with that, Napoleon and the boy turned the cart away from the Great Wall and headed back west.”

“But what about the [dragon]?”

“It’s dead and buried by now.”

“I’m getting to it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Now, just listen. So...”

“You don’t know the rest of it, do you?”

“Yes, I do. I’m just trying to get my brains back together after being interrupted so many times.”

“Is the purpose of the story to reflect how much time passed by *actually* taking that much time to tell it?”

“Be quiet.”

“So they went back to the west. And they followed the brick road back through to the other side of the forest. And everything was quiet. It was so quiet that even the blowing of branches by the wind

was loud enough to startle them. But beyond that there was nothing. The war seemed to have gone. What was left was smoke. Smoke everywhere. Smoke so thick they could hardly breathe and had to walk with cloths over their mouths. But they never saw anything. Not one single body. Not even of so much as a tiny bird. Finally, the girl, standing in the back of the cart, pointed and called out, 'Someone's coming.' They stopped, and all but the old man looked up to see what it was. A cart approached from the distance, pulled by a single man, though it was hard to tell with how much smoke surrounded it, poured from it. 'It's a stovemaker,' the boy said. And added, 'We should hide.' Napoleon shook his head. 'It is only one,' he said. 'I am more than capable of handling it.' And he let go of the cart handle and pulled his sword—six inches and freshly oiled—from its scabbard. Still some distance from them, the stovemaker stopped and waved and took up the cart again and stopped a little distance off. 'How do you do,' he said. He coughed and choked as he spoke, surrounded by thick acrid smoke, and when he smiled, his teeth were yellow-green. Napoleon called, 'What do you want?' 'Nothing,' the stovemaker said. 'Just wanted to be neighborly is all.' Napoleon stood there with his sword. 'Well then,' he said, '[*bonjour et au revoir*] and be on your way.' The stovemaker hesitated a moment, then pulled off his hat and wrung it between his fingers. He said, 'wouldn't care for a spot of tea would you? The fire's on, just got to boil some water.' '[*Merci*],' Napoleon said, 'but I think not today.' The smoke had begun to thicken around all of them by then, and even with rags over their faces, the boy gagged and the girl coughed and waved her dog around to try and clear the air. 'It's just that,' the stovemaker said. 'It's been so lonely, you know. You're the first I've seen in quite a while, you know. And I just thought you might wanna, you know, sit and talk a spell. We can talk about whatever you like, doesn't matter.' Napoleon said, 'No, I think we must be going.' 'Please,' the stovemaker said. 'Just a little while, won't you?' By then the smoke choked them all. Even the stovemaker had to put his cap over his mouth and nose. It became so much that they were lost in it, hardly able to see each other. And they coughed and coughed. And the boy helped the girl and old man out of the cart, who also coughed and could no longer see to write, and they ran to the side of the road and over a small

stone fence and into the field beyond some distance. They stood there coughing sometime, half bent over, and watched the mushroom-shaped cloud hover in the distance over the stovemaker's cart. 'It's the damper,' the stovemaker said, after he'd finished coughing. 'It's turned too low and makes too much smoke.' Napoleon coughed and straightened, then said, 'Then why don't you turn it up and let it burn?' But the stovemaker shook his head and put his cap back on. His face, hands, clothes, were soot-stained, and the marks seemed to have dyed flesh and thread permanently. 'Then the fires would go out. And there is little enough to burn as it is.' Napoleon said, 'And what does it matter if it goes out?' The stovemaker looked up wide eyed, the whiteness of his eyes stark against the soot-stains, and said, 'We couldn't do that.' 'Why not?' the girl asked. 'Because,' the stovemaker said. 'We just can't.' Napoleon said, 'Surely there must be enough bodies for your kind. There has been a war, after all.' The stovemaker shook his head and looked almost tearful. 'No,' the stovemaker said. 'All gone. Everything gone. Even the stovemakers. I am the last. When there was no one else to fuel the fires, we only had each other. Now I am the only one. All alone.' He pressed his cap over his heart and looked forlornly at the smoke enshrouded cart. 'Then,' Napoleon said, 'you mean to say there is nothing left in the west.' The stovemaker shook his head. 'Nothing,' the stovemaker said. He replaced his cap and bundled his thin jacket around himself. 'And the wizards say, the smoke, it brings the long winter.' He shook his head and started back toward the cart, saying, 'Best to tend the fire then, to keep the cold at bay.' He disappeared into the smoke, and after a while the mushroom-shaped puff drifted along the road and into the distance and left thick dregs in its wake. When he had gone, the girl said, 'If everything is gone, what shall we do?' Napoleon turned and looked down the road. 'Do?' he said. 'We shall continue west.' 'But there's no one there,' the girl said. Napoleon shook his head. 'No matter,' he said. And he went on, 'If the world is indeed ended, we have in you two——'—he said to the boy and girl——'—the means of its resurrection. You shall both bear children to refill it.' 'Ewww,' the girl said. And the boy said, 'But sir, she is my sister.' The old man held up a finger and said, 'Even more propitious. Remember that the world started among the children of those first expelled

from the Eternal Master's fields. We merely begin the cycle of the world anew. Consult pages one-million-three-hundred-thirty-four to one-million-three-hundred-eighty-nine for more information.' So when the smoke had cleared, they made their way back to the cart and loaded up and began again into the heart of the west."

"What. About. The. [Dragon]?"

"I'm getting to that. I have to lay the groundwork for the story."

"Groundwork? Groundwork! We've sat here all afternoon."

"Hush."

"I will not hush—this is getting ridiculous."

"It's supposed to be about the journey. Not the destination."

"No. You tell the story to *have* a destination."

"But you don't worry about getting there."

"Just one question—will I be dead before this finishes?"

"You might be dead now if you don't shut up."

"I'm almost there."

"You see. Now, be quiet or it *will* take all day."

"Okay. They eventually came to a river. The bridge across it was gone. And in the distance they could see the skeletal remains of some city that had been reduced to powder and was blowing across the landscape creating a new desert. But the river was wide and rough, so there was no way to cross without the bridge. The girl said, 'What are we going to do?' The boy said, 'We could build a boat.' They looked around, but the plains had long been denuded of timber. Napoleon looked at the water and recalled the last time he'd fallen in. He shook his head inside his helmet. 'No,' he said. 'It is obvious we can go no farther.' He looked around at the barren plain. 'Obviously, we must begin our rebuilding of civilization here.' 'Eww,' the girl said. 'As Wanda was for her bequeathment,' the old man said, 'be grateful for your fortune and opportunity.' But the girl only made a face. There were no forests, but the land beside the river had become a huge marsh, and they gathered the bulrushes there and wound them into bundles until they had built two houses, one for the emperor, one for the boy and girl. The old man didn't need one because he always sat outside writing and refused to come in. Then, finally, one night as the moons rose over the mountains, the emperor pushed the boy and girl into their small reed house and tied the bulrush door behind

them as the old man sat scribbling in moonlight. ‘I will let you out,’ the emperor said through the door, ‘when your first child is born.’ The old man said, ‘The first will of course be the toughest.’ ‘Yes,’ the emperor said, ‘so I will allow a small rest between the first and the rest. Though, after that, I am sure everything will go seamlessly.’”

“This doesn’t make sense.”

“What doesn’t make sense?”

“How are they supposed to have children?”

“Haven’t you been to see any biology picture shows?”

“He gets squeamish.”

“I do not.”

“The man puts it in the woman and she has a baby.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Will you just be quiet.”

“But it doesn’t make any sense. That’s not where babies come from.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Then how come no one around here has babies, huh? Have you ever seen anyone have a baby after they did it?”

“That’s beside the point.”

“You can’t. You can’t prove it and you want to make it out to be true.”

“If you can’t accept the story, then why don’t you just go away?”

“I might as well. I don’t think he’s ever going to get to the part about the [dragon].”

“The [dragon]’s not the important part.”

“Well, it is to me.”

“Gah. You’re impossible. We’re not even going to make it to Waterloo at this point.”

“Is that before or after the [dragon]?”

“Why don’t you just go away.”

“Fine.”

He stood and stomped out.

[In a rush, he almost collided with Zeb.] “Sorry.” And’e stood there a minute and placed’is thumb against the blade of’is front teeth. “When are we going to get to the [dragon] in your shows?”

Zeb blinked. “What...?”

“When are we going to get up to how [Napoleon got his dragon?”

“What the *fuck* are you talking about?”

“[Napoleon’s dragon.] When did he— ”

“WHAT THE FUCK’RE YOU TALKING ABOUT?”

The boy stepped back. Below, everyone looked toward the archway.

“What’s going on up there?”

Hard-faced, Zeb stepped from the archway into the amphitheater. “What the fucking fuck is going on here?”

“We were talking about [Napoleon].”

“[Napoleon]...” Zeb’s one eye blinked, but t’other refused to, so the one’d t’make up for t’other. “That had no fucking thing to do with [Napoleon]. It was all fucking made-up.”

“Yeah. I mean, but the other guy’s version’s better.”

“Better...”

“Yeah,” the one said, almost shyly.

Someone else came’n, “It was better than your version.”

“My version...”

“Yeah.”

“My version—THIS’S FUCKING HISTORY—THERE ARE NO *VERSIONS*—” Zeb’s gaunt face bloated, bulged.

“Sheesh,” someone said. “Learn to take a little criticism. If you tried, you could probably come up with some improvements.”

Zeb stood there, tottering, his thin neck seemingly insufficient

t'anchor's head from blastoff. "You...fucking...idiots—THIS IS NOT FUCKING MADE UP! THIS IS FUCKING REAL LIFE!"

The one shook's head. "Come on, everybody. Let's go."

"When's he going to finish the story?"

"Later."

Talking among'emselfs, they filtered up and out through the various archways and left Zeb standing there alone. The laptop's edge bit into's palm. He yelled at the empty amphitheater, then clutched's laptop t's chest and ran into a darkened passage.

Allison watched'er reflection'n a white wicker vanity as Sarah tied a final ribbon along'er dress's puffed shoulders. "There," she said, and stepped back, looked over the dress'n the mirror. "Perfect."

"Are you sure this's alright?"

"Of course I am," Sarah said.

Allison watched'erself'n the mirror.

"Now, let us do something about your hair."

“I just don’t know what can happen anymore.”

“Ah. We never know this. Only when all possibilities happen do we confront them.”

Mae glanced at’m. “You’re not helping.”

[“Pardon.”]

“Besides,” Mae said. “It’s all well and good to *say* it. You can *say* anything. It’s merely primitive virtual reality.”

A reflected Mrs Hoyle opened the door'n the mirror. "You two look wonderful." She smiled. Nodded. "Your father is ready with the car."

"Down in just a minute," Susan said.

A reflected Mrs Hoyle closed the door'n the mirror. "Now," Susan said. "Ah, just one last thing." And she tugged one of the bows on Allison's dress. "There, everything is perfect." She turned and lifted'er shawl from the bedpost and slipped't over'er shoulders. "You can take that one." Then she shook'er head. "Not like that. Do not worry about the dust. Daddy will let us out under the covered area, then go park the car. Just put it around like this."

Down'n the living room, Mr Hoyle looked up from'is watch, clicked't shut, re-pocketed't'n'is vest as the girls descended. "Right on time."

"Stop it, Richard," Mrs Hoyle said. "This is a house, not a factory." But she faintly smiled and shook'er head.

"And families take in raw materials to process them out as a desired good," her husband said. He faintly smiled too. "So in some ways you could argue it is the epitome of a factory. Just as the Lord intended."

"Yes, yes," Mrs Hoyle said, and shook'er head as she adjusted'er gloves. "Okay, girls, everyone out to the car."

"Yes," Mr Hoyle said. He pulled'is watch. "It would be best to get started. The wind is quite bad tonight. So I will have to take it slow."

"Well, at least it is not a storm, Richard."

"Hmmm." He clicked'is watch shut.

Out'n the garage, he turned t'look toward the back seat. "Everyone set?"

In all the excitement, Allison probably'd've forgotten t'mention bout bringing'er bag. But't'dn't matter.

Tiny stones peppered the windshield as they passed down the street and turned the corner.

"Oh, no," Susan said.

Mr Hoyle glanced into the rearview mirror. "What is it?"

"I forgot my purse. I left it up in my room."

Her father shook'is head. "No worry."

"But," Susan said. "It has everything in it. My handkerchief. Everything."

"You can get by without for a few hours."

His wife touched'is arm. "Richard, you should know better. You never know when a woman might need her purse. And we have not gone too far yet."

He shook'is head, but hand-over-handed the wheel at the next intersection. He looked up'n the rearview mirror as the garage door shut. "Everyone make sure they have everything this time." Susan nodded and opened'er door. "Wait," her father said. And'e handed'er the keyring over the back seat. And with'em, Susan disappeared into the darkened house.

She'd've been gone only a few moments before they'd've heard the scream.

"R—"

But'er husband'd already thrown open'is door and rounded the car. And Mrs Hoyle pushed'er own door open and followed. Allison scooted across the seat and followed as fast as'er dress'd've allowed.

But atop the stairs, Mrs Hoyle jammed against'er husband's back, seemed stunned a moment, raised'erself t'try and look over'is shoulder and into their daughter's room.

"NOT MINE." Susan'd've looked from Ceili and Argile t'er parents.

"*Not mine!*" she said. And she'd've pointed between whatever tiny gap opened between'er parents. "Hers. She brought them here."

A terminal window cleared. A cursor blinked at'ts bottom corner. Pulsed. Precise. Metronomic.

Eventually, it'd've woken'm.

Vision blurred, he rubbed the corners of'is eyes, scratched'is face.

The cursor blinked forward. Dots. Slowly, erratically, it filled the terminal window.

He leaned forward, but still half-asleep, his wrist-splint knocked against the mouse and sent the cursor hard against the screen's far edge. He clicked a half-forgotten, iconified window. The sequence probably'd've taken three or four hours t'complete. But'e'd've realized what'e was seeing before't was half-done.

"God..."

He pushed back'is chair. But a worn caster'd been replaced with a close-enough-sized zinc block salvaged from who-knew-where and the leg slid off and dumped him'n the floor. He scrambled up, dusted'mself, looked back at the desecrated skeletal structure of some alien lifeform awash'n screen-glow.

He passed out through the cubicalae. Paused more than a few times t'catch'is breath as'e ascended the central stairs.

Outside, he looked up. Wind brushed the dome, carried aerial sediment up t'tint broader sky. The sun hung obscured behind an orange-brown curtain that dome material diffused t'a smear and rendered everything dim enough'e'dn't've t'squint.

He wandered through an archway and into passages beyond. But everything'd been deserted. Wind beyond the dome'd've been the only sound. A wheelbarrow'd been left on'ts side amid ropes and cabling and scaffolding and patchwork robes'n one square. A faint breeze,

the minutest incarnation of what lay beyond the dome, brushed over'm, disturbed a blue tarp'n a distant corner of another courtyard. A phone'd been left plugged'n, black screened, maybe from charging too long, maybe fromn't being able. Winded, he rested'is hand on back of a chair.

“Is it the end of the world?”

Dave looked round. He blinked. “A storm.”

“Everyone can see that.” She shook'er head and crossed the commissary and looked over everything there, lifted a pot. “You know if this is fresh?”

Dave shook'is head.

Wind rustled the tarp.

“Hold it—wait.”

“What?”

“Just stop.”

“I’m not going to stop in the middle of the street.”

“Just do it.”

She grumbled, but pulled the car toward the curb, didn’t drop into park.

“Something going on.”

“What?”

Joan shook’er head. Vision awash with high-contrast sameness, she reached’er finger between the cardboard cutouts that allowed’er t’use a phone as rudimentary night-vision goggles and carefully stroked the fractured screen t’zoom. “Looks like the dynamic duo’s dragging someone off.”

“Great.”

“What’s the matter?”

“More complications.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“And when things get complicated, they get leaky. Then they go bad.”

“I don’t know,” Joan said. “I think she’s more cute than leaky.”

The driver groaned, released the brake. “I’m not going to be a sitting duck so you can think about getting into someone’s fucking pants.”

“Next time,” Joan said, “you can navigate, then.”

“Luckily, there won’t be a next time.”

“Oh, how wonderful,” an old woman said as she sniffed the pie box. “Delightful. I am sure you will do really well.”

Mary-Celleste politely smiled and nodded. “I hope so.”

Still sniffing, the old woman carried t’one of two distant tables already piled with similar boxes.

Smiles. Nods. At first, Rita’d been able t’keep pace, her bag’n the crook of’er arm as she stood with a stiff, half-formed smile, on the fringes as one group merged into others, split into another beneath the auspice of static-laden music that carried from wall-mounted speakers, apparently, from some kind of recording device, as’t seemed t’loop through the same hiccups. High on one wall, a large electric clock ticked as’f t’provide the metronome.

“Something the matter, dear?”

Mary-Celleste turned. “No. Nothing.” She glanced casually round the room again. “I was just wondering about my daughter.”

Old women nodded sagely with threadbare smiles.

Static.

“Okay, ladies and gentlemen...” The music slowly decreased’n volume till’t faded beneath the sound of the wind outside. But the man with the microphone opened’is mouth and the speakers popped and’e looked down at’t till the shshshshshsh noise of feedback’d subsided. “Okay,” he said, and held the microphone as’f’ts insulation were inadequate. “If everyone will gather around. We are ready for the competition.” He brushed’is fingers through’is hair, then lifted a pie box. “Okay. Here we have number forty-one. Number forty-one. Who wants to start the bidding?” He proffered a pastel-blue box. “Fifty cents. The bidding starts at fifty cents. Who will give me fifty cents?—Now, there is a gentleman. Alright. Who will make it

seventy-five. I know there is someone out there who wants to make it seventy-five. How about you, sir?"

Number-by-number, he hoisted pastel pink, blue, green, rose-papered, ribbon-tied boxes for the crowd's approval. "Going once. Twice. Are you really sure, gentlemen? Alright then. Sold." And a woman'n a print dress scribbled on a notepad.

"Alright, everyone," he said, after the last box. "If Mrs Breer is ready, we will have the results. Mrs Breer?" The woman tore a page and handed't across t'him. "And the winner is..." He held the paper at arm's length and squinted, finally bent toward Mrs Breer, who whispered'n'is ear. "Number eighteen. Number eighteen is the winner, at...fifteen and fifty cents. And if you please, Mrs Breer, tell us who number eighteen belongs to..."

"Second year in a row," someone whispered near Mary-Celleste.

"Must be hoping for a raise."

"So," the auctioneer said. "Now that we know who is taking home the best, if everyone wants—" Mrs Breer whispered t'him. "Okay then. Ahem. They tell me the food will be just a little delayed, but if everyone wishes to start taking their seats, everything will be ready shortly. And how about another round of applause."

People moved toward the dining area as the music faded'n. Rita waved from a distant table and Mary-Celleste moved through the crowd toward'er.

"Have you seen Allison?"

Rita shook'er head. She still wore the same stiff smile. "No." She turned. "I was just looking for Jack. Have you seen him?"

Mary-Celleste shook'er head and scanned the room again. Overhead, bare bulbs faintly dimmed, brightened. She'd've felt the hair at the back of'er neck prickle.

"Oh. There's—there is Jack."

A look, as'f'e'd barely contain'mself. "We're leaving."

Rita's face blanked. "W...why?"

"Now."

"J—"

"Because I said so."

Everyone'd've been looking by then, some while appearingn't to, but they'd've been doing so just the same.

“Now.”

Night.

Behind curtains, on window sills, a few small, scattered candles burned.

Only drums sounded as they walked. Lines that stretched through the alleyways led by patchwork-robed figures with colored-glass-enclosed lights on the ends of long curved poles.

Drums and soft footsteps'd've been the only sounds, other than the wind roar from beyond the dome.

Lights dodged against walls as they emerged up narrow steps into the fourposter square. Single-file lines squarely spiraled inward. And the first patchwork-clad figure stood silent at center as the last emerged atop the steps.

She rose t'tiptoe. Across the spiral, June and Brittney stood with interlocked arms, a bandage still round Britt's temple, seemingly a kind of luminescent halo amid starlight and moonlight and torchlight. Catherine glanced at'em a moment. Then she looked out over the rest of the crowd. Tracy and Mae and Zilog and everyone else must've been out there somewhere'n the semidarkness beyond lighted glass.

The drums ceased.

Only storm and distant darkness. And everyone seemed t'hold their breath.

Lights floated from their wielders' staves. And hooded robes followed from darkness below. But hung there lifeless'n the air as their lights moved round and round, floated among'em. As'f t'taunt the quilted figures. And hovered before their drooped hoods.

But finally the patchwork robes moved. Invisible hands pushed back their hoods, allowed the lights into'em, so luminescence seemed

t'spill between stitchwork. But slowly they seemed t'return t'lifelessness. Their lights dimmed.

Till then no sound, save gasps between held breaths.

But faint music: wet fingers over spun crystal.

Above, robe arms raised.

And the robes blew back, blew back as'f struck by a heavy wind, and hung there a distance behind naked, silver-glittering figures. Arms out, feet together, they turned and one arm beckoned. And robes drifted round the figures, stopped where they'd started. Poised, knees raised, the figures'd the same, stopped where they started.

Figures shifted through shadow lands and the only light was what came from beneath each hood. And ghostly music rendered any one a man at one angle, a woman at another moment and something else'fn't both, in time t'each crystalline note. Then with quick tempo, the figures extended their hands, shoved away, as'f t'refuse any more pleadings and beggings and enticements. And each blazed. Swirls, spatters, specks, streaks. No fingernail, vulva, penis, scrotum, eyelid, or crevice left not-tinted. Hair, short, long, deep cerulean, umber, striped orange-white. And such softened powders drifted from them as they spun. Men arched, arms and legs flung back, arched, flew forward as erections pierced naked air. Women, their hips, multi-colored pubic regions, jutted forward, and they flew.

The robes retreated from the maelstrom, hovered on the periphery as their lights dimmed.

But an orange-striped woman swam upward through void till she floated above all and looked down.

Jettisoned t'and fro back and forth, aimlessly, groins thrust out, none seemed capable of regarding'er.

Music: low, long notes that might've shattered crystal and hearts'f held too long. But somewhere a faint melody intercut, faded, rose. A blue-dot woman, groin jutted, flew haphazardly one corner t'the next, looked up. Slowly, as'f fighting'erself, her arm shifted, fingers extended weakly toward Orange-Striped Woman. And the woman above extended'er own hand, beckoned. Blue-Dot Woman appeared t'try, but'd only shake'er head as she was drawn back and forth. Orange-Striped Woman motioned again. Blue-Dot Woman strained, again, seemed t'break free for just a moment, but was carried away'n

whatever invisible currents tore at the rest. She looked overhead, shook'er head. Crystalline tears.

But Orange-Striped Woman motioned again.

Blue-Dot Woman nodded, seemed t'steel'erself, forced'erself up with flailing arms and legs, punctuated by high crystal, as a striped-orange hand beckoned, and Blue-Dot Woman raged against the current till she and the music seemed strained t'breaking. Everything ready t'go, fall, b'washed away as the current churned, everything'd t'break, there was no way human flesh nor crystal'd endure the strain.

Then.

Nothing.

Blue-Dot Woman floated just above the rest, looked down at the those ferried hectically beneath'er feet. But a beckoning drew'er attention upward. She swam, lightly, gracefully, the barest motion of arms, faintest kicks, till she'd wrap'er arms round Orange-Striped Woman's leg, press'er cheek t'er thigh. And t'other woman reached down and stroked Blue-Dot Woman's azure hair. Blue-Dot Woman looked up. And Orange-Striped Woman guided t'other up by'er azure hair till'tis mass obscured'er hips.

Red luminescence burst over'em. Yellow. Strobed. Faster. Till't seemed they must've seemed t'travel almost as fast as light itself yet forever occupy the same space. Orange-Striped Woman's head flung back.

Washed'n pulsed crimson.

Hung that way bordered on eternity.

But finally, it pulsed, faded, pulsed...

And dis-entwining'er fingers from that mass of azure hair, Orange-Striped Woman drew Blue-Dot Woman up, slipped'er hand round'er waist. Their legs entwined.

The women looked down. Below, dancers still pulled t'and fro. The lights beneath their cloaks extinguished. They looked up at each other, rose together till darkness submerged all below. And they hung there'n eternity, the only constellation.

But'e'dn't've even gotten a chance t'put'is key'n the ignition before
knocks resounded through each front window.

Even'n what little time there'd been for the news t'spread, almost everyone must've filtered out along the wall that overlooked the docks, or packed on the switchbacks t'try t'get a look. And they'dn't've but gauped as the raspberry-yellow-striped robot raised itself from'ts hands-over-knees, folded position and rocked the boat as't stepped onto the dock with'ts two-way backwards-forwards feet. Even as tall as't'd've been, it must've been light, otherwise how'd've the floated dock've withstood the weight? Did anyone try t'touch the ripped cloth, the strapping that dangled over'ts shoulders as't followed someone's phone up the stairs, try t'touch the smeared blood that marred that industrial-grade, striped paint? Or'd the stretcher so occupy their attention they no longer noticed that tall, headless unit as't pneumatically strode after?

And how long before anyone noticed t'other still out on the crater rim? But't'd walked so far, a little more sand and wind'd hardly've damaged'ts industrial-grade skin and synthetic hair.

And they carried Nathaniel up into the city.

This's just me. But I've tried t'work with what I've been given. Everything through this section of journal's been so hastily scribbled't's difficult t'discern very much. And our journaller seems t've'd no time t'relate anything bout their day-t'day lives. So we'll just've t'assume they still ate and slept and used fountains during those first days.

There's a couple folded, dirty pieces of paper'n here that seems as'f they might belong earlier. They mention a black smoke column being spotted coming outa the canyon and how everyone rushes out on the walls t'see a burning boat. People've t'dive and swim. And everyone rushes down t'the docks.

Another sheet has Chekhov coming up from tryna dredge what she'd manage. She slips a sling off'er shoulder and drops a hunting rifle onto the table. "What should I do with it?"

(Note To Self)

Come back later and deal with the evolution bits.

Also found a piece of ripped page stuck later'n the book. But't probably belongs here.

Sparks from somewhere'n gridwork above sprinkled silently over the car. Somewhere, a fulling hammer beat over the storm. Bulging, black-glass goggles amid flame and spark-bursts moved along spiderweb-steel networks.

They passed alongside a narrow-gauge railway track and distant warehouse lights loomed outa blown-sand and darkness.

"No need to worry," Ceili said.

"They won't follow."

"No."

"There will be a small delay."

And distant chain-explosions carried even over that wind.

"A small delay."

And Mary-Celleste looked out through the backseat window.