

Cream

Ron Sanders

Sleeper

Devon passed out.

That's what they told him, anyway.

He'd been waiting in line like everyone else, and next thing he knew he was the center of attention for a ring of bystanders, a pair of old ladies were rubbing his arms, and the bank manager was asking if he needed an ambulance.

The worst part, initially, was the embarrassment. But on the drive home an icy fear crimped the back of his neck, made his shoulders lock up and his elbows seize, made his hands sweat all over the wheel. What if it happened again? What if it happened while driving? He could be barreling along nicely, completely absorbed in the intricacies of lane surfing, and—BAM: dead man. Or find he'd unconsciously plowed through a crosswalk full of horrified lunchtime toddlers. Splattered innocence, crippled joy. The image was so appalling Devon had a phantom episode, imagining, in one missed heartbeat, that he'd blacked out again, and was surfacing anew.

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He pulled over with excessive caution; using only the rear-view mirror lest, in looking back for even a moment, some inexplicable mini-seizure should send him hurtling into a compound bloody fireball. Perspiration bathed his face and chest. He'd always been the healthiest of men; didn't drink, didn't touch drugs, didn't over-exert. Gradually the tremors passed. But not the terror; it was a vital shadow in the center of his skull. Devon called a cab and a tow truck. He sat slumped in the back of the cab, drawing faux calm around him like a horsehair shroud. The driver was a talker; Devon let him roll on. All he could see was the cab's windshield, streaked and bespattered, a broken mosaic of shocked baby faces that never had a chance to grow.

“Your scans are clean,” Dr. Goodman beamed. The clipboard, facing away, would not elaborate. “I think we can cheerfully write off the cause of this visit as one of those little anomalies that pop into our lives, shake us up a bit to give our egos some perspective, and then pop right back out as though nothing occurred. And who knows? Maybe nothing did. Sometimes nature just drops the ball for no apparent reason. I like to compare the body to a complex harp with one or more strings always out of tune, and hard work and healthful living as the elements that retune those—Mr. Devon?”

Devon blinked at him. A low hum had just passed through his brain like a train through a tunnel. There were things in there, moving around, clattering without sound. It was as if his thoughts were loose shingles on a roof, responding to a sudden high wind. He blew over.

Devon opened his eyes to another perspective. It was a skewed view, of three vulnerable specimens frozen in a brightly lit box. The action resumed: receptionist slipping out of room,

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staring strangely over shoulder, doctor frowning at clipboard, planted squarely before seated patient.

Goodman's entire demeanor had changed. He tapped his pencil on the clipboard—*thuda-thuda-thud*—little alien heartbeats in rubber on pressed cork. “You've heard of narcolepsy, Mr. Devon? Once we've ruled out the obvious—epilepsy, tumor, arrhythmia—we have to rely on conjecture, which, in a mature practice, comes down to empiricism rather than guesswork. What I'm trying to say is: symptoms are templates. Narcolepsy is a known condition, but it's not a common one—though I'm reasonably sure there're plenty of cases going misdiagnosed. I won't beat around the bush here. In narcolepsy, the brain's steady-state waking electrical activity is abruptly interrupted—the subject goes to sleep on the spot, rather than drifting away naturally. Why? The current's been cut off, the lights shut down. *Why?* We don't know yet; and there's that dreadful non-answer which seems, to the anxious layperson, an evasion rather than a helpful response. But it's all we've got. That, and a medication I'm prescribing. Don't worry about the endless string of Latin syllables. Although still in the experimental stage, it shows tremendous promise in the short-term. However, there's a caveat: you must be prudent in your approach to everyday activities whenever a recurrence might prove injurious to yourself or to others, and you must curtail these activities any time you experience symptoms that are in any way out of the ordin—”

“Mr. Devon?” Goodman's smile was frayed around the edges. “Are you feeling all right now? We were discussing your prescription when you appear to have relapsed momentarily. I've checked your vitals and you're good as gold. The episode was very brief, yet it absolutely confirms my immediate diagnosis of narcolepsy.” He nervously drummed his fingers on the

clipboard. “Miss Aines is going to administer a single dose of your prescription, and you are thereafter not to approach the medication without my approval over the phone. As I said, it’s experimental, but entirely safe. Then I want you to go home and take a load off—a load off your mind as well as your feet. I’d prefer you walk rather than use a cab or bus. Moderate exercise is always a precursor to healthful recovery.” He pulled open the door, hesitating halfway. “If you experience a recurrence, or become morbidly anxious, or entertain any weird, traumatic sense of alienation, I want you to give me a call right away. Miss Aines will produce my home and cell numbers as soon as you’ve received your medication and taken that single dose.” He smiled genially while ushering Devon out. “I know you’re going to be just fine.”

Strangest thing.

How can a man *know* what’s going on around him, behind him, within him—when he can’t see or feel a thing? Devon was unconscious. The infinitesimally vague electrical discharges were unlike anything he’d ever experienced, so he had no point of reference, but he *knew* his brainwaves were somehow being manipulated—by somebody or something from somewhere bleak and far away—for reasons of cold research, for inhuman experiment, for purposes that made absolutely no sense in regular terms. He could tell, by focusing, that a kind of frustrated enmity pervaded the ether connecting whoever he was with whatever they were, and that if he let go for even a second they’d—

“Sir?” A thumb peeled back Devon’s eyelid. Sensible impressions were returning. The sounds of traffic. The inside of a paramedics’ van, seen gurney-up. A man’s face; a face like any other. “Sir, can you feel the pressure of my hand on your arm?” A pinching above the elbow.

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“How about now?” The full-screen thumb splintered into five fingers on a rocking hand. “Follow my hand with your eyes, sir.” The face turned. “He’s receptive.” The face turned back. “You’re in an ambulance, sir. We’re taking you to the emergency room at Mother Of Mercy Hospital. But we’ve determined this is no emergency; that’s why we’re not using the siren. So just relax; what’s going on is purely procedural. You appear to have blacked out while sitting on the bus bench at White and Lincoln, yet no one observed any evidence of seizure or foul play. There’s no indication of brain trauma, no signs of physical injury, and all your responses to outside stimuli are well within the normal range. Do you feel okay now?”

Devon’s voice phased in and out. “Yes, I’m fine. I just need to—”

Two strong hands gripped his biceps. It was the second paramedic, leaning over the first. “You’ll have to remain quiet, sir. Until you’ve been thoroughly examined you’re under our supervision. It won’t be long. There’s the hospital now. We’re pulling up to emergency. Try to stay calm.”

“I can’t be strapped down. That’s what they want.” Devon’s mouth was too dry for more.

The paramedics exchanged looks. The first rattled a prescription bottle. “The label reads fifty. The count is forty-nine.” He looked back down at Devon. “I’d call yours a pretty extreme reaction. Now just relax.”

The van stopped with the gentlest jolt. A moment later the rear doors swung open. The second paramedic climbed out, and the first, hesitating, said loudly, “You’re under restraint only for your own safety, okay? We can’t have you blacking out and rolling off the gurney now, can we, sir?”

The driver poked in his head. “What’s the hangup?”

“We’re fine back here. One of the straps is tangled. Just give me a second.”

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The driver's head disappeared. The paramedic brought his voice down to a patter: "Look, fighting only makes it worse. They'll get in sooner or later, so unless you enjoy being knocked silly out of the blue, over and over and freaking *over*, you're just gonna have to play it cool. The more you resist, the worse it gets. But if you go along, you're in and out of the center and home free. So if you want the skinny right up front, take it from a guy who's been there. Read my lips." He strapped a small oxygen mask over Devon's nose and mouth and said noiselessly, with exaggerated movements of the lips, "*Stay down.*"

A hydraulic whine, a rocking and settling. A voice came out of the floodlights: "Okay to roll."

The bright assault of antiseptic fluorescence made Devon's eyes burn. Faces looked on curiously as he was wheeled by; faces as indifferent as the driver's, as indifferent as Dr. Goodman's, as indifferent as that burned-out receptionist behind the glass, as—

The electrical activity, Devon realized, functioned incidentally as a conduit. They were getting into his head, and they were learning what it means to be human, but it was hard work. Through this connection he'd become electrically empathic—able to glean their drive and exasperation, to know that, through their resolution, they *were going to learn* what they needed, if they didn't kill him in the process, or if he was unable to kill himself first. He was experiencing their excitement as well as their frustration, their urgency and their demand. He was losing hold, losing self-control. He knew it. He could feel it.

"Well, I'm taking him *off* the medication, at least for the present, and I don't give a good holy crap what you or Lancet have to say on the matter, is that clear enough for you? As of right

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now he's under our care. Your prescription arguably precipitated this patient's arrival, and there's absolutely no reason to believe it's mitigating his condition in the least. Fine. You can talk to the coordinator in the morning. I'm presently handling Mr. Devon, and this conversation is officially concluded. Now go back to sleep!"

Devon embraced the room's hard white light like a lover. He kept his eyes fixed wide, afraid even to blink, as Dr. Grant firmly replaced the receiver and turned, hands clasped behind his back. His face was sunburn-red, his eyes bulging in his head.

"Mr. Devon, you're doing great. You've been through a bit of a scare, but there's no reason to worry. Your provider has authorized any necessary procedures, though I'm confident we've no cause for alarm." He raised Devon's prescription bottle like a dead lizard. "As of this moment you're off these—and that bastard Goodman should be sued for malpractice! Don't think he's heard the last of me."

"No," Devon managed. "Not the medicine. Like I told you, this started *before* I was given the prescription."

Grant leaned in grimly. "*And*, like you told me, you've been riding a roller coaster ever since. Voices in your head; that kind of nonsense. A misdiagnosis of narcolepsy from some predatory quack who *will* have his license suspended, mark my words. Delusions of channeling aliens or whatever—you're a victim of too many horror movies, Mr. Devon, plain and simple. Now I want you to stop fighting it. Please. You're only making things worse."

"I'm . . ." Devon tried. "Not my imagination."

"Would you listen to yourself?" Grant leaned back, his face troubled. "You never should have been allowed on the street in the first place; not without a guardian, not without a complete examination. I'm going to give you a little injection here, just something to help you relax, and

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then we'll whisk you into the center and let the specialists have a go at you. You'll be right back on your feet before you know it, happy as a clam and all set to embrace the bigger picture."

Devon froze. He instinctively scooted in reverse, allowing his feet to dangle. "I feel better now. I just want to go home."

Again Grant zoomed himself in. "I give you my word of honor it'll be painless. These are some of the best men in their field, and they need to get a real good look at you right away. Now, I'd like you to just stretch out on the recliner, close your eyes, and make a fist. You'll feel the tiniest pinprick."

"No, please . . . give me something that'll help me stay awake. They're getting closer. If I fall asleep they'll be right back in."

Dr. Grant looked on quietly, his expression sour. "Who's getting closer?"

Facets of his identity were falling like flakes of dandruff. Memories were being stripped, copied, filed; Devon's humanness was being assaulted, weakness by weakness. The excitement was palpable; he was naked, he was down, he was roadkill. His flaws were being recognized and categorized, in some universal way only a natural predator could understand. Humans were easy, they were fait accompli. Devon could struggle all he wanted, but he was pinned and purpling, a pretty bruised butterfly. He thrashed, but didn't budge, called, but didn't peep, screamed, but—

"The more you fight me," snarled the security guard, "the harder I fight back. You *got* that?" He shoved Devon into a plastic chair, one of many lined against the wall.

"Listen to me!" Devon begged. "I can't hold on any longer. Please. Something."

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The guard sneered over his shoulder. “*I’ll* give you something. Now for the last time: Do—*not . . . fight it!*” He pressed the intercom’s call button. “Security on floor one, east wing. I have a disturbed patient who somehow got out into the hall. Not a biggie, but Riley and Forbes, I’d like you to assist. Johnson, ring up the center right away. Wills, call in a van and get straight back to me.”

The feelers were in. He was going. A great company was in his skull; a kind of delirious clamor and buzzing crescendo. Devon was a transparent display, every nerve-ending under intense scrutiny. Ecstasy, comprehension, anticipation. His mind was being peeled open; his nightmares, his mistrust, his mortal horror.

Devon leaped from his chair, tore the guard’s gun from its holster, and crammed the barrel in his mouth. A bear hug and shattering of teeth. The gun went spinning across the floor. There was a hard stomping down the hall, a flurry of shouts, the pulsing buzz of an alarm.

Devon hit the plate glass window like a bug smacking into a windshield. He blew out into the night, a mass of porcupine shards, blood spraying in his wake. He heard Dr. Grant puffing behind. “Mr. Devon! For the love of God! Don’t fight it! Somebody call the gate. Devon!”

His arms were shaking wildly, his eyes bursting in his skull—he was seizing; they had him by the cortex. Devon’s very consciousness was being eviscerated: through that real-time conduit, his thoughts were being pasted to an empathic helix, synapse by misfiring synapse. And they’d grown exasperated. Devon was about to learn the hard way that, no matter how grounded his body might be in reality, his mind was wide open to compromise:

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Liquid fire tore through his frame, spewed from his mouth and nostrils, set his fraying hair ablaze. His head snapped back and his mouth ripped at the corners, peeled off his face and blew away in shreds. Devon's ribcage shattered from the sternum down. He was being zipped open, torn apart, dug into. With a shriek of bone his spine snapped free, his pelvis collapsed, his skull halved to expose the hysterical animal writhing within.

A number of men hit him in a compound flying tackle. An orderly snarled in his face, "*Stay down, damn you!*"

Now Dr. Grant's pulsing round head broke into a crazy wheel of arms and nightsticks. "Sedate him, for Christ's sake! I don't care if you have to use chloroform. Drag him over to the shack."

Night sucked him up like a giant straw. Consciousness was a black wiggly thing, all-pervading, all-encompassing, all—and a flashlight's beam hit him right in the eyes. For a long hazy second he was dazzled by the badge on the gate guard's cap. Devon was logy and going fast, his limbs uncooperative, his toes and fingers numb.

"I'll tell you one more time, and then I'll brain you if I have to: *stop fighting it!*" The guard's eyes became compassionate, mentoring. "They'll take you to the center, and it'll be over before you know it. Then you can go back to whatever you've always been doing." He gripped Devon's shoulder with passion. "Listen, man, it can get *bad*, okay? And nobody, but *nobody*'ll ever take you seriously. So you have to learn to kind of switch off when they get busy, and act as humble as you can. But there's no disgrace in obeying; not when you have to survive. I mean,

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there's nothing to be ashamed of." He looked around uneasily. "We're just human beings, right? We're not supermen."

From outside came the familiar voice of Dr. Grant barking orders, and the gentle rumble of an approaching vehicle. The sound of doors swinging on their hinges. A new voice called out: "Okay to roll."

The guard looked back. "There's not a damned thing you can do anyway. So stop fighting it—just let go and relax." He passed a hand back and forth over Devon's eyes. "Is any of this getting through?"

"Yes," Devon said thickly. "Hear you."

"Good." The guard patted him on the shoulder. "It's not the end of the world. Just another boss." He placed the hand over Devon's eyes. "Now sleep."

Remembering Jack

I'll never forget the day I met Jack.

Who wouldn't remember a scene like that—stretched out flat on my back with Nick Kirby straddling me, kicking my ass to Timbuktu and back in front of everybody who was anybody, smack dab in the center of Kennedy High's main hall.

I didn't really have it coming, of course—everybody knew that; Nick was just whaling on me because I was available, because I was a geek, because he needed the exercise. It was nothing personal: Nick regularly kicked the crap out of lots of losers.

I know I was receptive; I had this flip-flop image of lockers to my left and lookyboos to my right, as my spewing tetherball of a head was fistfisted side to side. I don't recall feeling any real pain. I guess I was in that what-who-why state of shock that the self-preservation instinct throws into gear in case we jerkoffs and nerds don't possess the good sense to stay down until the storm's over.

And then, for no observable reason, the barrage just stopped.

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I know I didn't say uncle; my lips were too swollen to do anything but serve as punching bags for Nick's knuckles. The knees came off my arms and Nick's body lifted like a flying saucer firing its null-gravs.

That new kid—the sullen, sweatshirted loner who avoided the in crowd and geeks alike, who glared his way through P.E., who always sat at the back of class—was holding Nick upright by the collar, and he was twisting that collar deliberately while the rigid fingers of his other hand slowly balled into a fist. I probably had a better look at his face than anyone other than Nick, who was clearly distracted, and I think the best word I can come up with for that expression is—wow.

“Don't,” the new kid grated, and smashed Nick's face into a closed locker door, “pick,” and another smash, harder, “on . . . lit . . . tle . . . *GUYS!*” Those last four syllables were accompanied by thrusts of increasing ferocity. Nick's face had crashed six terrible times into the sharp steel gills that serve as air vents on these oblong hall lockers. When his face peeled away, it looked more like a package of fresh gutted catfish than the old Nick we all knew and loved.

The new kid picked me up and dusted me off. His eyes were clouding embers. “If he picks on you again, I want to know all about it.” He turned to the gaping kids. “This is my friend. Anybody fucks with him fucks with me.”

And with that he was gone.

When the monitor ushered me into the Principal's office, I just knew something big was up. First off, hall fights always go to the Vice Principal. Second, the new kid was seated outside the office, scrunched between a cop in uniform and a man in a brown suit. But the kicker was

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finding my parents sitting across the desk from the Principal, with a starched white nurse standing by the window.

The Principal was in no mood for introductions. “Sit down.” But my parents didn’t miss a beat.

“My baby!” Mom cried when she saw my used mattress of a face. Dad beat her to the punch. He rose half-out of his chair and showed a threatening fist.

“What did I tell you about violence!”

“Stop!” The Principal’s bark was the crack of a whip. My parents snapped to as if it was they, not Yours Truly, who’d been yanked out of class to see the Big P. “I’ve had enough of this matter. I intend to wrap it up by lunch.” He glanced at the wall clock. “That gives us exactly fourteen minutes.” He showed me the Official Eye. “Michael Parkson. I’ve heard the other involved parties. Nicolas Kirby is presently in hospital, recovering from massive facial lacerations. Although he is young and healthy, it is likely he will be severely disfigured for life. All witnesses to this travesty are playing dumb; I am convinced there’s a tacit understanding—a pact of silence enforced by peer pressure. Considering young Kirby’s record of campus fisticuffs, I’m assuming he’s at least partly responsible, and while he has implicated recent enrollee Jack Barrett, there are presently no remaining viable eyewitnesses. There is only yourself. Now,” the Principal clenched his folded hands, “Barrett, raised in a succession of orphanages, was transferred to this high school from State detention through a new outreach program. He has an extensive history of incarceration in numerous juvenile halls, and of savage reprisals in each. I argued like a lunatic against his enrollment, but there are,” and he spread and re-clenched his hands, “various School Department loopholes.” He leaned back in his chair. “Young Parkson. This is a very serious matter. While I appreciate your position, I do not like

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liars. I want you to tell me what you saw, and I don't want any waffling. My hands are tied without a sworn witness. But if you finger Barrett he will be expelled and, I'm certain, returned to the State's care after facing a police investigation and mandatory psychotherapy. You won't have to worry about retaliation, if that's an issue. We'll place this whole thing in the Department's lap and wash our hands of it." He looked back up. "You now have seven minutes."

"Boy . . ." Dad grated under his breath. "I had to call off sick because of this. If you make my day any tougher . . ."

"*Mister* Parkson," the Principal hissed.

"I *told* you," Mom wept, "you don't *need* to fight, sweetheart. You talk to your mother. Talk to Mom."

"Mrs. Parkson!"

"I'm sorry," I bubbled, tears welling at the lids. It's like I could *feel* Jack's ear just outside the door, straining to catch every syllable. "I'm sorry! I didn't see anything. Look at my face, look at my eyes! Does it look like I was taking notes?"

"Don't be a wise-ass," Dad snarled. "Answer the man's question."

"No!" I screamed, and now I was weeping freely. "I didn't see anything. I was totally out of it. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't see anything!"

The Principal slapped his palms on the desk. "Take as many days off as necessary. Don't come back to class without first checking in at the nurse's office. Speaking of which, Michael, you have an appointment right now. Nurse Taine, escort the boy." He jabbed the intercom's button. "Miss Dowdie, ring the damned lunch bell! Mr. and Mrs. Parkson, go home. You're excused."

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Imagine my surprise when I left the nurse's office and ran into Jack Barrett standing in the hall. He put his big arm over my shoulders and led me to the Electrical room doorway. There were tall ranks of those ubiquitous gray lockers to either side, so it's not like we were actually all that visible. I mean, I desperately wanted to be seen hanging with a non-nerd, and Jack was anything but a nerd, but at the same time I was put off by the idea of being caught with a guy's arm around me, if you get my drift.

"That was really cool what you told the Principal," Jack said. He crushed me against his chest. Now, Jack was a pretty big dude. He probably stood six-five, which only gave him like a foot and a half over me, but he was as thick and tough as an oak. "I could've been carted back to reform school, or worse, but you saved my ass." He squeezed so hard I was in real danger of losing my wind.

"And you saved mine," I gasped. "I guess that makes us even."

Jack appeared to be considering the laws of equity while he went on clutching me there, tighter and tighter. Maybe he didn't realize he was killing me; I mean, compared to him I was a petite Japanese schoolgirl. My shoulder was already deeply bruised, in the shape of a huge palm and five broad fingers. I was all caved in.

"Nobody ever stood by me like that before." Jack looked squarely in my flickering eyes. "I never had a real friend." Just saying that made him swell with camaraderie, and Jack really laid that squeeze on.

See, I know you guys are gonna think I'm bullshitting you here, but me and Jack stood there like that for the better part of an hour; discussing the pros and cons of friendship, debating simple headlocks vs. full nelsons. I lost all sensation on my left side, and a healthy chunk of

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bladder control. The hallway approached and receded, the overhead lights brightened and dimmed. But the really weird thing is that ninety percent of that conversation took place in the first five minutes. The rest of the time we just stood there in dead silence; a solid yacht of a guy with a trembling bird shit trim. Scads of people passed by during that near-hour. Teachers glanced over oddly, but the kids all seemed to look away. Even that hot little Marcia Tenders walked past, and I got the feeling she was really impressed. Finally I looked cool.

Eventually we moved on down the hall and out onto the front steps. Jack was holding me up now, though I don't think he realized it. He sat me down on a planter ledge and I kind of folded into the impatiens.

"We should celebrate," he said. "What's your drink?"

The blood was returning to my arm. I swear I heard my heart kick. I was just beginning to breathe again when the full import of Jack's words struck me like a fist.

Wow. *I* was being invited to party with a Somebody.

"Oh," I gasped vaguely. "Beer's good, I guess. What do you like?"

Jack laughed. "Come on."

"My name's Mikey," I ventured. "Michael, actually. Or Mike's best. Straight-Up Mike; that's what they call me. You know, like a standup guy."

"Let's go."

We worked down the steps and across the grass to the sidewalk. There were lots of kids hanging out, mostly the cool crowd, and I just know I was scoring Seen-With Points left and right. Even that fox Candy Wille walked by us and—I know you guys won't believe this, but she actually smiled at me and took a deep breath to draw my attention to her yum-yums. Like every eye in the crowd wasn't already glued on 'em. I was in emergency room heaven, man.

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Me and my buddy swaggered up to the corner. I was about to push the walk button when I caught myself. Me and Jack strutted across the street *against* the light, while traffic was forced to a halt and everybody who was anybody looked on respectfully. And I took my sweet time crossing, you dig?

We grooved on up to Larry's Liquor. The clerk watched grimly as Jack ran his eye over the bottles. He was a speckled old man, with a melting face and dour expression. The floor plan allowed customers to personally attain liquor and place it on the counter, so the clerk had developed a jaded and wary eye. Jack plucked out a fifth of Jack Daniels and grinned. "Named after me," he said. He grabbed a glass liter bottle of Margarita mix and set both items next to the register.

The old clerk wagged his head. "I'll be wanting to see some I.D."

"In my other pants," Jack said pleasantly.

There was a long icy minute where the two traded stares. Finally the old man said, "That'll be forty dollars, even."

"Where'd I say my I.D. was?"

The clerk cocked his head and studied Jack out of one eye. "You said it was in your other pants."

"And where do guys keep their I.D.?"

"Generally in a wallet."

"And where do they keep their money?"

The clerk raised his chin irritably. "If they're normal, in their wallets, too."

"So where would that put my money?" Jack demanded.

The clerk glared.

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"In my other pants!" Jack spat, and smashed the Margarita bottle over the old man's head.

Jesus. I've always been an anti-establishment sort of cat, everybody knows that, but all of a sudden I was accomplice to both robbery and assault and battery. Or whatever they call it: that in-the-commission-of-a-crime thing. Jack snatched the liquor bottle's neck in one hand and my girlie little bicep in the other. "The back door," he panted. "Never go out the front." He dragged me to the back door, kicked off the alarm, and hauled me out into the alley.

We sank down the wall. Jack spun off the cap, took a manly swallow, and handed me the bottle. "Here."

First off, you guys, I want you to know I wasn't a hard drinker back then; just the smell of that stuff made me start to puke. But I was a fugitive now, on the run with my partner in crime, and Jack just wasn't the kind of guy you say no to. And, Lord knows, I really needed that drink.

I got down a few sips. Jack yanked the bottle out of my hand, gulped some more, and wiped his mouth with a sleeve. "We've got to get out of here."

I was shaking like a Subaru, but I couldn't break down, man; not right there, not in front of Jack. We snuck down the alley to the street.

"Stand tall," he said. "Act totally nonchalant, okay? Nobody knows shit yet." He took a drink.

I reached up a shaky hand, and he handed over the bottle. I swallowed deeply this time. "What if he's dead?" I had to fight back the sobs.

Jack shrugged. "That'll give us more time." He snatched the bottle and really knocked it back. I watched his Adam's apple bobbing, amazed. His eyes weren't cinched; rather, he was

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searching the clouds with a perfectly clear, perfectly direct and unblinking gaze. “We’ll get nowhere on foot; we need some wheels.” And just like that his mind was made up. “Pretend you’re sick.”

“What?”

“Just act sick.” I stared at him blankly. “Christ,” he said, and punched me right in the gut.

I never saw it coming. And “punched” might be too soft a word. I was doubled over; but I mean right in half—my forehead scraped the sidewalk. I flashed everything: the booze, my remaining breath, yesterday’s breakfast, and collapsed into a pathetic fetal ball. Jack scooped me up and waved down a car.

“Get us to a hospital fast.”

The driver’s eyes were all over the place. He was a middle-aged milquetoast who looked like he was in cardiac arrest. The car was a light blue station wagon. The driver’s window was down only a crack. That’s all I could make out while peeking between my knees.

“Maybe you should call an ambulance.”

“There’s no time,” Jack said. “He’s dying. Look at him.”

“But what hap—”

“Open the door, damn you! He’s dying!”

The driver shakily reached back and unlocked the rear door. Jack chucked me in like a bag of dirty laundry, hopped in the back and over the front seat. “Get out.”

The driver seemed about to break into tears, but Jack ran his arms around him, unlocked the door with one hand, lifted the latch with the other. “Get *out*.” The driver threw his arms over his face. “*Damn you*,” Jack said, and kicked the door open and the driver out. He closed the rear and front doors, threw the car in gear and took off. “You did good,” he said.

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I managed a sitting slump and rolled my head deliriously. “Where’re—where’re we going?”

“Not far,” Jack said, punching the dash. “This thing’s on fumes.”

“Maybe we—” I managed, “—maybe we—”

He tore into the first available gas station. “Stay here.” I was able to raise my head, just in time to see him flipping around the OPEN sign on the front glass door. In a minute he came out with his arms full of chips and jerky. He tossed it all in, along with handfuls of tens, twenties, and fifties. “You’re in charge of cash,” he said, and bent to fill the tank.

I threw up again and again; I don’t know how many times, mostly out the window. The next thing I knew I was sitting up front, it was dusk, and we were on the freeway, driving way too fast and changing lanes unnecessarily.

“Jack . . .” I managed, “Jack, maybe we could drive a little slower and not look so suspicious, you think?”

He sneered. “That’s gonna fool that helicopter, huh? We’ll just blend in no problem, is that it?”

“Heli—” I looked in the side-view mirror and broke right into tears. “Oh my God, Jack, they’re almost on top of us. It’s over, man, it’s over.”

“The hell it is. I filled the tank.”

Then it was dark, and we were rolling in and out of a spotlight while Highway Patrol covered our front and rear. I could see black marshy fields along the freeway’s sides, but we were moving way too fast to make out details. Another helicopter was pacing us off to my right, and a pair of sirens were clearing the station wagon a path. What’s the name of those things they lay down to puncture your tires? You know, so they can bring a chase to a close . . .

Remembering Jack

Spike strips, that's it. Well, when we hit, the car didn't spin out, it just kept going sideways, across three lanes, a turnout, and twenty feet of open space before taking out a couple of small trees and landing belly-up in an old culvert.

Once again it was Jack to the rescue. He pulled my semi-conscious ass out the window and dragged me through the scrub and down a little gulch. Half a dozen Highway Patrol cars were lining the embankment when I opened my eyes, and one helicopter was hovering over the station wagon while the other swept an area three hundred yards away. And I was all gnarled up in Jack's bearhug of an embrace, and in more pain than I've ever imagined. "Jack . . ." I said, "Jack, I think my neck's broken."

"That's all right, little friend," he whispered, and almost crushed my spine. "It's okay, it's okay." He reached into his left front pocket and I heard the click of a switchblade.

There was the frantic whine of a police dog, very close. Half a dozen flashlight beams tore all around us. Jack swung behind me and threw an arm round my neck. All I could see was a faceful of flashlight beams.

"Stay where you are!" came a voice. At the same time one of the helicopters veered and hit us with its spotlight. I don't know if any of you guys have ever been in one of those things, but it's like a trillion candlepower, or whatever they call it. I mean *bright* white.

"Back off!" Jack shouted. "Back off or I'll cut his throat." He took a handful of hair and yanked back my head so that his lips were right up against my ear. He pushed in the blade until blood trickled down my throat. "*Act scared!*" he whispered.

No problem. I wailed like a weenie, you guys. I cried out to Mother, to God, and to Jack himself, in that order. But not to the cops, man, no way. I'd never squeal on a pal.

"Put down the knife and release the prisoner."

Remembering Jack

“Make me!”

“Lay down your weapon!”

“Make me!”

There’s this thing they do with light. Even though it was so bright that everybody in that sea of white would have been visible from space, those state-of-the-art flashlights had us dazzled to the point it was impossible to see the cops, the dogs, or the special agent with his rifle trained right between Jack’s eyes and not six inches from my left ear. When the shot came it was just one more element of the kaleidoscopic panoply, and I wouldn’t have put two and two together if not for the thunk, jerk, and splatter. You know how they say a bullet makes a small hole going in and a big one coming out? Well, they don’t tell you that you can look right through that little hole and see cerebrum souffl . The whole back of Jack’s head had been blown off, and the original contents were clinging to my shirt, face, and hair.

Most of the uniforms did a compound swan dive onto what was left of Jack. A pair of cops rushed in to take me down, but one was forced to restrain the German Shepherd from finishing the job on my throat, so the lone cop twisted back my arm until I screamed like a Camp Fire Girl while he used his other hand to crush my head into the dirt. His knee was in the small of my back, and he was applying the whole weight of his body. I felt the cuffs go on, saw the Shepherd slobbering six inches from my face, and heard that awful voice drilling straight through my eardrum—

“You have the right to remain silent.”

Remembering Jack

Anyway, that's how the whole thing went down. Since I was just sixteen at the time, I only had to do two years in juvenile hall, and then the P.D. successfully argued that I'd been acting out of fear for my own safety. Given Jack's gnarly history, everybody agreed probation was the best adult option.

Don't you just know I was a popular dog in juvie—that high-speed chase was major news, man, and the arrest was broadcast gazillions of times. The dudes all knew me before I was even processed! There weren't any girls to hang with, of course, but I made some real tight friends during mess, in the cells, and in the dayroom.

Yeah, and even in the showers. Straight-Up Mike, they called me.

Oh, man, were those ever the days. You guys can think I'm bragging all you want, but me and Jack were buds to the max, dude, and I've got the scars to prove it. So go ahead and walk away; out of this bar, out of my life, just like everybody else. I don't need you, I don't need anybody, 'cause I've got my memories, man, and I'll always remember Jack.

Thelma

Behind every shop window lies a strange and magical world; a world where half-defined shapes, busily engaged in mysterious transactions, seem to coalesce even as they pass from view. These unstable figures—customer, employee, and proprietor—are *important* people. They are not there to be rudely eyeballed, like so many fish in a bowl. Their business is theirs and theirs alone.

But old Thelma couldn't help staring, no matter how hard she tried, no matter how many times she was punished. Her head would be turning before she knew it, and sometimes, squinting against the mirrored sun, she would catch one or more of those murky shop-dwellers staring back importantly just as her hunched and gnarled reflection rolled by.

Thelma was crazy about people. Whether they pointed and whispered, or rudely laughed out loud, she always smiled in their eyes, resisting with difficulty the urge to reach out and touch. And she loved bustle. People walked this way and that, jealously guarding their personal space, but they invariably parted when she rolled down the sidewalk, as if she were a queen being

escorted through a sea of loving subjects.

The sidewalks were bustling now, and Thelma could barely contain her excitement. Her eyes devoured everything. When her chair finally came to a rest she found herself staring at a small box affixed to a pole. She'd seen this kind of fixture hundreds of times, and was mesmerized by the experience. The fixture poked out right at eye level, and bore a flat white plate with a wonderful little cryptogram of a funny black stick man hovering over a long black arrow. The stick man gave the impression of being in an awful hurry to discover the big secret that long black arrow was about to divulge. For some reason these fixtures always featured a blunt metal button beneath the cryptogram.

Perhaps it was the fascinating way people now all burst off the curb as one. Or maybe it was the intoxicating combination of crisp air and golden sun. But suddenly Thelma just had to solve the mystery, just had to push that stubby little button.

A hand whacked her across the back of her head; not hard enough to really hurt, just hard enough to let her know she'd done wrong. Right behind the sound of the whack came Gary's voice:

"God *damn* you, you ugly old witch. How many times do I have to tell you to keep your paws on the armrests?" The hand grabbed the white bun of her hair and twisted back her head. Gary's eyes were burning. "The next time you try that, retard, you're gonna go to bed without dinner. You got me? You remember what it's like going to bed without dinner? You cried like a baby all night, didn't you? Well, that's what you get when you screw up, y'hear? So don't press your luck." He pushed her head back down, but not too hard. There were pedestrians everywhere.

Thelma craned her neck to look back remorsefully. "Pleezh no be madda me, Gehr. I be

good.”

Gary exhaled noisily. “My ass.” He shoved the wheelchair across the intersection and rammed it against the curb, then kicked, shook, jerked, and heaved it onto the sidewalk, swearing up and down. But his demeanor changed abruptly as another old biddy, the widow Bender, approached and came to a halt directly in their path.

“Widow Bender! And how are you on this lovely fall day?”

“In the pink,” the widow lied. She stooped to smile in Thelma’s face. “Hi, Thelma dear! So . . . I see you and your nice young man are out enjoying the day. How’s he been treating you? Just like the princess you are, I’ll wager.”

“Oh yesh,” Thelma gushed. “Gehr gooda me. Gehr always gooda Telma.”

“That . . . that’s wonderful!” the widow grimaced. “I—” she managed, “I’ve got to *go* now, dear,” for in her passion Thelma had allowed her arthritic old talon to grasp one of the widow’s hands. The widow extracted her hand with difficulty, smiled breezily at Gary and winked. “Well, you just make sure you give him a big long kiss for me, sweetheart.” She looked back down. “Bye now, Thelma!”

“That was rich,” Gary said as they continued down the sidewalk. He snickered. “‘Gehr always gooda Telma’. You bet your ass I’m good to you, crone. Who else would put up with all your goddamned babytalk. Who else would tolerate your stench all day long. You gnarly pig. You don’t know—you couldn’t possibly imagine—how many times I’ve dreamed of just walking off and leaving you and your stupid-ass chair in rush hour traffic.”

Thelma looked back fearfully. “Oh no, Gehr! Pleezh no leave me, Gehr. Telma be good.”

“Oh-h-h—you don’t gotta worry about me leaving you, witch. I’ll be pushing your spastic ass around until the day you die. And you wanna know why? I’ll tell you why. Because

you're worth a hell of a lot more alive than dead, that's why. The state pays good money to keep corpses like you going, and a nice piece of that pie goes into my pocket for taking care of you.”

He laughed harshly. “I'm your guardian, you ugly old creep; I'm your goddamn guardian angel! I'm the one who feeds you and medicates you and makes sure you don't slobber to death. You didn't know that, did you—that I'm as close to God as you'll ever get, that I'm the one who's responsible for keeping your stinking ass in one piece? Even though I've told you a thousand times . . . you don't know *squat*, do you dimwit? So I'll be around forever, even though you're, what, a hundred and fifty years old? Even though you're ugly as sin and smell like the dead . . . wait a minute! What am I saying? *Like* the dead? You *are* dead. You're just a rotting old cadaver that some trick of fate keeps running. And you know *what*, you funky old skank? You'll outlive us all! Great people, *important* people, will pass out of the picture naturally. But not stupid stinking Thelma. She'll just hang in there, baby. Pissing and whining and waiting for good old Gary to do *everything* for her. Scum! You're dirt, that's all you are. Just plain dirt.”

“I do betta, Gehr,” old Thelma moaned, despising herself. “I sho sharry, Gehr. I be betta, I promiss. Telma be good fum now on, Gehr. Telma be good.”

Her apology was lost on Gary. He leaned forward to whisper in her ear, “And you wanna know *why* you don't deserve to be alive? Because you're worthless, y'hear? *Worthless!* You're not good for anything or anybody. You can't take care of yourself, you can't feed yourself, you can't do a thing. When's the last time you did anything constructive, or had even one original thought? When's the last time you made the slightest effort to be of value to anything? I'll tell you when: *never!* 'Cause you're a sick old piece of crap who can't see past her goddamn wheelchair. A cockroach has more value than you. At least a cockroach can get around on its own.”

Thelma

Gary shoved and jerked the wheelchair to make his point. “Don’t you understand, sponge? Life is *good* to you. But what good are you to life? Where on this entire planet is there a single life-form, not counting Yours Truly, that benefits from your being here. Name one thing. Can’t do it, moron? That’s because you’re *worthless!* But I’ll clue you in on something. When the golden day arrives that your filthy ass expires, tramp, you’re gonna make a whole lot of worms real happy. Party time for Ourobouros. *That’s* when you’re gonna contribute.”

Gary abruptly turned the wheelchair to the left, steered it across the street and into the park. “Aw-w-w . . .” he concluded, “what’s the use.”

This was Thelma’s favorite part of the day. Everyone in the park was always so happy, so full of vitality. Children squealed with delight, dogs chased Frisbees, lovers drifted languorously between the elms. And around them all bumped the slowly rolling chair, pushed by the mumbling and incongruously sullen man, his head down.

“*Jesus*, here we go again! Everybody and his mother out having the time of their lives. Every guy in town but me walking along with a hot young babe on his arm. Look what I’m stuck with. Oh man, am I embarrassed! You pointless turd. I’m the laughingstock of this neighborhood thanks to you.”

Gary’s mood continued to deteriorate, in stark contrast to the afternoon’s waking loveliness. After wheeling her twice through the park he brought her chair to a halt next to a trash bin.

“Okay, Quasimodo. Have a last look around. I’m gonna go take a leak and be right back.” He stuck a forefinger in her face. “Now don’t you move! I’m warning you. You stay put just where you are. Don’t you dare talk to anybody and don’t you dare touch anything. I’ll be right back.” He gave her a hard look and ambled over to a public restroom.

Thelma

Thelma sat stock-still, determined to be good. But her mind was rocking back and forth, chanting: *Don't be bad, Thelma; don't make Gary mad. Don't be bad, Thelma, don't be bad!*

This little mantra went round and round in her head until it ceased to make sense.

Thelma heard a rustling near her feet, but fought the impulse to look. Gary had told her not to move. If she could only once do what he said maybe he wouldn't be so unhappy all the time. Again came the rustling, followed by a tiny, frightened mewling. Thelma's hands gripped the armrests. The mewling grew in urgency until Thelma could no longer resist the temptation to peek.

The tiny white kitten couldn't have been more than three or four weeks old. It had one brown ear and a large brown spot on its forehead. It was obviously abandoned and extremely hungry.

Thelma fell in love with it right away. Her rheumy old eyes went teary, and her wretched old hand reached down to caress it. The kitten recoiled at her touch, then rubbed against her thumb. Every cell in Thelma's body trembled. "Ghity," she said.

Gary now walked back, looking bored. "Okay, cretin. Time to wheel your stupid ass home and—*hey!* What you got there?"

Thelma looked up at Gary's frowning face. Her cheeks were covered with tears. "Ghity," she bubbled.

Gary grimaced. "Leave it alone, damn you! What do you want with a cat, anyway? Don't I feed you enough? No! Out of the question." He looked around, picked up a wood slat and swatted at the kitten, trying to scare it away. All he got for his effort was a sizable splinter in his index finger. Gary howled as if he'd been gored, swore and dashed over to a drinking fountain to wash off the wound. In less than a minute he was back, but not before Thelma had managed to

reach down, grab the kitten, and bundle it under her sweater.

“Christ!” Gary spat. “Look what you caused, whore. Oh, *mama*, that hurts! I oughta knock your silly head off, you know that, you old bitch? You’re good and goddamned lucky I need you alive.”

Thelma withered under Gary’s invective as he wheeled her home, occasionally bashing the chair against walls, pushing it hard off curbs. She had been bad again, but it didn’t seem to matter. All that mattered was the tender little source of warmth shifting position on her lap. Each small movement jangled her nerves. Under her sweater she gently stroked the tiny creature. The warmth hummed in response. “Ghity,” she whispered.

Gary unlocked and kicked open the front door in one move. He shoved Thelma’s chair in roughly. “Jesus, idiot, don’t fight me! You know the routine. Sit still!” He kicked the door closed, heaved a sigh. After a moment he wordlessly pushed the chair to the ramp and up to the converted attic. The attic had been partitioned centrally to create a sunroom on one side and a small bedroom on the other. This was Thelma’s room. “Here you are, fossil: back in your digs. Enjoy. I’ll be downstairs in the real world. Do me a favor. If you need anything, call the undertaker. Stay out of my face.” He turned and walked down the stairs abutting the ramp.

Thelma waited until she heard the familiar sound of the television downstairs, then carefully opened her sweater to reveal the kitten’s tiny crimped form. The poor thing was trembling in its sleep, and barely responded when Thelma tenderly cradled it in her arms. The old woman and kitten trembled together as the afternoon sun burnished the bedroom’s bare wood

floor.

“Ghity,” Thelma crooned, rocking slowly in her chair. “Ghity, ghity, baby ghity.”

Now sunshine began to play upon a corner of the small card table that served as Thelma’s desk and dining table. She wheeled over and very gently lifted the kitten onto the warm spot. It wakened and struggled to stand while she supported it with one hand under its belly. Once it was upright it began to urgently rub its cheeks against her other hand, then attempted to suckle a finger. It was starving. Old Thelma kissed it, over and over. It was all she could do.

Without any warning Gary came barging into the room. When he saw the kitten on the table he stopped dead in his tracks. His mouth fell open as he stared from Thelma to the kitten and back again. Finally he breathed, “You *bitch!* What did I tell you? *What did I tell you?*” He took a great step forward and slapped Thelma hard across the face. “I told you ‘no cat’, didn’t I? *Didn’t I tell you that?*” He scooped the kitten in his hand, stepped to the window, and screamed, “DIDN’T I TELL YOU NO GODDAMNED CAT?” Staring hard at her, he threw the kitten out the window as if it was so much garbage. Thelma hugged herself, horrified. Gary stormed over and grabbed her by the hair, began slapping her face back and forth, his passion ascending with each consecutive blow. Finally he caught himself, almost hysterical, but still together enough to realize the stupidest thing he could do would be to leave marks. He stepped back.

“You’ve crossed me for the last time.” He tore her mirror from the wall, smashed it on the floor. He pointed a shaking finger at the shards of glass. “You see that?” he spat, indicating a piece. “That’s you.” He jabbed his finger at other pieces. “You see that? You see that? You see that? That’s what’s gonna happen to you next time you disobey me.” He knocked a picture off the wall, moved to the closet and tore Thelma’s clothes from their hangers. Then his anger seemed to abate.

He walked to the door and said coldly, almost calmly, “No more privileges. Period. No more trips to the park, no more listening to the radio. This door stays locked, and you stay in.” He appeared about to elaborate, but his anger was catching up with him again. Finally he stepped out, screamed, “*Just die, already!*” and slammed the door so hard it shook the walls.

The aftermath was worse than the explosion. Thelma sat in shock, wondering only how she could have been so bad. She wiped away her tears with a deformed and quivering hand. This was the unhappiest she’d ever made Gary, and the first time he’d ever locked her away from him. An exaggerated sense of lonesomeness weighed upon her. She loathed herself. Gary was right. She didn’t deserve to live.

Little by little the numbness grew over her. Her thoughts slunk farther from meaningful analysis, and an almost palpable silence enveloped the room. It was in this oppressive silence that she thought she heard a familiar sound.

Thelma’s attention refocused, her heart began to pound. There it was again. A tiny sound, frightened and lost, seeming to come from right outside the window. Entranced, old Thelma rolled her chair over.

She leaned out. The white kitten lay straddled over the rain gutter running above the eaves and just under her window, having hit a power line and fallen to its present position. If not for the line the animal, small as it was, would certainly have been killed or seriously injured by an impact with the cement drive below.

Thelma’s brows ran oblique. The kitten was perched awkwardly on one of the wide steel clamps securing the rain gutter to the roof, a good seven or eight feet from the window’s trim. Thelma gripped the rain gutter, tried to shake it to get the kitten’s attention. The gutter was solidly attached and didn’t budge at all, but the kitten must have felt the vibrations, for it looked

up and wailed pitifully.

“Ghity!” Thelma moaned. She rolled her chair back from the window, trying to think. But she had precious little experience in problem solving. The harder she thought the more confused she became. She must have nodded, must have dozed for an hour or more. The next thing she knew it was getting chilly, and there was the sound of a key in the lock.

Gary came in with a small blue plastic bowl in one hand and a plastic drinking glass half-full of water in the other.

“Here’s your gruel, ghoul.” He placed the bowl and glass on the card table. “That’s right. All you get is formula. No meat, no vegetables, no sweets. It serves your stupid ass right for being such a sneaky old slut. And that’s *all* you’re gonna get from now on, until I think you’ve learned your lesson.” His face twisted with contempt. “You mangy whore. I’m being way too kind for the likes of you. If I had my druthers you’d starve to death up here. Oh, yeah! I’d crank up the T.V. and you could scream your ugly old head off for all I’d care.” He crashed his fist on the dresser, then swept off Thelma’s little ceramic menagerie. “But I need you *alive*, pigface!” He took a deep breath. “There’s enough nutrition in that slime to keep you going. But that’s all. We’ll see how tough you are after a few days of goop diet.” He turned and walked to the door. Before he slammed it he said icily, “You’ll live. But so help me, bitch, I’ll live to piss on your grave.”

Thelma waited a minute, then pushed herself over to the card table. She inspected the contents of the bowl. “Formula” was a vitamin-rich concoction mass-produced for the elderly, but lately Gary had been saving pennies by preparing his own version; basically a blend of milk, margarine, and sugar.

Thelma anxiously looked around the pigsty of her room. There was trash and filth

everywhere. Not only had Gary never once lifted a finger to clean the room, he seemed to take a vicious delight in haphazardly storing junk more properly assigned to the garage or basement.

Now Thelma rooted through a pile next to her bed, looking for something that would extend her reach. After an exhaustive search she settled on a grimy aluminum curtain hanger. It was the retracting kind: two nearly identical lightweight rods that fit one into the other for sliding adjustment. One end of each rod was crooked at a right angle for securing the device to a wall. Thelma found that by forcing the assembled hanger to its greatest length she had a good six feet of extension for her arm.

She had to rest. This had been a tremendous amount of effort for a crippled and sedentary nonagenarian. She was beginning to doze when the kitten's mewing renewed its tug on her heart. Thelma continued her rooting, fished out a heavy rubber band. The band was an inch and a half wide, perhaps twice that in circumference. It was difficult to stretch.

Thelma wheeled back to the card table and placed these items before her. She was breathing hard. After a minute she drank the water from the plastic glass. The room seemed to revolve, steadied. Thelma forced the rubber band around the base of the glass, then moved it upward an inch at a time. The pressure of the band cracked the plastic in three places. Puffing and wheezing, old Thelma now pushed one end of the curtain hanger under the rubber band until the two parts were secure, making a six-foot-long handle for the glass. Outside, the kitten began to cry continuously.

Thelma lifted the bowl of formula and held it over the glass. Her hands were shaking so badly that this job—the simple act of pouring the contents of one vessel into another—was accomplished only with the greatest difficulty. A good deal of formula oozed out the cracks in the glass. Thelma wiped the bowl clean with her crooked old finger, then smeared this residue

around the rim of the glass. She balanced her little device on the wheelchair's armrests and rolled to the window.

Thelma thrust out her head. The white kitten was still straddling the clamp over the rain gutter. When it saw her it began to wail and move its legs ineffectually.

"No, ghity, no," Thelma cooed. "Ghity stay." She maneuvered her contraption out the window so that the base of the glass rested on the floor of the rain gutter, then began to push it slowly toward the kitten. A lot of formula was lost in the process.

All this activity was hard on the old woman, and by the time the glass had reached the kitten Thelma's arms were shaking. Very little formula remained in the glass, but the kitten attacked the nourishment ravenously, licking the inside of the glass clean and lapping up the inch of liquid on the bottom. With the last of her strength, Thelma dragged the device back inside and let her head fall on the sill.

The kitten was still hanging on the clamp, still straining to lap up the spilled drops.

Thelma watched it listlessly, unable to lift her head. An absolutely novel feeling began to grow in the old woman's heart; a sense of worthiness, of responsibility. Something small and vulnerable . . . something *unimportant*—but something very much alive—depended on *her*. Life desperately needed her, contemptible as she surely was, and Thelma found herself weeping uncontrollably while her heavy head lolled on the sill and the afternoon sun gently washed her face.

The next day Thelma slept very late. When at last she rose she became dizzy and weak

from the act of sitting upright. The normal procedure of working her misshapen body into the wheelchair was an almost Herculean task.

She struggled over to the window. The kitten was sprawled exactly as she'd seen it last, and her heart skipped a beat. She passionately shook the rain gutter. When the animal finally lifted its head and sluggishly cried out she was so relieved she had to cling to the sill.

All day long she remained at the window, talking as much to herself as to the kitten, her mind slipping in and out of reality.

Gary came in late in the day. He glared and refused to say a word, plopped down the bowl of formula and glass of water. He scowled and slowly shook his head. Thelma was too weak to acknowledge him, so he walked back out and locked the door.

After a few minutes Thelma retrieved her device from under the bed, patiently slopped formula from bowl to glass, forced her chair to the window.

As soon as the glass reached the kitten it came to life. It attacked the mixture eagerly, lapping up even those drops trapped in the cracks. Old Thelma was so exhausted she fell asleep with her head and arms out the window, and didn't wake until it was fully dark and quite chilly. It took a supreme effort to make it back to bed.

That night she came to her senses alternately shivering and sweating. Her room seemed unfamiliar. Thelma pulled a heavy sweater over her flimsy nightdress, covered herself snugly, and let herself drift.

On the third day she remained in bed, her hands and feet freezing. Gary waited until near

Thelma

sunset to bring in her formula. Thelma feigned sleep to avoid him, then woozily fought her way through the steps of boarding her wheelchair, filling the glass, making her way to the window.

The kitten cried frantically when it saw her. Thelma pushed the glass, which seemed a dead weight, to where the kitten could just reach it. Her arms began to shake terribly, but she managed to keep the glass in place until the kitten had finished.

All sensation passed from her left arm.

Thelma gasped. Her upper body jerked. The glass and curtain hanger flipped over the rain gutter and dropped into a hedge below the window.

Thelma's hand reflexively pushed her away from the window, the wheelchair rolling her back a few feet. There she sat quietly, wondering at the lack of feeling in the arm. It might have been made of wood. She lifted the wooden arm with her good hand, placed the arm neatly on its rest, then used the good hand to push those rigid fingers one by one into a semblance of grip.

She watched the day expire, saw the full splendor of its passing face for the final time, while shadows crept along the walls and floor, steadily dabbing up random pools of light.

The sky caught fire. Within the window's frame stray plumes ignited, slowly lost their intensity and glory, then smoldered with a dull and bloody glow. As the fire subsided these plumes turned to smoke in the deepening blue, became vagabond ghosts in the dark, lost their way in the night, and were no more.

Death treads gently on gentle souls.

The end came for Thelma not with abruptness or horror, nor did it bring her any pain. It

Thelma

mirrored twilight's subtle diminuendo; measure by measure muting voice, shading tone.

It was almost an elegant thing.

Night stepped through the window not as a burglar but as a suitor, drawing its endless shroud about her, round and round, claiming her pulse one revolution per beat. It worked its way up her arms, her neck, her face.

Thelma watched the stars writhe prettily above the horizon, burning out their hearts for no one and nothing. She watched them shimmer, languidly, until a breath of cold blew out the light in her eyes.

In the wee hours there came a tiny scuffling at the window. A brown ear appeared, then a white ear, and finally two round eyes peered liquidly into the room. The kitten mewed nervously for a few seconds, then half-jumped, half-fell to the floor.

It froze where it landed, questing with its senses. In a minute it squinched and crept to where the two orthopedic shoes stood on the footrest. It climbed awkwardly over the rest and onto a shoe. There it paused to look up uncertainly. It clawed with difficulty up Thelma's leg and onto her lap. The old woman was cold as stone. The little white kitten threw back its head and wailed. It cried on and on and on in the darkness, rocking side to side, rhythmically digging its claws left and right into her cheap cotton nightdress. When it stopped, the room was quiet as a tomb. Slowly the kitten pushed its way under her sweater until it was all but buried. It curled up tightly, began to hum. It closed its eyes and was almost immediately asleep.

Empire

Alura is a planet as lovely as its name.

The air, you would swear, has a sweet bouquet, and among Captain Scott's ground party, sick to the gills of canned air, there was whispered talk of an *aftertaste* upon inhalation—something between caramel fudge and hot buttered rum.

Native Alurans are friendly to a fault. The men are wise and mentoring, the women ample and unabashedly nude. The men can be firm, however, and so for propriety's sake made certain the damson-toned nymphs arranged their flowing blonde tresses strategically in the company of Scott's all-male, cabin-fevered, skin-starved crew.

Alurans are *humanoid*. They are social creatures, prone to lounging and fond of dissertation. The planet Alura, with its bounteous fields of stellarium-rich photocrystals, has from Day One provided its denizens with long lives of peace and plenty.

Still, sometimes a prodigious native energy supply can be too much of a good thing.

Aluran males go almost directly from puberty to senescence, fulfilling their reproductive function in a single season, only to linger in decrepitude for decades to come. Aluran women suffer throughout their lives with that exotic and unpleasant condition known as *mammaria vulgaris*, wherein supercharged estrogen causes the mammary glands to engorge in the company of males, and to spontaneously engage in profoundly mortifying paroxysms of projectile lactation. The ejected product's sugar content is so stellarium-enriched that, upon exposure to air, it leaves a most unbecoming veneer of crystallized threads and filmy residue. Very many Aluran women are also cursed with the stigmata of superfluous breasts on the back, shoulders, and underchin—a humiliating condition that, during this, the first meeting of officials from Earth and Alura, caused the Elders considerable grief and embarrassment.

Stellarium crystals, or *stellaria*, are not all that uncommon in the Milky Way. They can be found carpeting the temperate zones of most planets; absorbing, storing, and concentrating starlight by way of their unique arrangement of stepped internal faces. Some older crystals have been known to power a medium-sized city for a good solar year. Since their discovery by 23rd Century Earth prospectors, they've been the prime energy source in every Solar System project from transportation to military. The natural consequence is, of course, a steady depletion of this hardy but highly exhaustible life form.

Aluran crystals have a paradoxical relationship with their galactic neighborhood. Alura is a remote, recently uncharted, most unpromising candidate for life of any kind. But its crystals' struggle for distant starlight produced a rigorousness, a high field presence, and an unparalleled ability to photosynthesize. The evolutionary result is a robust, self-contained mini-system; warm, steady, and perennially paradisiacal.

It was in this setting, on the crystal-rich bank of a perpetually mild lagoon of the Silken Sea, that the Aluran Elders received the bug-eyed Earth crew. After much apologizing and woman-scolding, White the Eldest brought the small talk down to basics, speaking haltingly in the Universal Tongue.

“There will be no need for the Elders to Counsel, Captain Scott. Your generous offers to purchase stellarium crystals wholesale, as well as to join with Alura in business partnership, are entirely unacceptable. These fields are not only our life-blood, they harbor a deep and timeless spiritual significance. To all Alurans. As you have informed us that you are fully empowered to speak on your home planet’s behalf, I feel honored as well as saddened to relate to you personally that, no, regrettably, we will never comply with this request. We are not for sale.”

Scott bowed. “I will inform my world’s leader of your feelings in this matter, and return with his thoughts.” He paused as Gray the Elder wheeled his chair up against White’s. The two huddled for a whispered confab. White looked back up.

“And . . . Captain Scott . . . we feel it best you return as sole representative, that your wonderful crewmen not be forced to endure the unsightly spectacle of our hapless women.”

A mutinous groan rose from the men.

Eldest White, nodding sympathetically, said with great bearing, “Thank you gentlemen, and a safe and very brief sojourn to you. May time wipe this unbidden, untoward, and disgustingly messy spectacle from your minds.”

“How backward can these idiots be?”

Empire

The President of Earth zoomed his image up tight, that Scott be irresistibly apprised of his displeasure. “I’ve given you full powers of emissary, Scott. They’ve heard our complete offer? What do they want, jangling baubles and party hats?”

“It’s like a religious thing,” Scott hemmed. “‘Spiritual’, he called it. Doesn’t want to let go of the past, or posterity, or something like that.”

“Oh, what a load of crap. Every race has its price. Now you get back down there and you do some fancy talking. You know what’s resting on this project, and you know how imperative those crystals are. If the Third Ring catches us with our pants down this time, we won’t have enough power to send up a surrender beacon. Money isn’t an object—we’re already through the roof on this. I’m authorizing your direct military command of all Group Bases if need be, of limitless and instantaneous funding, of total support from every proxy in the Quadrant. Damn you, man—get it done! If I see your pasty face again without a full work order for the immediate export of stellarium crystals, I’ll bust you right back down to janitor before your pansy-ass lips are dry. There’s an election coming up back at home, in case you’ve forgotten. Do we have an understanding here, Scott? Now, either you’re gonna make me happy or I’m gonna make you history.”

“I’m so glad you could make it,” Scott whispered, peeking out his quarters while desperately avoiding looking at his guest. He’d leaked word that he needed to meet with the most intelligent of the Aluran women, and she’d tiptoed blushing through the flapping door, her long hair fluffing all around her gently swelling self. He began gathering the strange metallic marbles into a pile.

Empire

The woman plucked one up, turned it before her wide violet eyes. “Pretty!”

“Telefiles,” Scott said, placing it back in the pile. “I’ve been studying some ancient Earth records, looking for ideas. I’m Captain Scott,” he breathed. “And you are?”

She spread her arms and giggled nervously. “*Shela!*”

“Shhh!” Scott couldn’t help breathing her in: a sweet musk emanated from her every distending pore, while he grew clammy at the pits and groin. “Shela, I have very important work for you, a mission of the utmost moment. We have discovered that the Elders of Alura are plotting against us. It is imperative that we learn all we can to spare us from disaster. You can be our eyes and ears. You must eavesdrop on their conversations, you must find out all you can about how they manage and secure stellaria, and report back to me.”

Shela bent nearer, her chest heaving. “Oh, but Captain Scott! Whatever will I tell my friends?”

Scott’s eyes began to wobble and ache; the taste of peaches in cream came to his tongue. His fingertips grew sticky, and a pulsing gossamer web grew about them. “It’s a secret,” he whispered. “It *must* be, do you hear? You *must* come to me here, every night, and report *everything* you hear. No one must ever ever *ever* see you come and go, do you understand?”

The woman’s entire body blushed ripe plum. “But how can I be of both Earth and Alura? In what manner do we merge?”

She was expanding before his eyes. “I,” Scott gasped, “am hereby deputizing you. You are now an agent of our command. Of *my* command.” He scooped his tunic off its hook, raced his eyes across the colorful bits comprising his rows and columns of commendations. Cadet Mentor . . . Stellar Emissary . . . Galactic Commander . . . and peeled off the flexy starburst medal for Best Ship’s Hygiene.

“What are *those*, Captain Scott?”

“*These*,” Scott maundered, “are breast badges. They’re the proofs of all my manly endeavors. They’re awards: what Earth’s elite, political and military, give to officers of merit upon the successful completion of missions great and small.” He demonstrated the badges’ attachment and removal. “They’re just latex suction pads, what we call ‘Peel and Paste’.”

Shela’s eyes swelled in their sockets, her lips plumping as he stared. “*Breast*,” she hissed prettily, “badges! But why do they call them that?”

“Well,” Scott said reasonably, “because they’re worn on the breast. Flashing one of these babies is a great honor.”

Shela’s eyes sparkled, following the badge in Scott’s rocking fingers. “For me?”

“Remember—” Scott panted, “*our* secret.”

She looked down; left, right, and supernumerary. “But where will I wear it?”

Scott reached out his shaking hand, his breath hot and moist in his throat. “Right . . . *here*.”

“I bear grave news.”

They were in the Aluran’s command Circle, overlooking the Silken Sea. Scott studied his clenched hands. “It grieves me even to speak it in this fine and lovely place.”

White the Eldest gripped his armrests and leaned forward, the veins throbbing in his forehead. Immediately his harem gushed to his sides, fanning him with their endless tresses while blushing furiously at their flashing pendulous fantasies. “Speak it,” White urged, “Friend Captain Scott.”

Empire

Scott rose and began to pace, hands clasped behind his back. “Your world, Eldest White, is under the scrutiny of a devious and relentless species.” He raised a hand. “This race, the Klingons, has engaged an assault upon Alura under the auspices of their wicked ruler Kal-El of Oz.” He whirled. “Make no mistake! They seek only your stellarium crystals, and will stop at nothing to get them! No ruse too shallow, no ploy too obtuse . . .” He wagged his head sadly while raising a hopeful forefinger. “I am ambivalent. First: I, like all good men of Earth, am weighed down by this terrible turn of events in the life-cycle of a great and generous planet. But second, and far more important: I am overjoyed that we have arrived in time to protect you.” He bowed to the waist. “If you will permit us.”

Gray the Elder placed a hand on White’s forearm. “Surely we must Counsel!”

“The moment is urgent,” Scott said. “Proof of this threat, alas, is presently at hand.” He triggered his vocalizer. “Ensign Manson. Do it.” A second later the skies over Alura were erupting with pyrotechnic rage: Roman Candles, skyrocket, podloads of sparklers and Sneaky Petes. The women jiggled in terror while the Elders gasped and wheeled in erratic circles. The spectacle ceased.

“That should hold those awful Klingons for a while,” Scott said.

“Bless you!” White panted. “And bless all you fine men of Earth. Our stellaria are saved!”

“Only temporarily,” Scott reminded him. “We can’t hold them off forever. I suggest a peace offering; a few carriers of your richest stellaria to keep them at bay while my selfless colleagues desperately attempt to work something out.”

“Never!” White vowed, and with surprising passion. “We deeply appreciate your kind Earthling concern for our security, Captain Scott, but understand that under no circumstances

will we ever relinquish a single rod of our beloved crystals! We are bound by ancient promises—to the beaming fields above and the chiseled roots below. None of this sacred growth shall *ever* leave our world!” He shakily raised himself half out of his chair, waving his bobbing nursers away. “Never! Do you hear me, sir? Not ever!”

“But surely, a—”

White clutched his chest and fell back in his chair. For a minute all was confusion. Presently Gray the Elder freed himself from White’s supporting fleshy tangle and looked over gravely. “I suggest you remove yourself, *sir*, and with the utmost haste.” There was no doubting his savvy, nor his hostility. “While it may be true that Eldest White’s advancement in years may have made him slow and over-trusting, and while the word of the Eldest is final, be advised that,” and his eyes burned across the Circle while he tapped a forefinger on his temple, “his true friends *know* things, and are a force to be reckoned with.”

Shela quietly slipped round the flap, her chest beating hard.

“What took you?” Scott whispered. “What have you learned?”

She huddled there, vainly attempting to contain herself. “It is Gray you must fear. He is inciting the Elders to retaliation. Nothing will change him.”

Scott gripped her passionately. “Shela! You must understand—Gray is a wicked man, bent only on destruction. His one course is pure selfishness—he *must* be destroyed!”

She began helplessly sprouting and exuding, so great was her consternation. “But what can we *do*, Captain Scott? I cannot keep The Secret from my friends much longer.”

“Take a deep breath,” Scott advised. “Relax.” Peaches in cream. “Now take another deep breath. Relax, relax. Breathe deeper, *deeper*; oh *Shela*, Shela, *breathe!* That’s a good girl. Now, there’s an old Earth saying: if you can’t bribe ’em, enlist ’em. So I want you to bring *all* the girls here, the whole gang, every night, and I’m gonna make sure *each* and *every* one is deputized with a breast badge!” Her eyes welled. Shela’s shoulders fell and she slowly began to deflate. “No, no, no!” Scott said hurriedly. “They’ll just be your *deputies*. You’re so smart, agent Shela; you’re smarter than all the rest put together. That’s why I’m promoting you.” He snatched his tunic from the wall and peeled off the Second Place, Three-legged Sack Race badge. Scott leaned forward in a crystallizing haze. “Let’s just see if we can find some more room in there.”

Captain Scott strode purposefully into the Circle, flanked by Military Police. The Aluran sky was choking with hovering Earth craft, an awesome and intimidating sight since long before dawn. Every few minutes another carrier landed in a brilliant splash of gravity repellent.

“What,” White tottered, “is the *meaning* of this, Captain Scott? And why have we been confined to the Circle these many hours?”

“For your own safety, sir. The situation is far worse than our original reports led us to believe. It now appears that the Romulans have sided with the Klingons, and are gearing up for a Trump maneuver even as we speak.”

“These words you use,” Gray said darkly, “are of no meaning to us. By what authority do you impose your military upon our neutral world?”

Scott met him eye to eye. “By authority of the Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts, Elder Gray. And it is not an imposition. The United Federation Of Planets has declared *this* planet a

protectorate of the Borg Confederacy, and ordered Battleship Earth to her defense. It is *we* who bear the onus of this venture! Not *you*, we!”

“And bless you, son,” White rasped. “And bless your fine people all.”

“Cease!” barked Gray. “You use these terms, alien and obtuse, to divert us from actuality! What are these things, sir, and what do they imply?”

A tic worked in Scott’s eye. “You’ll have plenty of time to learn, Gray, in the comfort of our brig. Men, remove this scoundrel.”

The MPs immediately grasped Gray’s handgrips and wheeled him away.

Scott turned to White. “It pains me to inform you, Eldest, but Elder Gray is actually an Ent working for the Dark Lord.”

White paled further. “No . . . I . . .”

“Yes. I’m afraid you’ve been confiding in a traitor and informant. We Earthlings come from a long tradition of wheeling and dealing with just such rascals.” Scott turned to the cap of Crystal Hill, where the Terran Blue & Green was being raised in a mild breeze. “Look to the future, Eldest! See the Aluran flag replaced by the Terran, so those cruel invaders are made visually aware of their formidable foe. A major battle will be won, perhaps without a single shot fired! Our President has even brainstormed a replacement name for this glorious planet—so that all potential villains know they are one step behind in the game.” He made a frame of his hands and peered through. “Think of it, Eldest White! A grand name, an imposing name, a name feared by all—a name that will give even the Death Star pause.” His eyes grew misty as he genuflected by the chair. “Try it out for yourself, Eldest. Give it a shot.” Captain Scott articulated broadly, running an arm over the gleaming panorama: “*New . . .*” he enunciated “. . . *Earth . . .*”

“New . . .” White mumbled, “. . . New . . .” His sunken eyes rose Scottward. “And this strategy will preserve our precious stellaria?”

“Absolutely. Our precious stellaria will be unapproachable! Even now drillers are tearing up fields. Loaders are stocking carriers, carriers are unloading in cargo ships. Tons and tons and *tons* of stellarium are ready to be transported to Earth for safekeeping. I want to *guarantee* you, Eldest White, that no foreign power will ever get their greedy mitts on these crystals!”

“I, sir,” White breathed, “am impressed.” He impulsively kissed the Captain’s hand. “Nay, I am in awe! You will forgive my physical impertinence, but your ways of thinking are far beyond we simple Alurans. Please accept our tears of gratitude, and let us know how best we may assist.”

“It’s all worked out, Eldest; you won’t have to do a thing. Aluran males are even now being rounded up en masse. And since you are civilians in a military arena, we are sworn to protect you in the grand Terran tradition. So all males will be safely ensconced on a special parcel of land in the Deader Desert, where no Orc or Oprah would think of searching. Aluran women will be transported to Earth for protective housing in some of our politicians’ finest mansions, and thereby inducted into the illustrious Great Chambermaids Society. Graduates are highly prized. Who knows—one day an Aluran woman may even bear the coveted Golden Chamberpot.”

“No . . .” White’s eyes were brimming. “But, Captain Scott . . . the Deader Desert?”

“No longer, sir. The area has been renamed the Aluran Reservation, in your honor. A ‘reservation’ is a place we Earthmen use to house our noblest peoples. All Elders will be preserved therein with complete security, and provided unlimited supplies of a popular Earth elixir known as ‘vodka’.” He unholstered a flask and had the Eldest sip.

“It is . . .” White gasped, “fire on the tongue.”

“Don’t worry, Eldest, you’ll get used to it.” He placed a comforting hand on the old man’s shoulder. “Someday, my friend, this fire will certainly be your dearest and most trusted companion.”

“Folks—” the reporter gushed, addressing the hovering cameras while backpedaling up the walk “—you’ve heard about her, you’ve read about her, you’ve seen her wise and beaming face shining as the brightest star in the galaxy—the Woman of the Future, the symbol of success, the highest inspiration for all those yearning young girls, now viewing from home and dreaming of all they can be. So, with the whole Solar System watching, we give you that Stellar Sacagawea, that Purple Pocahontas: Senator Scott’s Mystery Princess, the Fabulous Aluran Muse who brought us our life-saving stellaria—Earth’s unparalleled Heroine—ladies and gentlemen . . . *Shela!*”

The camera zoomed right in. Almost overwhelmed by all the excitement, Shela promptly popped off her breast badge, held it high overhead, and smiled into the bespattered lens.

“Latex!” she bubbled, “Peel and Paste!”

Rage

The night rears, and I sag.

Seize and recover, seize and recover. Headlights burn my eyes, but I don't dare close them; no way. Got to stay upright.

There's Oscar loitering in the half-shadows. I know he sees me: his left eye gleams and drops. But there are no unnecessary movements, no increased tension. We've dealt before.

Oscar gives a discreet toss of the head, and I follow him down the stairwell, where a pool of pitch obscures us from the sidewalk above. Oscar glares.

"Like I told you, *essa*, don't come shuffling around here like the walking dead. Put on some decent clothes, wear something casual. Jeez."

"I need a dime," I mumble. "Just a roll."

"Yeh, yeh, yeh. You need a dime, I do the time. Don't play with me, dog. Make this worth my while."

I grip the twisted steel handrail. "I need a dime. I've got to stay awake. Got to."

Rage

Oscar backs off, sneering. “Then do some espresso, man. Get off my turf.”

“Please . . . if I fall asleep it’ll happen again. My rage . . . will escape. I can’t keep letting it happen.”

“Shit, homey. What do you mean, your ‘rage’? Are you gonna start on me again? We all got rage. You keep that stuff at home where it belongs.”

I hang my head. “No, man. I can’t control it. If I fall asleep again, I’ll go off again. It’s that simple.”

Oscar backs away melodramatically. “Simple? That’s some heavy bullshit, brother. And it’s the same crap you ran by me last time. Read the papers, man, we got enough nut jobs around here. You don’t need no more whites. What you need is a good headshrinker.”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you too, bitch! Get your homeless ass out of here. Don’t you be disrespecting me, chump.”

I cling to the rail. “Please. I’m sorry. Just this once.”

Oscar appears to seethe. Finally he says, coldly, “Where’s my dime?”

I stuff my free hand in my left front pocket, pull out a few crumpled bills and a mess of change. “Eight dollars and thirty-nine cents. It’s all I could manage. I’ll make it up to you next time.” In a moment I feel the handful scraped away and the slim foil-wrapped roll take its place.

“There ain’t gonna be no next time,” Oscar mutters. “Now split, fool.”

I climb the steps like an old man and stagger down the sidewalk, streetlight to storefront. My mouth is caking dry, but it doesn’t matter. Tear open the roll. Pop the little handful of pills without washing them down. Next thing I know I’m sitting on the curb, gagging, tears squeezing

Rage

from my eyes. Saliva rushes into my mouth but I refuse to vomit. The bitter, bitter mouthful dissolves and peristaltically works its way down my esophagus.

The sound of brakes. A spotlight's beam hits my eyes. The officer's voice is icy.

“Are you all right?”

I wince and turn my head, nodding. “Something,” I manage, “caught in my throat.”

“Do you need medical assistance?”

I shake my head and make a great show of swallowing. “Better,” I say, and open my mouth wide.

The beam breaks from my face, searches the curb and gutter. The light is switched off. “Move along.”

I stand and raise a grateful hand, walk down the sidewalk with forced aplomb.

But now the night's an iron heel. How much longer before the uppers kick in . . . the cars hum a sick street lullaby, the library steps dribble and pool. Stumbling, cinching, weaving—sit down or fall down. An alley, dark and rank. A plywood slat, leaning against the wall. The amphetamine will work; it *must*, if only I can rest. Sit.

Tucked behind the plywood is a bed of flattened cardboard, stained by booze and pee and God knows what. A bum's crash pad. My arms tremble uncontrollably, a burning flash takes my chest. Recline, behind the wood, out of sight. Close your eyes or they'll fry right out of your skull. Just for a minute, just for a breath.

Just rest.

Rage

There he is, on the move. I must have slept, and well: my juices are flowing, my mind sharp. We're creeping down the alley, one shadow after another. He's intent and resolute; he doesn't know I'm on him.

I follow him over a sagging fence; a fence that fights me, like everything else. He's looking, looking. And now he's far ahead, inching around a corner to study the street. I can sense what he wants. He's found a man walking alone; a man in a nice suit, tapping a silver-knobbed birch cane. His excitement rises with the sound of the approaching cane. Can't reach him, can't stop him; my limbs are in a web. I can only scream silently as he grabs the man and drags him headfirst into the alley, bashes his skull repeatedly against the cold brick wall, chokes him to death and hurls the body back down. I holler for him to stop, and he seems to glance up for a second, then bends down to frantically root through the dead man's clothes. He leans back on his haunches, analyzing something important in the fractional glow of streetlamps. He peers around, and his blank eyes squint as he looks my way. But he can't, or won't, see me. In a minute he drops back out of sight, ravaging his prize as the night caves around us.

A bed. An unlit room. A smashed-out window framing a dirty false dawn. I must have broken in, must have sleepwalked here. Dank and smelly, but familiar.

The uppers didn't work; that son of a bitch Oscar. Still, there's a residual effect: jazzed jaws and fingers, teeth grinding for the pulp. My eyes burn like snapping embers . . . this is an old abandoned hotel; rats on the floor, cobwebs in the corner. A half-memory challenges me, and I reach under the mattress to pull up a billfold stuffed with cash and credit cards. The driver's license reveals a distinguished, elderly gentleman smiling pleasantly for the D.M.V. Just a face

Rage

in the crowd. But he knows me, and he fears me. I cram the bills into my trousers pocket and my palms begin to sweat. My fingers itch like crazy. Who am I?

Outside are scrub-peppered hills. A strange landscape, yet I feel I've known it all my life. Climb out into an overgrown alley—this section has been going to sod for years, but once I'm on the road there are plenty of small businesses, even some nice homes. And I glimpse a pursuing figure just to my left—a raggedy, disgusting creature who looks like he just crawled out of a cave. Christ, it's my reflection in a waking storefront window. The image is so disturbing I refuse to look again.

An open doughnut shop; only a few customers before the morning rush. The amphetamine must still be circulating: the thought of food makes me want to puke. I smooth my wad of bills before purchasing a large black coffee. The clerk and customers regard me strangely, but is it only my wild appearance? The coffee is burnt motor oil—I have to get it down, have to keep it down. I can't allow myself to faint.

On a crumb-covered tabletop, the local paper's banner headline screams up at me: *Canyon Killer*. Half-memories swirl like falling leaves: a jogger . . . a wandering bard . . . a young photographer. Victims mangled and mutilated. Tension razzles my nervous system in little electric waves. Dirty whites. Have they found the old man yet—the bills are burning in my pockets. Wolf down the coffee, ignore the pain. Too paranoid to order a refill. But I'll have to do some more caffeine; anything that will help me stay awake.

Dawn is breaking as I grope along the sidewalk. I'm gonna swoon, man. What is it that makes a man fall asleep on his feet? Oscar won't be out until dark. Even assholes have rhythm.

Helicopters sweep the hills in the semi-darkness, their searchlights' beams jerking this way and that. You can make out the call of their rotors as they move between crests.

Rage

To my left, an old woman sits slumped against a market wall. She raises a languid arm and smiles gummily. What does she want: money . . . company . . . sympathy? I blow her off until I see a sheriff's car climbing the hill, then instinctively sit behind her, away from the road. She grabs my hand and jabbars her psychedelic whatnot while I peer around her, see the car slow and continue up the road. My mind refocuses.

"I read you," she's saying, gripping my hand with passion. "Sleep. Sleep is your problem." I try to pull away but she only clings tighter.

"What do you want, man? Money?" I pull out a twenty and hold it in her face. She snatches the bill like a bullfrog catching a gnat, shoves it in her bra with one claw, retakes my paused hand with the other.

"You are hiding," she drones. "You are on the run."

"Let go of my hand, lady!" I push myself upright. She's trying to haul me back down when her eyes shoot open and her jaw drops.

"No! It's *you!*"

"I *said* . . . let *go!*" Pull myself free, bang around the wall and slump down the bricks, my head brimming with sleep's cement. Pedestrians pop out of nowhere. Traffic picks up. It's all a drone, man, I can't stay awake. Feel my way around the shop . . . a space behind garbage bins. Don't close your eyes, jerkoff, stay awake! Don't close your eyes.

He's slinking ahead, but not so hazily, not so irresistibly. I could reach him, if only I could break free of this mucus. And I know where he's going; I can feel his want.

Rage

He moves like smoke, seeping between buildings. Just a shape: a head and torso impelled by four liquid limbs; a spectral spider. He doesn't look back, though I scream myself hoarse.

Down a broken walkway to a gutted cottage, stripped black by wildfire. I'm almost on him when he reaches the sleeping old woman, but my arms and legs lock into a slow-motion spacewalk, my long howl of protest splinters and fades.

He has her by the throat now, he's lifting her up the wall and choking her for all he's worth. I can't stop him, but for one crazy moment he pauses to look behind. I'm drifting back out of reach, my fingers cramping, as the woman's head bobs and bounces, as her arms slap left and right on the wall. Then, with one final, impassioned squeeze, the nosy old witch is silenced.

Kicked in the bathroom door in the hotel's lobby. Shaved and hacked off hair by the handful. A little pomade and a found baseball cap and I look almost human.

The sporting goods store provides striped jogging sweats and running shoes. More important: I've purchased a programmable alarm device. Once I figure it out, I'll set it to vibrate at ten minutes, before rapid eye movement can take hold.

Everybody's staring at me. Or am I just paranoid; everybody's staring at everybody. How long before they discover the old lady's body.

Christ, I'm swooning. Coffee does nothing, NO-DOZ is no help at all. I almost passed out leaving the store. It's coming on dusk; got to hang on for Oscar. I'll buy the prick out. The whole wad, man, for just one long, electric white, bitter rush into night.

This time that savvy eye glints rather than gleams. Oscar, leaning insolently on the railing, drops and sardonically wags his head.

I shuffle up with my hand patting the running brick wall, trying to not stumble.

“What did I tell you, fool? Didn’t I say you wasn’t to come around here no more? Now split.”

I show him a handful of bills. “I want quantity this time.”

“What did I just *say*?” Oscar shows his silver caps. “I told you to split. You ain’t welcome, you ain’t wanted. We don’t do business no more. I don’t know you.”

“Listen, man. I can barely stay on my feet. You don’t understand. I *can’t* keep falling asleep. I just can’t.” I start down the stairwell.

“You go down those steps, boy, and you don’t come back up. You hear me?”

I whirl and climb, my rage rising with me, but the moment’s passion leaves me drained. “Please . . .” A loud burring comes from my left pocket. You can see the fabric vibrate.

Immediately Oscar is a live wire. “What’s that!” A hand finds his back pocket and I hear the characteristic click of a switchblade. “You’re one dead narc.”

“No, no. It’s an alarm. I’m still learning to program it. I keep telling you—I can’t let myself fall asleep.”

I feel the blade’s tip poking my belly. “Back off,” he says.

“Please. Just this once.”

“*Back off*, Sleepy, and I don’t want to see you no more. If I catch you on my street again I’ll kill you.”

Rage

I backpedal down the walk, turning to see a police cruiser nosing around the corner, recovering in time to force a shuffling jog. The spotlight's beam hits me before swinging onto Oscar, now leaning casually on the railing.

At the corner I stop to look back. Oscar is talking jocularly with the officers, who haven't left their car. It's obvious they're looking for something bigger than pissant dealers. The car moves along.

Slip back into the alley. There are more official vehicles about tonight, and the helicopters, as always sweeping the hills, appear closer to town.

Passing out. I'm going, man; I know it. Dead on my feet. Pull out the alarm. The LED winks cheerily. Set it for ten minutes, and for five-minute repeats thereafter. Back in the pocket. Clinging to a fire escape ladder, the rust breaking off in my fingers. Letting go. Slipping like silt, as the black ground rushes up to meet me.

Through the alley and across the road, between the parking lots to the main street—I know where he's going. One deep shadow in the lesser darkness, he flits in and out of the streetlights, makes straight for the railing and stairwell. The web has me again, and it's too late anyway—he has Oscar in a chokehold and he's fighting him, dragging him back to the walk between lots. He drags him right through me, Oscar struggling and gagging all the while.

There's a strong sound beneath me—a hum and vibration. He turns and looks all around, flagging in the dark. And I'm being pulled out of sleep's murk like a fish on a line. The vibration ceases; rapid eye movement is renewed. He drags Oscar's body all down that bisecting walk and

Rage

across a haunted road, frantically bashing the skull on asphalt. I've almost caught up. And now he looks back, arches like a cat, and redoubles his efforts.

I'm making headway, closing in. He hauls the body down the alley, snarling back at me.

Another burring of the alarm, somewhere on the line between grogginess and complete insensibility. Five minutes have passed; it seems like five years. He collapses with the body.

After a pause he pulls himself upright, grabs the corpse and, with gathering ferocity, repeatedly smashes its head on the ground.

When I cry out he stops and turns like a cheetah at the kill. His eyes, two white holes in the night, widen with mine. He grabs Oscar by the hair and drags him along, weaker now, slamming back and forth down a reeling alley bordered by leaning buildings.

Another burr and he collapses, just outside the old hotel's window, then drags himself inside. I haul myself along the brick wall, yelling in a vacuum, as Oscar's body passes through the frame.

Pulling myself into the room is like fighting quicksand. He looks up, rips his nails out of Oscar's eyes and goes for mine, even as the alarm shocks us back into alignment. I tear a sheet from the bed, wrap it around his neck and squeeze my way out of slumber. His hands find my eyes, but I have leverage: enough to stand on the bed, enough to loop the sheet round an old wall fixture, enough to use my body weight to draw the sheet tight. I sink back down until we're face to face. And my mouth spews a mantra while I watch his black lips writhe in sync:

Die, you son of a bitch, die. Die, you son of a bitch, die. Die, you son of a bitch.

Die.

All data regarding the Canyon Killer Murders point conclusively to derelict Owsley Martin as the perpetrator and sole concerned party. Martin was a vagabond living since his late teens in the hills of Laurel Canyon, drifting down to the populated areas when he required sustenance: one of those hit-and-run relics of the hippie era known colloquially as “coyotes.” He was discovered hanged by his own hand in an abandoned hotel room off of Deep Ridge. The instrument of his demise was an old sheet taken from one of the ground room’s beds. The body of a petty drug dealer, one Oscar Benecito, was also discovered in the room, but forensic analysis shows he expired before Mr. Martin, and was therefore not a party to the actual hanging. This was a murder-suicide.

Long-time Canyon residents remember Martin as intense and highly antisocial, prone to bizarre behavior and empty nights spent talking to himself while walking the hills. According to several locals who had spoken fleetingly with Martin during the three weeks of murders, he had complained of an inability to stay awake, and these witnesses received the distinct impression that Martin suffered from acute narcolepsy.

However, the autopsy reveals that Martin was a victim of pineal gland damage involving the body’s circadian regulator—that aspect that controls the sleep-wake cycle in healthy beings. Blood sugar and serum albumin indicators demonstrate that Martin was not a narcoleptic—that he had in fact functioned *without sleep* for an astonishing twenty-six days. The tax on his mind and body must have been incredible, producing delusional psychopathia and a complete inability to differentiate between reality and fancy. Owsley Martin was a man who, paradoxically enough, only dreamt he was asleep.

One major footnote demands appending in this case. Although fingerprints, DNA analyses, and hair-and-clothing vestigial evidence prove beyond contest that Owsley Martin was

the sole culprit in the Canyon Killer Murders, there were three additional deaths in the city, and two in the hills and canyons, that have been attributed to a so-called Copycat Killer, due to their striking similarity to the Martin slayings. The bodies—a tourist, a shopkeeper, a hitchhiker, a deputy sheriff, and a deep canyon squatter—were murdered and mutilated with Martin's trademark ferocity, and were forensically determined to have been dispatched, one by one, in an erratic line leading from the city to the hills. No indications of a perpetrator, outside of the immediate signs of struggle, exist to cast light on the identity of this mystery figure.

A massive operation was undertaken in the depths of Laurel and Topanga Canyons. Some two thousand squatters and derelicts were rounded up, fined, and physically expelled through the highly commendable efforts of Los Angeles County Sheriffs, CalTrans, L.A. Firefighters, various citizens groups, and, eventually, one regiment of the 43rd National Guard out of nearby Santa Monica.

Over a period of two years the entire area was segregated by electrified fence, in the locally famous Hands Helping Hands project, a County-funded enterprise that, ironically, provided strong temporary employment for those very evicted squatters.

The Canyons are now indigenous plant and wildlife sanctuaries, rigidly protected by officials and citizens alike. They are off limits to all civilians, and are rigorously patrolled by County inspectors and by periodic helicopter runs. No unauthorized person has ever entered the sanctuaries.

Yet there are scores of residents, still shaken by the grisly murders, who whisper of an odd nightly phenomenon. It's just human nature: urban legends are born in the imagination rather than in fact. Still these dwellers lock their windows and doors, still they clamor to congressmen and councils, still they swear of a black figure roaming the hills, raving to the night

Rage

of an elusive slumber, and screaming at the moon of an insurmountable, of an unknowable, of an unimaginable rage.

Horizon

K-19's most striking feature has always been the peculiar plasticity of its physics. The ability of its molecules—in both its organic and inorganic aspects—to attain fluidity on the moment, and to remain mutable indefinitely, is well documented. Everything on K-19 *morphs* as a steady state; *spontaneously*, as perceived by the senses, but *continuously* below the visual threshold . . . in its depths. Miller knew this; had in fact written impressively on the phenomenon way back in his sophomore year. But nothing could prepare him for the *eeriness* of the place; for the lush mauve tendrils crawling across heaving pasturage, for the nitrogenous pips that sparkled and passed, for the solitary brooding inn that seemed to dissolve and huff in the aching night.

The driver allowed his car to find a comfortable site after its sickening descent. He took his time, too, in releasing the cabin pressure. Nor did he look back, or make a move to get the door. The trip had been passed in icy silence, but Miller was prepared: he realized Earthmen were just as unpopular on K-19 as on any other developing world. But, damn it, this was an emergency.

He stepped out and gave the driver his print. It was scanned and handed back without a look or a word. “The tip,” Miller enunciated, “is included.” The driver didn’t respond. Miller knew he was understood; this entire quadrant recognized Universal Tongue. Miller slid the print back on. “Thanks again,” he said quietly. The car, with the faintest shiver of protest, lifted off and began its ascent.

Miller squinted in the drear. A fissure crackled in the distance, a nearby seepole kicked and spat: the first signs of real weather. A shade was pulled aside, and an odd figure stared out at him, eclipsed by the room’s shifting blushes of gradient light. The inn was the only sign of habitation for miles; Miller was certain the driver had deposited him here solely out of spite. He shouldered his case and began the slow uphill hike. The ground worried each footfall with a tugging, sucking action; frightening at first, but only an annoyance by the time he reached the porch. An unfamiliar sprig turned at his passing, a hanging shutter leaned back and groaned. Off to his right he noticed four peering steeds mailed against the weather. They were just like the animals he’d studied remotely so long ago; fascinating then, repulsive now—fat, sprawling, disgusting slugs that wax dynamic when stimulated by their riders.

He waited. After half a minute the old door creaked open and Miller found himself staring across a dilapidated lobby at a hunched gray fellow in a state of flux. The innkeeper looked up and away, his shoulders slinking down his spine. Miller walked casually across yawning floorboards to the desk and unslung his case, peripherally observing a small group seated against the far wall; evidently the steeds’ owners.

“I’ll need a room for the night, at least. Our galleon was disabled in a drift pocket and I was one of the last men off. I had to retrieve some drives.” He held up the cylindrical Rhea fur

case, speaking clearly in the echoes, “They’re important drives. The rescue ship was full. The company’s sending a personal vessel that’ll arrive tomorrow night at the latest.”

“No rooms available,” the innkeeper muttered. “The place is closed.”

Miller blinked in the flickering shadows, his face cut by sarcasm and disbelief. “What do you mean, ‘closed’? *I just told you* there was an accident in the drift. I’m stuck here. I’ve a graph that says all of K-19’s right on the cusp of a major storm. The company will cover my print. Where’s your ledger?”

“No need,” the innkeeper mumbled. “Rooms all taken.”

Miller’s jaw dropped. “Taken!” The word was the crack of a whip. He seethed for a minute, then said carefully, “I’ll sleep in the lobby then. But be absolutely clear that the company will hear all about this.”

The innkeeper shrank further. From the seated group came a cold drawl: “Lobby’s taken too.”

Miller’s face burned to the side. Two of the men stood. A different voice called out, “And he *said* the inn’s closed!”

Miles off, a young iridescent moon broke from behind a peak, recasting the floor’s shadows. Miller stamped on two and the rest disappeared into the woodwork. His expression twisted round. “Do you know who I *am*?”

“No. But we know where you’re *from*.”

A pantry door opened and an old woman oozed into the lobby. “What’s all this racket?”

“You!” Miller demanded. “Do you work here?”

She looked at him hard. Miller could tell she was bristling by the sudden spikes under her cloak at the shoulders. To his utter disbelief she folded her arms and said, “The building is closed.”

Miller took two broad steps forward. He stood pointing out the open door while fighting the urge to yank aside her molten misbegotten head. “Do you *see* that world out there? There’s a real storm brewing. I’ve never heard of a rooming race—and he almost added ‘no matter how backward’—turning away a traveler in distress. What’s wrong with you people?”

The room locked up. Outside a lateral column of shrubs fell about, caught up in a death struggle that ended as quickly as it began. The wind moaned from the marrow. The old woman said, “Come here.”

After a respectable pause Miller followed her out onto the porch, the hard truth sinking in with each step. When they were out of earshot he said matter-of-factly, “Okay. How much?”

Her head jerked back as though she’d been slapped. “You . . .” she said, “you . . .” and turned away. Miller waited, listening to the steeds splashing about in their own waste. He should never have gone back for the drives. They were replaceable. The company wouldn’t have blamed him for being swallowed up in the offship rush. His fantasy scenarios of a promotion and raise were already turning stale. The woman’s voice was small in the night. “There’s another inn not far from here, just down the road over that hill.”

“Let me guess. Also ‘full’?”

“If they say so.”

He carefully set down his case. “You know what? Maybe I’ll just get comfy on your porch here. You don’t think that’ll bring your property value down too far, do you? And—so help me . . . don’t you *ever* think this little travesty’s going unreported.”

She shifted closer, her face buckling and swelling.

“No. Listen to me. You can’t stay outside in a storm. You won’t last.”

Miller snorted. He couldn’t help it. “What do you mean: ‘won’t last’? Maybe you should show Earthmen some respect, huh?” He blew out a lungful of stress. “And while you’re at it, why don’t you take a look at this little backwater planet of yours from an honest perspective.” He ticked off points on his fingers. “Your propulsives are notoriously unstable. Your ‘durable’ goods have preposterously fickle shelf-lives. No one will navigate anywhere near your gravitational field without first closing his eyes and crossing his fingers.” Miller’s hot white face eclipsed a wayward atmospheric globule. “Case in point: our company’s marooned galleon and my little unrequested sojourn.” He placed his hands on his hips and looked around marveling. “Say, just when *is* peak tourist season, anyway?” Patches of black moles cropped up on the old lady’s face. “Why . . .” Miller appended, “if it weren’t for the company’s sense of progressive fair play, this whole place would’ve just shaken and shimmied into oblivion long ago.”

The woman’s body twisted and trimmed; her fingers withdrawing and protruding, her face on fire in the snapdragon wind. The mass settled back down. Her eyes became smoke-veiled embers, her voice a sandpaper hiss.

“You’re from Earth; you don’t understand. Products, capital gain, your precious company—we’re not interested in all that. We’re sorry your ship was caught in the drift. But please don’t start any trouble here.”

Miller fought to control his temper. “Lady, we don’t start trouble, we finish it. If any of you people have a problem with the way we run things you can always take it up with a caseworker.”

She glared. A lump throbbed laterally along her forehead. “Over the hill.”

“With pleasure.” He looped his case’s strap over his head and began to hike.

The old lady watched him recede, watched him stare back every now and then as the occasional static electric discharge lit her cloak’s hood before crackling off. Her form appeared to be marrying the landscape molecule for molecule. Miller’s eyes, constantly torn by fluid displays of rock and foliage, burned and froze, swam and steadied as the storm picked up. When he looked back again she was gone. Maybe he was better off with a lesson learned well. If the grotesqueries at the next inn were anything like these last impudent monsters, a little tact might go a long way. It couldn’t hang more than a night, and maybe a day, anyway. He’d just fall out in his room and sleep through it.

An odd sound rose back at the inn, a restless, banshee-like wailing. Miller stopped, trying to put his finger on it. Haunted K-19 imagery . . . peaked riders . . . a miscellaneous audio file, back in college . . . yes, the steeds had been roused; all four. The noise spiked radically as they rounded the intervening building. A pocket of air sizzled and exploded overhead. Miller picked up his pace.

It was a struggle to make any headway at all; the road had an odd disposition that made forward movement like walking in place. The steeds’ compound wail became aggressive, phasing in and out, nearing . . . definitely nearing. Miller pressed on with an attitude, his ears popping, his eyes bulging—he had to be marching backward somehow . . . no, it was the road, the road: the road itself was flowing downhill. Miller cried out as first his left ankle, then his right, submerged in grit and was freed. He fell on his palms, felt his wrists gripped by a force unseen. Only by rolling onto his back was he able to struggle free. He sprinted uphill, each sole’s contact too brief to allow a meaningful grip.

The wailing increased in intensity, cutting right through his brain. He shot back a glance, saw four surreal shapes charging uphill in tandem. Miller shook to the quick and scrambled to the road's summit, where he gasped for want of air and options: before him lay only bogs and gnarly banyan-like trees. The road itself descended into desolation; no signs of habitation, no trace of civilization. He stamped and bawled at the horror and betrayal, rewarded in seconds by a tremor underfoot and an answering howl. Miller simply lost it; blew out his mind in a flurry of shrieking gray, ran stumbling off the road into the abutting swamp. The undergrowth strained to meet him, muck underfoot grabbed and thrashed. Mustered by his cries, sulking columns of mist swept in from all sides, tangling him up, making for his airways while obscene things ran yipping through the shadows, leapt thrashing in the vapors, hopped flopping pool to pool. Racing low to the east, a pair of moons threw parallel shadows that passed tree to tree, creating a pulsing confusion of simian wraiths. Reeking fumes—sulphurous, vile, increasingly antagonistic—were stirred out of the air by his movements.

Miller's case nipped him. At first the notion was so unreal he could only stare at his shoulder in shock. Next thing he knew the case was convulsing down his arm. He flung it off with a little bark of horror, blood droplets swimming in his breath, his fingernails splitting blue. The bag flopped off in one direction, Miller in another. Crashing sounds broke just behind, accompanied by a haunted cry that built and built until it seemed right on top of him. Miller slammed his back against a tree and stared up at the quartet of steedsmen, silhouetting the erratic night from a chalky precipice. As their hoods inclined, a strong pair of limbs grabbed him by the biceps.

The tree hauled him up kicking, a foot at a time. When he was eye-level with the steedsmen a pair of branches broke from the trunk; one to impel and brace his spine, the other to hold him by the throat.

Miller hacked and dribbled, clinging to the iron limbs while his body jerked to and fro. “You freaks!” he coughed. “Get me down!” His focus was going. The steedsmen watched motionlessly, unmoved. Miller forced a savage breath. “I’ll see you burn! I’ll see your whole planet blacklisted, quarantined . . . shut down.” He was fading. The upper limb lifted him forward until he dangled, suspended midway between the trunk and the stolid observers. One of Miller’s eyebrows detached, his left arm seized, teeth and bits of rotting flesh spewed out before him. “Please . . .” he choked. “I’ll do anything. Anything.” His face went purple, the eyes bulged and raved, the ears crimped and folded, the scalp peeled off in layers. “I’m sorry . . . please . . . please . . .” His head fell forward. “Oh mercy,” he whispered. “Please.”

A stalagmite-shaped bulge, seeping out of the slime beneath his feet, strained upward through bursting pockets of gas. The tree’s uppermost branch shook Miller hard; an alley dog thrashing a roof rat. A long shudder ran down the branch and the tree turned to stone. Immediately the bulge rushed up, clasped Miller’s feet and tugged. A stinking miasma appeared throbbing around his stretched and dangling remains. Putrefaction began at once. On the precipice the four steedsmen watched silently for a minute, turned their beasts round as one, and began the long slog downhill.

Snapdragon

It has always been the curse of our species to miss the forest for the trees.

Our ancestors' natural tendency to demand complexity in all systems made their appreciation of simplicity well-nigh impossible—their rude science could never accept the reality of photosynthesizing single-cell organisms stretching galaxy to galaxy, *producing* life, *consuming* life, and *maintaining* life throughout eternity.

“*But,*” they would cry—reactionaries and thinking men alike—“*there must be a purpose, a Grand Design, some kind of wise and caring Source for the unknowable!*”

When the truth hit them, many found the notion of a deaf-and-dumb genesis—the concept of life-without-meaning, and therefore *life itself*—to be untenable.

The ensuing surge in suicides may have done the world a backhanded favor, if only in reducing the gene pool's incidence of low self-esteem. To these, our hysterical forebears, we can only tip our collective hat and say . . . Good Riddance.

Snapdragon

Upon its entropic death throes, that Cell bridging the Canis Major Dwarf and Ursa Minor Dwarf galaxies produced a continuum cataclysm, a thrust deep enough to rock our own Solar System in ways formerly inexplicable.

21st Century researchers, by then aware of Cells, still clung stubbornly to this concept of universal sentience. They therefore first interpreted the spatial kick as a kind of *plea* for healing.

We now know that these Cell reactions are actually more akin to kneejerk plaints. Nevertheless, Cells *are* organic, and this particular Cell's instinctual attempt to reach a healing source had very real consequences in the local group—the resultant shockwave disrupted timespace, creating slips in the faultline and causing anomalies on our own Earth and elsewhere; anomalies that instantly self-adjusted with bizarre and unpredictable consequences.

The first jolt was the seam-breaker, a major rocker—the aftershocks were comparative trifles, producing erratic continuum shifts of mere hours and miles.

We have pinpointed and cross-referenced that phenomenon.

According to our most precise instruments, the initial wave occurred just outside of Jerusalem in the year 26.

And he hit the garbage face-first; dazed, disoriented, naked, emaciated. The piled material was so unfamiliar he froze on impact: black plastic trash bags, cardboard boxes, aluminum cans. Rather than dirt or desert sand, the ground was some sort of continuous gray brickwork, smooth and cool. Just beyond, a low continuous brick ledge led onto rough asphalt. He dragged himself into a sitting slump, recoiling at the heat and blare of traffic. Rundown buildings, rusted-out vehicles, dirty raggedy people sagging in doorways . . . and a dark woman

Snapdragon

running up in clapping footwear, shamefully dressed, her face painted, her hair high. Behind her a similarly dressed woman, perhaps a friend, shouting:

“Maggie! You get your ass back here, girl!”

But the first woman ran right up to him and said breathlessly, in a tongue that made no sense at all:

“C’ m’ on sugar: you can’t just lay here with your privates public!” She giggled musically, her breath fruity sweet. After a quick search she came up with a torn and stained blanket, draped it around him, pulled his arms out from under. She continued rooting, talking incessantly, at last producing a sprung bungee cord with enough play to serve as a belt.

Thus covered, he reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder. The woman trembled. When she looked back up her face was a fluid mask of remorse, the expression falling, caving, melting, tears pouring down her cheeks. He rose and the woman simply dissolved at his feet, kissing the toes and ankles, weeping uncontrollably. “Talitha cum!” he commanded, and turned at a shout and bustle.

The other woman stormed over, yelling at the top of her voice: “*Get away from her*, you freak! I’ll call a cop. I’ll mace your nasty ass in a hurry.” She kneeled to embrace the weeping woman. “You all right, honey? What did he do to you?” She looked up with venom in her eyes, but the man was already walking along the curb, staring in amazement at the cars and stoplights.

The ground rocked, *hard*, as though the planet had momentarily ceased its spin. He raised himself on one elbow and blinked at his surroundings.

He was sprawled on a high cement stairway, just outside a stately steel-and-glass building alongside a much cleaner street. Other folks were frozen in similar postures of dismay, on their bellies and knees. Their expressions were identical: startled but unsurprised.

A man tumbled down the steps and helped him to his feet. “Are you okay, sir? Wow! That had to be it: that was the Big One for sure.”

It was a surreal scene: cars, their motion sensors triggered, honking repetitively nearby and in the tapering distance, like calling prairie dogs. Drivers hunching outside paused vehicles, men and women spilling from buildings.

The man looked him up and down. “Do you need medical attention, sir? Can you walk?” He blinked. “Como esta? Por favor?” His fingers did a pantomime of a body walking. The answering stare was intense, but of no assistance. The blanketed figure opened his mouth and spoke something that struck the helpful man as merely intelligent gibberish. He shook his head and said with exaggerated clarity. “I am Mister Edmond. Mister John Edmond.” The man nodded, intensifying his stare. At last Edmond ran an arm around his waist and sat him back down. He flipped open his cell, thumbed a number, and said excitedly, “Larry? John here. Yes, of course I felt it. Who didn’t. Look, I’ve got some guy here in shock. He’s not mute; he just spoke a dialect I’ve never heard, but definitely Semitic. Not modern at all. No, I can’t leave him here; there’ll be aftersho—” And on that abbreviated syllable a tremor ran right up his back, shaking out the glass left standing in the bank. “Did you feel *that*? Okay, then. Meet you at Giggles? Good enough. Bring something this poor fellow can wear; he’s just draped in an old blanket. Get going before traffic freaks. Right.” Edmond led him down the steps, smiling vigorously. “Don’t be frightened. I’m going to introduce you to Professor Baling. He’s a linguist at Pepperdine. Practically famous. We’ll get you nice and fixed up, and once we’re all in communication mode we can learn who you are and maybe get you a job or something.” There was another rumble, long and low. Edmond’s brows furrowed and he tugged gently, but with urgency. “Please trust me, sir. This is your lucky day.”

Snapdragon

The lunchtime stampede: Giggles was packed, shire to shire. The man from Nazareth now sported lime-and-purple jogging sweats, ten sizes too large, a gift from the kindly and portly Professor Darian Baling, precariously seated directly opposite and to Edmond's left. The Giggles servers whizzed back and forth on their Star Wars roller skates with the strafing turret sparkle-hubs, wearing enormous Harry Potter eyeglasses, Princess Leia frightwigs, and their signature JollyWally Grab-a-Jabba fanny packs.

At last a server responded to Edmond's wave. She screeched to a halt at their table, the brakes on her skates emitting flurries of canned Gremlins giggles. "Hail thee, fellow Jedis, and may the farce be with you."

"Muggles are morons," Edmond responded. "We're ready for menus."

"Energizing!" She whipped two out of her jetpack. "Right Chewbacca at ya!"

"I think maybe I'll go for a Filet O' Flipper, or else just a Silly Salad with Chuckling Chicken, or maybe, um . . ."

"Oh, yoda, yoda, yoda."

"You're right. I'll have a Bilbo Burger, hold the Magic Mustard, with a side of Funny Fries and a Shimmy-Shimmy Shake."

"Just coffee," said the professor. "How about our friend? He can't have eaten for days."

The server straightened. "Friend? *Friend?* Where's Waldo! *Where's Waldo?*" Then, appearing to notice the little party's third member, she moved her twisting face in close, a hollow Keebler countenance of psychotic glee. "And who's *this* happy hobbit?" The man from Nazareth recoiled, not sure what to make of it all.

Snapdragon

Edmond danced his menu side to side, much to their server's delight. Finally he said, "Let's go for the Golly Burger with plenty of Gee Whiz, a Jumbo Jelly Sundae, and a Stupid Soda to wash it all down. StuporDooper." It struck him that the stranger's table etiquette might be less than punctilious. "And please make sure that cup is spielberg-proof." Edmond raised his eyes. "You're not like a vegetarian or anything?" The answering stare was cryptic.

"On me," the professor beamed.

Their server yanked an imaginary handle on her forehead, tittered, "Back in a flush!" and zipped away.

The professor smiled encouragingly, clasped his hands on the table, and spoke a line or two of what Edmond recognized as simple Hebrew. Their guest narrowed his eyes. The professor tried again, then began branching out. After a few minutes of this Edmond felt superfluous to the proceedings. A temblor rang cutlery in the Giggles kitchen. Edmond's eyes were naturally drawn to the in-house television monitor, its frame painted to blend seamlessly with the Frodo's Playground mural over the registers. Ordinarily the broadcast news was enhanced by the Giggles digital FunnyVision program, so that the anchors' hair and facial features automatically received magnetic treatments of superimposed rainbow wigs and rubber noses, but today's news was so important, and so sobering, that the man-oh-manager felt compelled to temporarily squelch the FunnyVision program altogether. Employees all stopped what they were doing, their painted smiles and hobbit hoods surreal in contrast to the sudden mood shift.

Film clips moved by almost too rapidly for the mind to assimilate: a Turkish neighborhood buried in rubble, thousands of Pakistani survivors marching out of a smoking valley, Japanese tsunami victims dragging their belongings down a ragged coastline, aerial films of a Detroit neighborhood consumed by flames.

Snapdragon

But the real shocker came from a sweating seismologist at a lonely podium, surrounded by microphones, lights, and anxious faces, speaking in a monotone so contrived it inadvertently raised blood pressure all over the nation. No foci could be located, this man stated; no hypocenters, no epicenters. It appeared that the planet Earth itself was in “sporadic seismic arrest.” He had absolutely no idea what those data meant, knew of no protocol for dealing with such a profound phenomenon, and hadn’t the foggiest notion of what steps to take. He knew only one thing for sure, and that was that there was absolutely no cause for alarm.

Edmond dazedly turned back to the table. The very act of avoiding the set somehow made it all a dream; there was a palpable reality in these known faces, something down to earth, something almost comical.

Baling seemed to feel Edmond’s eyes on him. He lowered his head and studied his clasped hands.

“Well?”

The professor looked up, grinning wryly. “The dialect is ancient Aramaic, and it’s flawless. Says he grew up in Galilee as a carpenter. Says he was tried in the court of Pontius Pilate. Says the last thing he remembers was being prepared for crucifixion at Golgotha outside of Jerusalem. Says he felt like his whole body exploded, and that the next thing he knew he was sprawled out in the garbage—by his description the eastside ghetto over on Fourth and Military.”

“O-o-o . . . *kay*.” Edmond wiped the tabletop. “Look, Larry, I’m really sorry I roused you for nothing. I don’t know what it is—I just had the feeling there was something more than meets the eye to this guy.”

The professor leaned back. “Oh, you may have been right.” Baling clasped his hands behind his head and spoke ruminatively. “It takes a great deal of dedication to create and

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maintain a messianic delusion at this level. I'll give him credit: he certainly does his homework. He doesn't believe he's Jesus; he's way beyond that. He knows it—in a matter-of-fact way that goes without ego gratification or any self-interest whatsoever. He's lived the illusion so long it's modified his personality. He's Jesus, John; so get used to it. He certainly has.”

Their server wobbled back to the table, obviously subdued by the news, her Gandalf's staff limp as a sobered lover. She laid out the gaily patterned platters like a woman packing her final bags. Her Darth Vader cloak appeared to have lost its gleam, her Spock ears looked wilted and pale. Still she gave it her professional best, duly tapping her light saber on the tabletop while performing a truly Tolkienian full-fairy curtsy. But somehow it just wasn't the same. She looked at the professor and her particolored face scrunched and drained. “I'm—I'm just so, so *sorry*,” she tried. “My children, my children . . .”

The professor nodded in amazement and the server slowly rolled away, the blinking Harry Potter broom between her legs mournfully swishing side to side across Cap'n Sparrow's Deck.

The man from Nazareth grimly studied his platter. The aroma made his nostrils flare and cinch. He stared uncertainly at his benefactor.

And the whole place seemed to lift off its foundations. He dragged himself to his feet, in a dank alley surrounded by looming, broken-down tenements. Two blocks away a department store's roof collapsed before his eyes, even as a pair of helicopters wheeled in a stark wedge of moonlight between leaning buildings. There were fires leaping here and there, and the startling sounds of the occasional smashed display window. He exited the alley with all senses perked, his eyes hungrily absorbing every new sight, each sudden motion. This side of the street carried the ghosts of the old neighborhood: closed shops and overgrown walkways, abandoned cars and

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neglected yards. He noted a small group of men loitering on a street corner. Their eyes narrowed and flashed as he passed; after a minute the group began to follow as one. Presently he came across dozens of kneeling citizens outside a sealed antique building, fighting to catch the words of a gesticulating man in an Armani suit. The man from Nazareth had just halted to observe when a disturbance behind almost knocked him off his feet.

“Hey,” the offender said angrily, but with more impatience than hostility, “you wanna make a little room here, pal? Jeez.” This person then fell to his knees and beatifically raised his eyes.

He continued down the walk, pausing to stare in looted buildings. A dozen yards ahead, a group of four men stepped out of the shadows between shops. One whistled, and there came an answering whistle to the paused man’s rear. He turned to see three more striding up purposefully. Their footfalls were echoed; he turned back to find himself trapped.

There was no preamble; the post-riot condition obviated any feeling-out process—the fists clubbed his head, the shoes found his stomach, and he could only lay curled up on the sidewalk while the hands ran through his jogging sweats. But a penniless, helpless victim is just a diversion on a ripe swollen night in a city caught with its pants down; the punks got in their kicks and split.

He had to drag himself into a doorway. When he got his wind back he scraped to his feet and moved along, using the looted storefronts for support. In one display he observed a neglected, still-connected television running the disaster buffet; the orphans, the wasted homes, the collapsed freeway overpasses. But it didn’t strike home, didn’t feel real—the technology was way too strange.

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A groan just off the walk got his attention. He limped over and discovered an old man trapped in an avalanche of fallen bricks. The mortal nature of the injuries was unmistakable; he reached down to place a palm on the forehead.

A very bright light struck him, followed by the urgent sound of rubber meeting curb. An amplified voice said: *“You in the sweats! Remain where you are! Keep your hands where I can see them!”*

Two officers, a man and a woman, stepped around the car with flashlights aimed. The driver pulled out and leveled his gun, holding forth his other hand to indicate complete compliance. The woman, keeping her distance, crept by and crouched near the pile of bricks.

“Talk to me,” said the man.

“Unconscious,” the woman responded. She righted herself, muttered, “This one’s dead,” and swung her gun around.

The male officer immediately threw him into a combination wrist-and headlock, slammed his face up against the car’s hood. “Relax completely,” he grated. “I want you to go absolutely limp. Do we understand each other?” He leaned hard. “Are you holding anything that can hurt me?”

The woman patted him down thoroughly. “Nothing obvious. Pits and crotch clean.”

“I.D.?”

“Nothing.”

“Okay.” He kicked out the legs and pulled both wrists behind the back. The female snapped on cuffs. “I,” the driver grunted in his ear, “don’t know if you’re aware this city’s been placed under martial law. I further don’t know if you’re aware of the implications. Looters can be shot on sight. Muggers—creeps who waylay old men under cover of chaos—can receive

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some of the harshest sentences on the books. When you're rotting in that cell, with only your conscience for company, I just want you to thank God it was us who got to you before some decent armed citizen."

The woman ran her flashlight's beam back and forth across his eyes. "What's your name, sir?" He blinked. She shook her head. "Unresponsive."

"So be it."

The woman got the door.

The driver pulled the cuffs up to the shoulder blades and shoved down hard on the crown. "Watch your head," he said.

You had to squeeze and slither to reach the desk, though there was far less processing than usual for that time of night. Fact is, the place was one crisis from anarchy: just too many officers coming and going to make sense of it all. Detectives, Fire, National Guard, even Coast Guard and Parking had occupied center stage at one time or other. And each successive temblor critically wracked the nerves of these men and women, the very men and women trained to hang onto their cool under the direst of circumstances. This was bigger than law enforcement, bigger than crowd control, bigger than major disaster. The families of these officers were in some instances unaccounted for, their homes and valuables left naked to the mob, and there wasn't a damned thing they could do about it. And still the reports came streaming in; over the radio, over the television, over the Internet. The earth was breaking up around them, brimstone was spewing high. The sky was falling, and there wasn't a damned thing they could do about it.

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The desk sergeant was in no mood to argue. “He’ll have to go straight to Old County. We can’t spare placement in this station. If you can get his prints, fine, but I can’t guarantee a file. A phone call is out of the question.” He turned to glare at the prisoner, his eyes all but bursting in his skull. The pencil gripped between his hands was bent to the breaking point. “You are hereby waiving your rights to counsel, at least temporarily. This city is in a state of martial law. We can guarantee your protection, but that’s about all. If you have family and friends worried about you, well, they’ll just have to sweat and fret like the rest of us. You have no identification, and according to these arresting officers are entirely uncooperative.” The room trembled ever so slightly and the pencil snapped. “For now you are going to be held in protective custody, Old County Jail, Downtown. Any cell we can spare. A public defender will be in contact with you at the earliest opportunity.” Another tremor ran through the station. This time the sergeant closed his eyes and controlled his breathing. After a minute he whispered, “I sincerely suggest you be compliant, and take care to not make any enemies.”

The quake first slammed them against the rail, then right up against the independent cells. The escorting officer was sweating heavily as he pulled the prisoner out of reach of scrabbling hands. He hollered back at the angry and frightened men in their orange County jumps, but his every word only served to rile them further. He released a bicep and waved the free hand. The module commander, watching closely, triggered a siren.

The prisoners went nuts. The escorting officer, grimacing, waved the arm again to signal a stop. The siren wound down and the individual voices became evident: pleas for news, pleas for protection, pleas for transfer. The deeper they moved, the deeper became the passion, the

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anger, the horror-stench of trapped men who know they're about to die. There came a jolt so fierce it almost knocked the officer off his feet. The prisoners wailed and screamed.

The last available cell was right near the end. Directly across stood a giant of a man; black, broad, and intense, the only caged animal not prepared to howl. He just watched, his eyes glinting and his mouth on the verge of a smile.

The officer waved his arm again. A harsh buzz, and the cell door rumbled open. The officer nudged him inside and waved. The door shut. "Move your back up against the door so I can get the cuffs." The man from Nazareth stared ahead uncertainly. The officer reached in and dragged him back, held him firmly as he worked the key. The prisoner turned.

Sweat was pouring off the officer's face. "I know you can hear me." He rolled his eyes. "I know you can hear what's going on around us. Now I want you to sit on your cot and face the wall. Do not allow the prisoner behind me to provoke you. Sleep, do yoga, meditate: whatever. This will all work out somehow. I . . . I have a family to find."

He stumbled back down the walk, and the man from Nazareth found himself eye to eye with the big man across the way.

"Hello, bitch." A tremor shook the module and the prisoners cursed, screamed, bashed their cell bars with anything that would rattle nerves. "Seeing as you're the last person I'm going to see alive, I feel it's beholden on me to make my confession, if that's all right with you." The man from Nazareth stared silently and the big man smiled. "Just what I was hoping for: a good listener." A crack raced across the wall behind him. "I've always been a God-fearing man." He raised his eyes. "Do you believe in God, bitch?" He wagged his head regretfully. "I thought not. You know, God came to see me, right in this very cell. And do you know what He told me? He told me a snitch would come and test me, and that that snitch would be an agent of the Devil.

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And He said if I really meant to sit at His Right Hand I had to pass that test. I had to slay that agent.” He spread his hands. “So there it is. Not much of a confession, you say? Well, you’re right. My hands are cleaner than yours.” He vigorously rubbed his palms, meaningfully clenched the fingers. “For now.” A rumble rose from the old building’s bowels. Bits of ceiling fell around them both. “Agent, meet agent.”

The man from Nazareth turned and stared at his cell, wondered at the stainless steel toilet and sink, made the mental leap to indoor plumbing. In a heartbeat the module’s east wall had collapsed. Excitement replaced fear in the air. There was a scream from the guardhouse and one by one the cell doors buzzed open. The man from Nazareth turned at the sound, found himself staring from one wide-open cell into another.

The big man spread his arms and beamed. “Voila.”

A shotgun blast and emergency siren’s howl. Prisoners came stampeding back into the module, snapping at one another like dogs. “Snitch!” the big man called. “Snitch in the hall!” Within seconds the cell was blocked by furious prisoners. “Save some for me,” the big man said. With howls of excitement the animals in orange jumpsuits came down on the man from Nazareth, beating him with fists and feet, with elbows and knees, with any loose objects they could find. Finally he was dragged to the cell bars and secured at the wrists, ankles, and throat by bloody starched County towels. He sagged there, head fallen and knees crimped, an absolutely broken man. The prisoners filed out and huddled against the rail, grinning and high-fiving. “Leave us,” the big man said quietly. “There is important work to be done.” When the mob had moved away he turned back and lovingly removed from his butt-crack a shiv filed out of a toothbrush. He pressed his big self up against the suspended man, kissed him on the fractured skull and bloody mouth. He dropped back his head. Then, in an act of slow-motion ecstasy, he

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shoved in the shiv inch by inch, his moans echoing the captive's. Now the wide black face came in until the lips were just grazing the prisoner's ear. The voice was low, almost sultry, the breath a hot miasmatic pool: "Any last words, snitch?"

The bloody head fell, chin rolling against the chest at an awkward angle. "Eloi, Eloi," came the glottal whisper, "lema sabachtani . . ."

The big man cocked his head quizzically, his expression rolling round to one of pouting indifference. "Cat got your tongue? Aww, that's too bad." He snorted to the bowel and hawked one right in the eyes, ran back to the gate and stood there holding it like an eager chauffer. A broad smile cut his face in two. "Don't wait up for me, bitch. I'm going to Disneyland!"

This is as far as our instruments will trace in this matter, so many hundreds of years ago. The Cell was revitalized, the tremors quelled. Of the man from Nazareth, we have only speculation. All indications are that the streetwalker, Marilyn "Maggie" Deliano, through persistent and selfless entreaty, was able to procure sums sufficient to have the body interred in a tiny mausoleum outside the city, and that she was persuasive enough to found him a cult following. This following, eventually numbering in the tens of thousands, was permitted daily services until a freak after-effect of the Cell's initial paroxysm caused the cemetery's landfill to shift, resulting in countless sinkholes, collapsed edifices, and sunken statuary. Bodies were exhumed for purposes of relocation, but officials were dismayed to find the man from Nazareth's coffin barren, although there is nil evidence of tampering. As no body existed for the sake of identification, the empty coffin was shipped, at substantial cost to the cult followers, to the man's original homeland, where it is rumored to have been weighted and submerged in a little desert

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sea. With no physical traces remaining, and only unsubstantiated eyewitness reports, it is deemed meet that we seek no further vestigial evidence, and consider this record sealed.

Now!

The first gob was like any other: warm, well-aimed, expressed with certitude and contempt.

The second hit his cheek, just shy of the clogged broken nose. Numbers three and four were almost on top of each other—pat, pat—on his eyelid and beard. Pat, pat, patapat. Pat. Patapata. Pat-pat. Patapatapatapata, and the rain came down for real.

He rolled his swollen eyes—once to the left, once to the right. The lids were so damaged he could manage only a periscopic slice.

He was in a field, on his back, becoming drenched even as his senses became desaturated. The sky was black, gray, and heaving. It had to be winter; late December or early January. Rainwater made him gag, but he was too lopy to turn away. The pain was vicious. His mouth had been kicked in: several teeth were missing; the gums clotted and bleeding, the jaw a rusty mangled trap.

He sat up and nearly passed out. But he recognized the signs, and didn't dare: he'd drown in the rain—croak tonight, half-buried in mud, a foul pocket of steam for Starbucks' horizon-searching crossword solvers. Before dawn the rats and possums would come for him, attracted by the blood. Once the field had dried out, the ants would get busy. The gulls and pelicans would show off the harbor, followed by crows and buzzards. A flesh hill for flies; big ones, marsh jumpers, relentless in their work. The machine would break into full gear at this one sunken, miscellaneous spot, spreading its operation like a rank growing pool, horror to horror. And the flesh would dissolve in mandible and jaw, and the raggedy clothes would gradually fall away, and the innards would rot in the warm California sun until the unrecognizable pile stank so badly someone called a low-level emergency number. Too big to be a dog or cat. Smells something awful.

He lurched to his feet and stood swaying, pressing all available energy into the one vital effort of remaining vertical. His left side hurt so wildly he had to lean right. The giddily revolving field made him stagger, until his skewed equilibrium got him stumbling along, into holes, over roots, down and up the swirling polluted ditch, toward the fence . . . the fence—that collapsed border between the world of crawling, sucking nature and the world of paramedics and dumpster dinners . . . the fence, leaning in the leaning rain, snagging in his old coat, tearing a forearm, giving way that he might pitch over and crawl through the curbside growth, off the curb and into the road.

Cars braked and swerved needlessly, drivers hammered on horn plates, screamed obscenities, hurled miscellaneous refuse. He scrambled across the road and into the mall's parking lot, but the moment he hit the ground he was socked in by pain; he had to keep moving. He stumbled alongside a few storefronts until he reached a facing pair of cast iron benches. One

seated a tiny old woman, so white and wizened she looked like she'd just been fished from the harbor. She watched him lirting there, hands clamped on the opposing bench.

“You’re a dirty man. A dirty, dirty man.”

Footsteps on wet cement; a splat and clacking.

A new voice demanded, “What are you doing here, buddy? Are you bothering this woman?”

A chubby security guard stepped between them, his expression and posture flat-out confrontational.

“Call the police,” the woman said.

“Is he bothering you, ma’am?”

“*Call* the police!”

The guard squirmed. “Well, there’s no reason to do anything that radical, ma’am. I’ll just escort him off-property. You’ll be fine.”

The old woman’s jaw fell. “Officer. Did you just hear me? I don’t feel safe. He could come back. Now call the police!”

“I . . . ee-yuh . . . ma’am, to be honest, this isn’t really an emergency situation. But I’ll make absolutely sure that he doesn’t—”

“*Officer!* I said to call the police! Where is your employer, officer? Do I need to talk to him?”

The good arm began to tremble, the knees gave way, and he collapsed supine on the bench; a pile of rags and refuse.

“I-ee-uh . . . oboy.” The guard fumbled out his walkie-talkie. “Yeah, Gopher, it’s Buddy. I’m over here in front of Dimple’s. We got some derelict wandered in off the street, and now

he's all flopped out on one of the benches. Right. Well, there's a woman here who doesn't feel safe and she wants we should call a cop . . . I copy that, man, but like I'm just passing it along, okay? What do you want we should do? No, don't roust Al! It's not that important, and anyway he said we got to, y'know, use our own initiative. I dunno. I can't move him, and that's lawsuit-type action, man; you know that. Whatever you want to do. I guess. Then it ain't on me, man. Okay. Ten-four." He stuffed the walkie-talkie in a coat pocket, knocking out a handful of corn chips.

"The police will be here in a scratch, ma'am. I'll be right beside you all the time, so you don't have to worry about anything."

"He's disgusting."

"We get them from time to time, ma'am. They come dragging in off the beach or harbor. This one looks like he sleeps in the garbage. But I've never heard of 'em actually hurting anybody, you know, biting people or stuff like that. No reason at all to be scared. I carry pepper spray in case one should go off on somebody or something, and the station's just down the street, so you can count on the police showing up real quick if you need them, ma'am." Even as the words were leaving his mouth, red and blue roof lights showed at the drive. "And here they are now. See what I mean? No worries at all."

The car pulled up beside them. A spotlight played for a few seconds. The lone cop stepped around the car. "Who called in the emergency?"

The guard tossed his head. "That would've been Gopher, over in the shack by Sauer Dog. I think the situation's pretty much contained. This guy don't want to move. I don't know if he's wasted or what. This lady here complained about him."

“I don’t like him. I don’t like him at all. He smells bad and he looks dangerous. He’s a dirty man; a very dirty man.”

“Like I said.”

The cop turned to the other bench. “Sit up.”

He forced himself into a seated slump.

“What’s your name?”

“Lsr.”

“Loser? What happened to you, sir?” He passed a light eye to eye, gave the mouth a visual once-over. “How’s the other guy? You do some damage?” The eyes flickered. “Do you feel you need medical assistance, sir? Are you having trouble breathing or swallowing?” He tucked the flashlight under an arm and extracted a sterile glove from a pouch on his belt. “Hold still.” He used the gloved hand to examine the ears, mouth, and throat. “Stay put. Don’t move unless I tell you to.” He walked over to the security guard, now huddling beneath an overhang.

“What’s your name, Security?”

“Ernie. But around here I just go by ‘Buddy.’ Sometimes we like to—”

“Security?”

“It’s Ernest William Budd, sir.”

“Do we have an understanding, Security?”

“Look, I didn’t mean to come off—”

“Security. I didn’t ask you if you liked me, I asked you if we understood each other.”

“I was just doin’ my—”

“Security. Are you carrying your guard card? It’s required, you know, on this shift, on this property, on my time.”

“Yeah, well of course I—”

“Present it to me please. Remove it from the wallet; take it out of the little window.

Thank you. This card is not well kept, Security. I need to be able to read these characters on the moment, not squint through thumbprints and cookie crumbs. I’d like you to clean, smooth, and file this little paper card very carefully; that’s if you ever get a free minute. Take a good look at it. Now take a real long look at this shiny thing on my chest. See the difference? Thank you. So what am I?”

“You’re a police officer, sir.”

“And what are you?”

“I’m a security guard, sir.”

“Now we’re *going* to have us an understanding, Security.”

“Sir?”

“Security: I like my coffee with one cream and two sugars. Not the other way around.”

He grimaced. “Makes me think of mama. But *not* hot. And definitely not cold. There’s a crazy li’l *just right* in there somewhere, and I’m sure we’ll get it *just right* sooner or later. *Right?*”

“Sir!”

“Security? Don’t you have work to do? Patrol the premises, maybe do a little detex here and there so your boss knows you’re not too comfortable? Somebody could be in dire need right now, Security. Maybe some skateboarder’s running amok, maybe the supermarket’s short a boxboy. Or maybe that poor dumb son of a bitch back there needs counseling more than badgering. Maybe you could call the police when someone *needs* the police, instead of dragging me off my fucking lunch break to take down some homeless stiff who only needs a push in the right direction, instead of a bench in the rain. Get him off the property.”

“Sir.”

“I have your name and card number. Get him off the property.”

“Sir!”

“Security?”

“Sir?”

“How many creams?”

“Just the one, sir.”

“Just the one.” The cop stepped back behind the wheel, killed his emergency lights, and cruised away.

The guard came back clenching and unclenching his hands, his eyes on fire. When he reached the old lady he forced himself to relax. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but I . . . I . . .”

“Don’t be too gentle with him, officer.” She raised the umbrella to cover her eyes. “Not on my account.”

“Get the hell out of here! If I see you on my lot again I won’t need a cop, you hear me? I’ll kick your a—excuse me, ma’am—I will eject you with any means at my disposal. Now *Go!*”

He wobbled up and careened the way he’d come, swung left at the sidewalk and staggered to the corner. The rain picked up momentarily, but he was too dazed to worry about shelter. It was all he could do to remain standing.

A man was melting out of the drizzle, crossing the street slowly but purposefully; bent face hidden beneath a rubberized rain cap, slight frame bundled in a trench coat under a clear plastic protector. He skipped a couple of puddles, keeping his head down, his hands clenched in the coat’s pockets. The last few steps were taken with care, that he not appear the aggressor.

“Please don’t be alarmed. I need only a minute of your time. If you’d like a clean bed and some dry clothes, a hot meal and a storage locker, I’m the guy to see. There’s showers and basic stuff; you know, radio and TV . . . nothing fancy. I can even put a few bucks in your pocket . . . here and there.” One eye showed as he skewed his head. Very old, in his seventies. Angular face. Lots of acne scars. A fair Caucasian, Midwest accent. He very slowly removed a cheap pop-up umbrella from under his coat, thumbed it open, and gently tucked the handle behind the filthy coat’s lapel, creating a hood against the rain. The umbrella cut out the back-glare of floods and neon, allowing the wasted mug to show in bleak humps and hollows. Deep compassion ran over the stranger’s face like passing headlight beams. He breathed, “Oh, my,” and squinted up at the heaving mist. “What else? I.D., if you’ve lost yours. There’s a phone to call home . . .” He looked inward, at a bruise too deep to display, and sighed, “What’s your name, son?”

“Lr.”

“Larry?”

“Ltr.”

“Later? Lothar? Luthor?”

“Lsr. Ltr.”

“Lester. I have a two-point proposition for you, Lester. Option One is you can come along with us now, and we’ll get you all fixed up.” He pointed across the street, at a white van idling in anticipation, a long exhaust plume marking its tail. He pulled a business card from a coat pocket. “Option Two is you can dial the number at the bottom of this card and ask for ‘Mr. D’. It’s a toll-free number; won’t cost you a thing. The boys’ll drive out straightaway, and pick you up whenever you’re ready. I like to throw out this option in case someone is, understandably, trepidatious about the whole affair. But there’s no reason to be nervous.” Mr. D

now cupped both Lester's hands in his. He squeezed those mangled hands with sympathy, with necessity, with poetry. "Look down at our hands, Lester. Look down at our hands." Pinched against the business card was a meticulously folded twenty dollar bill. "Many establishments simply will not serve the homeless; there are hygiene laws and all that. But this money, if used in a timely manner, may help preserve your vital existence—if only for a space. I do not dole out such a sum willy-nilly. But I find a certain potential in you, son; one that has surely gone unnoticed." Mr. D looked down with a kind of jaded embarrassment, pearls dripping from his brim. "There's always that Third, unspoken Option, Lester. We can turn about, go our separate ways, and this little slice of magic will have never occurred. You may keep the twenty. But I would urge you most emphatically to hang onto that card."

Lester's arms worked their way up, out of his control, until the squashed bill and card were nested in his palms. Again Mr. D cupped Lester's hands, his eyes all but welling.

"Bless you, son. They are yours to keep. Come with me." He gently led Lester across the street to the van.

Inside were a large, strapping black man behind the wheel, and a small, scrawny white man in the back. They were dressed in hand-me-downs. The black man wore a leather flyer's cap, the white man a rainbow stocking hat. The small man slid open the cargo door. Mr. D helped Lester climb in.

"Lester," he said, motioning to the black man, "this is DeeWayne." DeeWayne grinned chummily. "And this is Andrew." The little white man nodded and gave an arcing wave of the hand. "Boys, this is Lester. He's agreed to come along and get cleaned up. He'd like to enjoy our company, and I know we'll enjoy his."

"Welcome aboard, Les!" said DeeWayne.

Andrew smiled like a zoning chipmunk. “Good to know you, big guy. Great to have you with us.”

Mr. D folded himself onto an upturned milk crate. Most of the van was taken up by bags and boxes. There was a smell of rain and overripe apples. “I apologize for the inconvenience, Lester, but we use this van more for the transporting of food and material than persons. Please make yourself as comfortable as the circumstances will permit. You are free to leave at any time, but I so want you to see what the compound has to offer. If for any reason you are dissatisfied with our accommodations, we will cheerfully return you to this very spot. But that would be a true tragedy.” He drummed his palms on his thighs. “Now. I need to have a word with the owner of this convenience store. I promise you I shall be but a minute.”

DeeWayne’s smile lit up the interior. “Okey-dokey, Mr. D! I’ll keep ’er revving!”

Mr. D smiled back and hopped out. He sidestepped puddles, flashing that tender grin at everyone he passed. Lester had just time to see him handing a bill to a panhandler before Andrew eased shut the door, leaving a crack to peer out.

DeeWayne spun in his seat. “*Listen, bitch!* I’m telling you once, and once alone, so you clean that fucking shit out of your ears and listen! You *best* not be holding any needles or bringing in any drugs. You got me? You *best* not be having any outstanding warrants, you *best* not be having any bugs on you. No sex-communicating diseases, no weapons, and no outlandish fucking mental problems. Do we *understand* each other? *Are you fucking deaf, too?* That’s a good man just walked into the store; that’s a holy-ass righteous motherfucker, and he saved me, and he saved a whole lot of other sorry assholes who didn’t have a prayer or a dollar. I *love* that man, you *hear me, motherfucker?* And I’ll whip the shit out of any standout son of a bitch who don’t have the grits to do *whatever* he says, *whenever* he says it, for no other good’n’goddamn

reason except *because* he says it. I *will* make him come out *right*—if I have to violate parole to do it. *You got me?*”

Andrew laughed musically. “Sound down, Dee. Come on, man. We’re all good here; we’re cool.” He peeked out the crack. “He’s coming back. He’s carrying some stuff. Here he comes. Everybody mellow out.” Andrew slid open the door just as Mr. D reached the van. The drizzle was tapering nicely, but he kept his stuffed arms down. He hopped back inside, planting his butt on that same upturned milk crate.

“Merry Christmas, gentlemen!” In his arms were bags of chips, nuts, and jerky. He passed the treats around. “I want you guys to put out the good word on Markey’s Quik-Stop. The franchise owner’s a scholar and a gentleman. He was at another outlet, but he left these goodies just for us. What a prince!” He turned to Lester with misting eyes. “Eat up, son! Let this be a reminder: the world is full of good, wise, and humane men and women. Nobody has to go hurting.” He raised a trembling hand. “Markey’s!”

DeeWayne and Andrew lifted their hands as one, called out “Markey’s,” and slapped their palms against that delicate raised hand. Mr. D shook up and down, grabbed Lester’s free hand and kissed it over and over, his breath bubbling in his throat.

“Markey’s!” DeeWayne cried, and put the van in gear.

“Markey’s.”

Mr. D’s compound was right alongside the freeway; the offramp was their overlook. It wasn’t all that big: half an acre of bare dirt surrounded by caving chain link. They could see a big old warehouse with a broad level roof, positioned forward on the lot and flanked by a number

of broken-down office trailers. Behind the warehouse were dusty cars and vans, a few sagging motor homes, an antique converted school bus.

DeeWayne whipped the van off the ramp onto a parallel dirt road. It was an adroit move, but a dangerous one. He said quickly, "I know, Mr. D, I know. I done it again. But did you see that semi bearing down on the left? He was trying to beat me out on the bottleneck. Can you believe it?"

Mr. D hauled himself back up with the hanging end of the passenger-side's broken shoulder strap. He'd been expecting as much. "Last time," he said, "I believe it was a runaway house trailer." He smiled warmly at Lester. "We kid each other sometimes. These boys are like my own sons."

Andrew leaned forward, embraced Mr. D, and kissed him smack on the cheek. "Papa!"

DeeWayne laughed and whacked Andrew upside the head.

"No matter how many times you disown 'em," Mr. D concluded.

The front gate was open on a permanent basis: a smashed-in skeleton made fast by twisted-round coat hangers. DeeWayne turned in with exaggerated care, winking at Mr. D all the while. Andrew slid open the cargo door and they all piled out. DeeWayne and Andrew walked in through the solid front's little side door, while Mr. D vigilantly accompanied the hobbling newcomer.

It was all beds and bunks and sofas and mattresses. A single row of high windows on either side provided plenty of daylight. Ranks of ceiling lights were blazing against the weather. Kitchen, showers, and office were in the rear.

Sixty-seven pairs of eyes coldly watched Lester pass. These were hungry faces, molded by years of guerilla survival in the streets, penitentiaries, and halfway houses; life streams that

serve only as spawning grounds for miscreants. Mr. D, genially greeting his charges all the way, led Lester to an old steel motel bed with a scratchy khaki military blanket.

“This is yours, son. This is yours, Lester.” The crowd pressed in. A lanky tattooed man on an adjacent bed watched Lester like a snake. Mr. D patted the blanket. “Go ahead, son. Give ’er a test run.”

Lester carefully stretched out on his back. It was feathers and clouds. It was new-mown grass. The smell of chili con carne wafted from the kitchen, with an undercurrent of baking bread and hot cocoa. For a silken moment Lester’s whole body relaxed; his blood seemed to warm, his eyelids to shiver. The moment passed.

Mr. D was delighted. “And you’ll have your own locker, with a combination known only to you! There are games and magazines . . . TV and radio . . . lots of stuff. But let me give you the grand tour first. You can rest in a bit. Boys!” Only Andrew accompanied Mr. D and Lester to the back; DeeWayne was hanging with some of the rougher-looking tenants. Lester peripherally watched them huddle and glare.

“Here’s the kitchen; we’ll get some real chow in you in a minute. These are the showers, and I’m afraid I’ll have to insist you give yourself a good hot scrubbing, Les. We’ve had our share of problems with vermin; nobody’s fault, life can be rough. But transcommunication’s a terrible thing, and I would be derelict as head of this household were I to not lay down some ground rules for the good of all. This is my office. Andrew, allow me a minute or two alone with Lester, please. The formalities.”

Mr. D led Lester into his little office. Andrew closed the door behind them. “Please sit here, son.” Lester took the indicated chair across the desk from his host. Mr. D removed his rain cap and wiped his forehead with tissue from a desktop box. His wispy scalp was spotted and

creased, his hair so white it was all but transparent. He sniffed, wiped his narrow nose, and donned a pair of bifocals. A clipboard came from an upper drawer, a felt pen from his shirt pocket. He tilted back his head.

“There are certain preliminaries involved, Lester. No organization can long exist without careful planning and the meticulous keeping of records.” He raised his eyes. “You look like you’ve been roughed up. I’ll need to have you examined by a physician. Doctor Glover is a fine man and a good friend. He actually lives quite nearby, and volunteers his services readily. He will be by as soon as I give him a call.” Mr. D winked. “Doesn’t look all that shabby on his résumé, either.” He looked back down. “We’ll get you some fresh clothes from the Hamper. I don’t think you’ll wow the ladies, but you’ll be clean anyway. And it’s our policy all furnished clothing be washed a minimum of twice a week. Machines are in an enclosure out back. I’d like you to shave and have a haircut, at least once. Injuries and infections can go unnoticed under a man’s beard and locks. If Doctor Glover prescribes medication, you are required to follow the prescription. We are well-connected with the wonderful people at Roosevelt Clinic. And I’ve found vitamins to be just as important as good food and exercise. Once we get your health back up, you will be requested, but not required, to assist in food runs, basic cleanup around the property, light errands; you know, stuff like that. Let’s see now. Am I forgetting anything . . .”

“Ahr . . . arru . . . are you Jesus?”

Mr. D’s head cocked. His mouth twisted about: he was uncertain whether to smile or frown. Half a minute later his expression was dead-serious.

“Lester. My name is Mr. Dreir. Mr. Carl Dreir. I made a lot of money over the Internet, both in the stock market and on ebay. These are similar to stores; they’re virtual workplaces you can manipulate through your computer. If you’re a pretty savvy guy, and have a knack for

getting in on ground floors—and I'll be perfectly immodest here: I am and did—you can make a lot of money, very fast and very surreptitiously. I used to be, believe it or not, a terribly poor fellow. I flipped burgers, washed windshields, walked dogs. Then I ran into some people who showed me how a man, with just a computer, a modem, a little luck and a lot of chutzpah, can buy, sell, jump in, back off—well, you get the picture. I was quite wealthy before I knew it. I bought property, I bought titles, I bought on common sense rather than impulse . . . this may sound unreal to you; it sounds unreal to me even now as I speak it—but in the space of three short years I went from near-penury to a state of wealth I'd never dreamed of.”

Mr. Dreir rapped a knuckle on the desk. “Funny thing. All that money had no effect on my ego. Zilch. Instead of feeling more successful, all I felt was guiltier. I started seeing people—people who were hurting—as an investment in something bigger than myself. One day I gave some poor lady a roof and a future, the next day it was a whole little tribe living under an overpass. I bought this compound and some vans, made friends with a couple of store managers—” Mr. Dreir did something that struck Lester as strange: he turned and stared with brimming eyes and a bizarre grin. There were lots of things going on in that smile—confusion, pride, awe, fear. “And you know what, Lester? It felt good; real good. *I* felt good. I was growing in ways that luxury and status can never provide.”

Mr. Dreir now reached across the desk and clasped Lester's hands in his own. He seemed to be caressing every scar and blister as though they were nubs of exquisite worth. Lester was surprised to see that Mr. Dreir was weeping—not overtly, not shamefully, not with effeminacy. With dignity.

“Lester. When I first purchased this place it was nowhere near as orderly as it appears today. Everything has been picked up, patched up, cleaned up—all except for one little spot.

That one little spot is a kind of closet we all jocularly refer to as the Confessional. It's not really a confessional; there's no confessing, no guy in a robe behind a screen, no religious significance whatsoever. It's just a room where people can be alone with their thoughts for a spell, and try to figure what they're really looking for in life. When you ask me these questions about Jesus and whatnot, I feel you're actually addressing your personal spiritual side. That's your space, and nobody belongs in there but you. Not me, not some proselytizer—just you. Okay?" Dreir nodded once, with conviction. "As I was saying, after I'd bought the property and everybody was moving in, I sort of locked myself away in that room and asked myself: Am I crazy? Is what I'm doing making any kind of sense? And I found something in there I'd never found before. And do you know what I found in there, Lester? Do you know what I found?" It looked like internal stress would break Mr. Dreir's face into moist giving pieces. "I found *me* in there, Les." He nodded again. "I found me." Dreir abruptly released Lester's hands. His expression became businesslike. "Ever since, I've asked newcomers to check it out on arrival. Not an obligation, not a rule; just a suggestion. So give it a shot for ten." For a moment Dreir appeared at odds with himself. "I'm going to let you in on something, son." He rapped that gnarly old knuckle rapidly. "The man I bought this place from told me about that little room almost exactly as I am telling you now; sitting across from me at this very desk, looking into my eyes with a depth at that time unfamiliar. And he told me that happiness is only a dream. He said that sentient life, due to its subjective nature, is destined—or, perhaps more accurate, doomed—to pursue the unattainable." He vaguely waved a hand. "Perhaps his leanings were Buddhist, or he might have been an existentialist. Whatever. The point I am attempting to assay here, Lester—and it was merely his theory, mind you—is that this hypothetical state of happiness cannot be contained, cannot be extended. The machinery of being causes a man to strive, rather than loiter. In an otherwise

healthy human, a state of enduring happiness would indicate self-delusion, mental retardation . . .

.” Mr. D’s eyes burned into Lester’s. “A sleeping man approaches that state of bliss, embraces it for a heartbeat, and—” he snapped his fingers. Brittle and spindly as those old hands were, the report came, in that hushed little office, like the snap of a whip. “And he is once again in the Here and Now. He wakes to the inevitable torment, to the want, to the soul’s undoing, to the . . . decay.” Dreir’s whole frame sank into his chair. “In real-time existence, according to that man’s philosophy, a wide-awake individual can undergo a similar process, only so gradually as to be unaware. In other words, he may ride the crest of events, and be washed up on the shore of happiness, so to speak, only to be just as surely sucked back by the undertow. Forward, peak, reverse. Up, tremble, down. Advance, retreat . . . surrender. As though a man’s life were a series of waves—a tide beyond his control. Oh no no no, Lester: that undertow does not necessarily contain the precise elements as the breaking wave—the details can be different, but the process is the same . . . forward and reverse, growth and decay, hope and dismay—the controlling force is the Worm, son, and he is in all things.” Dreir sighed. “Predestination is a difficult concept to accept . . . which only buttresses that fellow’s assumption of happiness sought in a vacuum. Free will, blind chance, just desserts . . . forgive me, Lester. I do not mean to bring you disquietude in this loving place. Just an old man rambling at the deaf portal.” He lowered his head, leaned forward, and gripped Lester’s hands with useless passion. “Bless you, son. Bless you, bless you, bless you.” Dreir leaned back. “I wish for you to experience that heartbeat, Lester. In our so-called Confessional.” Mr. D now reached under the desk and came up with a shaggy old dog, its newspaper cushion still gripped in its claws. Dreir carefully removed shreds of paper before gently placing the dog on his desk for Lester’s inspection. The thing was so faded it could hardly stand.

“This, Lester, is Boy.” He steadied the old dog in the crook of his left arm and used his right hand to wave its forepaw. “Boy, Lester. Lester, Boy.” The dog swayed, dipped, and folded into a mangy pile. Mr. D sighed clear from the grave. “Boy is blind and unable to function healthfully, as he had the misfortune of belonging to a cruel master, who could not appreciate the love of a sweet creature such as this dear and devoted animal. Due to his advanced age he is unable to hear in one ear, slow and prone to crabbiness . . . nature’s banes . . . yet, despite his years, he should be able to walk normally, digest properly, sleep in peace . . . he does not deserve to suffer so . . . no . . . not Boy . . .” Mr. Dreir caressed Lester’s hand and Boy’s curls, his eyes melting in their sockets. “Nevertheless, son, you will encounter so many wonderful souls in this world. In this very compound—you will meet unfortunates as yourself, who are dedicated only to the comfort and succor of their fellow man.” He dropped his head one last time and pushed himself to his feet.

“I’ve a pick-up to handle over at the Ralph’s on Harrison. Andrew will show you the room. See if you can get inside yourself; do a little searching. When I get back maybe we’ll be in a better frame for communicating.” He cracked the door. “Andy, show Lester into the Confessional. There’s somebody in there he’d like to meet.” Mr. Dreir picked up the clipboard. His cell phone rang and he clamped it on an ear. “I’m coming, I’m coming.” He carefully placed Boy on the floor, attached a little leash, and slowly walked him to the door. Decrepitude, high and low, passed from the room without looking back.

Andrew took Lester’s elbow. “C’mon, Big L. We all gone in, and we all come out none the worse.” He moved his head Lester-wise, but backed off at the smell. “I’ll let you in on the grits right off: ain’t nothin’ in there but a man’s conscience. Don’t let Mr. D spook you none. Just talk to the Man and c’mon back out.” They halted outside a little door. “I’ll come for you in

ten.” He grinned and wagged a schoolmarmish forefinger. “No sleepin’ now!” Andrew opened the door and switched on the light. Lester shuffled into a room no larger than a motel bathroom. It was as Dreir said: a blank little cubbyhole, unkempt and unresolved. Andrew closed the door.

Lester came to his knees by degrees, the single dusty bulb shivering from stale displaced air. He blew caked blood onto a sleeve. He could breathe. “Sir . . .” The effort at cogency was just too much. Lester swung his bowed head left and right. “Sir . . .” He looked back up. “Sir . . . please help me. Please. No more. I . . . I—please. No.” He sobbed for air and hacked, spewing all over his beard and coat. “Sir . . . I can’t, sir . . . I can’t.” His face shook and relaxed, shook and relaxed. Lester raised his two mangy paws as abbreviated fists, the deformed digits unable to clench. “If you care, *help* me,” he managed, “*please!* I can’t, sir. Please. Show me.” Lester coughed, almost retching. “Please, sir . . .” he wheezed. “*Now*. Please.”

There was a knock and the door creaked open. “You still awake in there?” Andrew smiled. “Come on, man. Let’s go and get you some grub.”

DeeWayne stopped them in the hallway. His eyes tore into Lester’s. “What’d I tell you? I said if you got any bugs you wasn’t to come in here without a proper delousing.” He swung his head. “Isn’t that what I told him?” Andrew smiled uncertainly.

DeeWayne pulled out a pair of generic plastic surgical gloves, jammed them on up to the wrists. “*C’m’ere!*” He grabbed a handful of Lester’s hair and dragged him into the main warehouse. At Lester’s bed he pushed until that smashed red nose was almost buried, like a furious master about to toilet-train a diarrheic puppy.

There was nothing to see but linen.

“Deaf *and* blind, huh? Well then, asshole, let me describe it for you. They’s called lice, and they transport from man to man, you dig? Right now they could be anywhere on these-here

premises, 'cause if they's on this bed they's anywhere your homeless ass been. That means in the Confessional, that means in the van, that means in Mr. D's own personal clothes for all I know."

He roared like a lion, grabbed Lester's hair in both hands, and hurled him crashing into a bedpost. "Stay out of this, Andy, unless you want a piece of me too." He punched and kicked, savagely, until Lester curled into a shaking fetal ball, then went ballistic; breaking a dustpan, push broom, and waste basket on the forearms and skull. When he ran out of weapons he gave a little shriek and began kicking the face maniacally; slobbering in his passion, falling and whaling from the floor, staggering upright, starting the process all over. Half the compound's occupants cheered from a growing ring, half scrambled for cover. Lester was battered along like a smashed snake, sobbing with fear as he tried to make his feet. When DeeWayne came after him with a lock and chain, Lester lurched to his knees and scrambled out the door.

"That's right, bitch, get out of here!" DeeWayne was an immensely strong individual. He now grabbed Andrew in one hand and Lester in the other, dragged them, pumping his arms left and right, clear across the lot to the van. "Open the damn door, Andy."

Andrew did. DeeWayne kicked Lester inside, then kicked Andrew in behind him. "Close the damn door, Andy. If he moves, brain him." DeeWayne stomped around to the driver's side, jumped in and fired up the van. He took off like a lunatic, barely able to control the wheel. Lester and Andrew were hurled into a common lump amidst bags and damaged fruit.

DeeWayne swore as he tore onto the freeway, vilely and repeatedly. He cut off cars, lane-hopped wildly, broke every law in the book. Only the stress-relief caused by time and miles saved Lester from a solid tire iron-whooping. When they reached Markey's Quik-Stop he screeched to a halt and composed himself.

"Open the damn door, Andy."

Andrew did. DeeWayne watched Lester in the rear-view mirror. “Get out.”

Lester didn’t need to be told twice. He scrambled out and pitched onto the sidewalk.

“Close the damn door, Andy.”

The door slid shut and the van roared off.

Lester used a bus bench to haul himself up. He collapsed supine on the seat, left arm hanging over the gutter. He could tell at least one rib was broken; he had to force shallow breaths, even as every nerve demanded he savage the air. An eardrum was popped or inflamed, the same-side orbit crushed, the mouth locked up—his stomach was . . . twisting, he couldn’t hold it, his eyes bulged as he fought against countering life-forces: those dyed-in-the-demon opposers that won’t let a wracked-and-ready animal die before it has experienced agony’s full measure. Unable to lift his head, Lester puked bloody bile, on his coat, over his face, out and back up his desperately flaring nostrils.

A spotlight made his private hell available to all. An amplified voice snapped, “*You on the bench.*” A car door opened. A flashlight’s beam fried his eyes.

“Sir. I need you to sit up for me.”

A second voice, farther off: “Medical?”

The first voice. “Sir, do you need a doctor’s attention?” Something banged his smashed shoulder. “Sit up.”

Lester sat up at an angle, his left arm a straight prop for his shot Pisa-tower frame. He sucked wretched life back up his broken nose. The light moved eye-to-eye. The series of questions were looped sections of the same old nightmare: Drugs? Alcohol? Identification? Address? Employer? Person to contact? General relief? Medi-Cal?

When the list was completed the light fell away. “Sir, I need you to vacate this bench immediately. Benches are not community property; they are provided for the convenience of persons financially capable of purchasing a seat on one of the lines, though frankly I doubt you’d be permitted to board in your present condition. *Do* you have bus money?”

Lester squeezed shut his eyes as another wave threatened.

“Then you have the option of walking away or facing arrest.”

That second voice, with feeling: “Not in my car, Terry. I’m serious.”

“Get up.”

Lester draped his arms over the bench back and rose by walking up his butt. His knees screamed in protest.

“Keep going.” The light swung to his feet. Lester stood in a punch-drunk sway. “Get moving. Stay on the sidewalk. Do not cross the street against traffic. Use the crosswalk like everybody else. Push the button until you see the steady green hand. If you’re halfway across the street and that hand turns red and starts flashing, I want you to turn around and walk back to the curb. I don’t care what the instructions say on the little box. Do it until you get it right. We hit this corner every hour. I don’t want to see you back here again. Do we understand each other?”

“Thnk . . .” Lester managed. “Thkyu.”

“Get going.”

Lester clung to the pole like a drunk to a rail. He pushed the signal call button with deliberate accuracy and stared at that stern red hand forever. The patrol car cruised off. When the happy hand appeared it took Lester a full thirty seconds to peel himself off the pole, so by the time he was halfway across he was already being warned back. A bitty old lady stood on the island, hanging onto the miniature median call stand with one arm, her purse clutched

meaningfully in the other. Her eyes were searing. “Get away from me,” she gnashed, “you filthy animal.” Lester staggered back to the curb. The old lady began a resolute march, against the light, while left-turning traffic waited patiently and drivers farther back, ignorant of the situation, leaned on their horns. It took two entire series, red through green, for the biddy to make the curb, one baby-step at a time, and by then the intersection was in gridlock. The moment she conquered the curb the whole mess blared past.

She stood glaring for the longest time. The walk hand glowed. The old lady raised hers in imitation, waved it in front of Lester’s fractured face. “What are you—dreaming? Wake up! You can go now. *Go!*” He stumbled off the curb and half-ran, half-staggered across the street.

He had to feel his way along the south wall to reach the mall parking lot. Lester collapsed in a doorwell, gripping his side. There was some serious internal damage; the spleen, perhaps, or a section of gut. His mouth had taken a real booting—teeth, tongue, lips. Lester wheezed away the blood. He opened his coat and gingerly lifted the shirt. His left lower quadrant was one massive bruise; just looking at it made him grind his teeth and squeeze shut his eyes. Gradually his head reclined in a whipped animal nod. Bloody saliva rolled into his beard.

His foot was kicked, then the leg. The bad leg. Lester’s eyes popped open and he snarled.

A skinny brown security guard was looking down on him, his cap tilted aggressively. “Get out of the doorway, asshole. You ain’t supposed to be on this property, and you know it.” He kicked harder. “Don’t fuck with me, motherfucker! I’ll mace your ass in a hurry.” Lester’s striving hands failed him.

The guard tore out his walkie-talkie. “Peepers? I got a bum down here at SweePea’s. No, but he’s giving me a hard time. He don’t want to leave. Sure I told him, man; first thing out of my mouth. Can I juice him? But he *is* resisting!” He kicked savagely, just below the bruised

quadrant. Lester roared to his knees. “He’s coming at me, Peeps! Didn’t you hear that? I got to protect myself, don’t I? Then how about the stick? *But you heard*, damn it!”

Lester pulled himself to his feet. The guard shoved the walkie-talkie back in its holster.

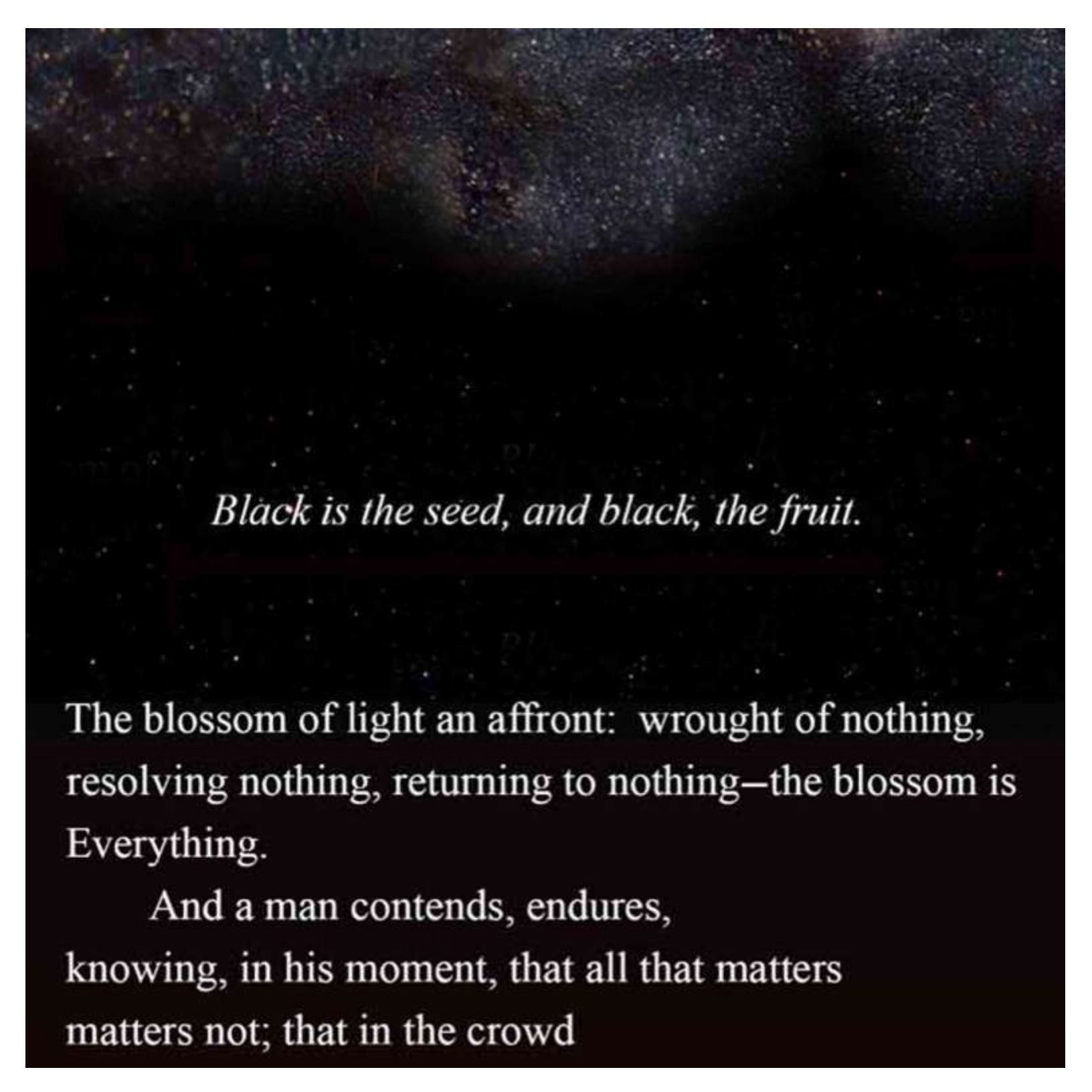
“Get your nasty ass out of here! Snap out of it, punk—go do your sleeping somewhere else.” Lester staggered past. The guard, attempting to kick Lester’s hindquarters, slipped in a puddle and fell on his own. “*Go!*”

Lester stumbled into the road, hugging his screaming side. Braking cars swerved on the wet asphalt. He stumbled into the undergrowth and pitched over a crushed section of fence, pulled himself past the ditch and went kicking through roots and scrub. Something large darted between his flagging feet. Eyes gleamed in the brush and scattered; some were not so quick. Lester’s legs gave out and he fell on his back to protect his injured vitals. Something moist slapped his forehead; blood from above. Another hit his cheek, and another, his nose. Half a minute later the rain was coming down for real.



*F*aces

Ron Sanders



Black is the seed, and black, the fruit.

The blossom of light an affront: wrought of nothing,
resolving nothing, returning to nothing—the blossom is
Everything.

And a man contends, endures,
knowing, in his moment, that all that matters
matters not; that in the crowd

he is alone, that in the cosmos
he is lost, that in his writing
he is written. He is a coal, shot hot between voids.

Intense to evanescent, each pass of a life
has a spectrum.

Red is the womb.

Here, at riot's eye, all bellows howl,
all fires bend to the harlot wind of becoming.
And the nub is a lump, and the lump *accrues*,
marbles dreamless, in liquor weightless, defining:
Liquid ruby, clinging vine, tallow flower in wine—
the little ogre, caught on a briar, kicks.
Comes a marvelous trophy, born squirming and gory,
torn naked and pendent, borne blind and grotesque—
wound about the hollows and seams,

spat in a maelstrom:

one more shape in the window,
one more shadow exposed
in the bloody triumph of light.

Out of the whirl, the faces gather round.

The boy has opened his eyes,
but the infant makes no sound.

Shapes loom to the sides, to the front and rear:
The faces grin, closing in . . . grow enormous fingers
to point, to pinch—to peel back the veil
and make his eyes scream.

In the dimness a glimmer, a nimbus, a pearl.

The colors peak.

Within their arms a becking form appears.

The figure is a woman, whose seeming lips recite:

“Come sunder the night. Little ember, ignite.

I am mother, I am mother. I am life, I am light.”

But like oil on a rainy day,
the colors blend and wend their way
into the whirl, and there,
subdued, the voice is slurred,
the light, obscured,
and night
renewed.

Here on the lattice,
morning embroiders the tatters of night.
While tall beaded glasses
squeeze melody from melting ice
the diced and slanting shafts of sun
checker the shadows with tangerine light.

On the sidewalks April's children run

*but the eyes in the faces see
nephew on the august perch
of uncle's wicker knee.*

Graven in air, the faces shift,
their eyes a flickering stream.

Loosed features drift, expressions run
in subtle strokes of shade and sun.

The stream sucks him in: swirls of abhorrence,
pools of disdain. Succumbing, drawn under,
he swallows his eyes. But the eyes in the faces remain
watching.

So scrawny it grieves, he eats too damned much;
ever absent, he is always in the way.

Sickly, quiet, submissive, shy,
he hides when the faces quarrel,

cries when they crack his lie.

Craving love, he learns early to fast.

contriving a limp, he is weaned at last.

What hold wanders here—there are no bridges,
only walls. Every scribe is a master of cant.

The learned are jaundiced, the ignorant smug.

And those who would name his demons,

when maintaining “this will pass,”

fashion their webs of pap and straw.

This animal man is a thief.

Mother,

My world is a stranger. My eyes are wounds
on a mind that will not heal.

I saw more range, more warmth, more *mother*,
in the dance of sun on heather,

in a single kiss of dew.

Now your urn, blessed bowel, fouls the cedar
of father's mantel, while he grows blacker,
blending bile with grief and gin.

Those lips that never tendered,
that heart I never knew—mother,
who *were* you?

Ubiquitous, the emerald slut lies splayed, exploding:
from her pores an eruption, on her belly a rank,
stinking moss. She bleeds life, vomits it,
into bud, into blade; sharing with a passing star
the silent scream of spring.

But here she dreams, perfumed,
a picture of grace, her verdure in groom.

Secluded, seduced, sedated. Churls put on her face
while zephyrs attend to the scent of her loom.

Time purls. The zephyrs flit sweetly,
chasing motes in fibers of light.

Playing tag in the sun, currents weave into one
near a still-life of mourners and fatherless son.

The figures seem rooted, unreal.

As the gust musses trees, light leaps between leaves.

The greenery breathes. As if shaken,
the scene comes to life:

Huddling in sync, the faces incline, their eyes
like slinking thieves. The young man implodes.

The tension relents and he straightens. He wheels.

He limps off alone, wind hounding his heels,

the moment too eerie to bear. Sedans trickle by.

A raw widow grieves. But the faces continue to stare.

And the wind pirouettes, finds a wing,
has a plunge, brakes low on a rest,

makes a guarded descent. The breeze buffets markers,
losing vigor and bent, then slips thru the stones
toward the beckoning trees.

The draft ruffles leaves, where its whisper is spent
and lost as a sigh.

A stipend, a shack, a lessor in wait.

Such are the fruits of his father's estate.

He breaks no bread, seeks no sweet;

strange dynamics govern his blood,

preclude his seed from the common fire.

Music of amity, refinement's caress,

are brute concerns; abrasive, obscene.

In his quiet aching way he is whole.

Seasons burst and smolder, surrender and brood.

Their pageant revolves about him.

The years breathe, driving the crowd,
steeping its fevers in jasmine and sun.
Humanity brawls, exalting the flame.
But without him.

And he grays, sinking, certain his pain cannot,
could not possibly, be borne by another.

The silence condenses, sets.

At last even pain deserts him.

But near the brink he hears the nervous hum
of impermanence, feels the white pang of being's wing
as day succumbs to the fist of night.

Dawn burns deeper, duller; each beam towing
a filament of dusk, each round of the wheel a salvo
in the stunning of his eyes.

Now the years are mired in sameness.

The day wears on. Guests come unbidden:

Conscience, the despot. Sentiment, the leech.
Misgivings sojourn, transmigrate, return,
as Lonesomeness plumbs his moribund vein,
metastasizing.

Still he rooms with the wind, dies waking,
dreams sleepless. And it dogs him:
all this teeming while an instant, an irrelevancy
a rube's view of the pulse careening downstream,
working its rhyme into a billion like irrelevancies.

Here *must* be real, Now *must* be sound, and yet—
no sooner are the moments cast
than shape is shadow, and present, past.

Only the day wears on.

Blue is the evening begotten, the twilight of our lives.
Dark gathers,
mooring its stain where a dreamer weighs the deep,
his eyes in ruin, his color in vain.

Only ballast and mind, merely ego and rind,
growing blind as the day wears on.

Down this grim promenade
a musty wind hustles gaunt silhouettes.
They are loth to be borne;
they are patiently measuring stones.

Eyes leap in their caverns, looks light and remain
on a smudge in the gloaming, a scarecrow with cane,
tapping out his tenure in a cold feeble rain.

*And now the purple veins of near-night
thud sluggishly, almost grudgingly.*

The black earth splits wetly, obscenely.

There: *something impatient stirs, exposed.*

Limbless, sightless, the lamprey rises;

her breath unbearable, her length immeasurable,

her age—

impossible!

Preening whore, hypnotic.

In one vile kiss she is sieve and abyss.

Her bruised lips are splayed, her violet mouth, made,
and her churning, insatiable crawl is
pitch.

Out of the whirl, the faces gather round.

was he hurt?

can you hear me?

But the old man makes no sound.

Shapes loom to the sides, to the front and rear:

The faces glare, stealing air . . . grow enormous fingers
to prod, to pin—to pull down the veil
and make his eyes seize.

*In the dimness a glimmer, a nimbus, a pearl.
The colors peak.
Within their arms a becking form appears.
The figure is a woman, whose seeming lips recite:
“Come sunder the night. Waning fire, grow bright.
I am mother, I am mother. I am life, I am light.”*

But like spectra from a dying sun,
the colors flare, are torn, are spun
into the whirl, and there,
subdued, the voice is hushed,
the blossom, crushed,
and night
renewed.