

The Day it Rained Forever, Ray Bradbury

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The Day it Rained Forever

THE hotel stood like a hollowed dry bone under the very centre of the desert sky where the sun burned the roof all day. All night, the memory of the sun stirred in every room like the ghost of an old forest fire. Long after dusk, since light meant heat, the hotel lights stayed off. The inhabitants of the hotel preferred to feel their way blind through the halls in their never-ending search for cool air.

This one particular evening Mr Terle, the proprietor, and his only boarders, Mr Smith and Mr Fremley, who looked and smelled like two ancient rags of cured tobacco, stayed late on the long veranda. In their creaking glockenspiel rockers, they gasped back and forth in the dark, trying to rock up a wind.

‘Mr Terle …? Wouldn’t it be really nice … some day … if you could buy … air conditioning …?’

Mr Terle coasted a while, eyes shut.

‘Got no money for such things, Mr Smith.’

The two old boarders flushed; they hadn’t paid a bill now in twenty-one years.

Much later, Mr Fremley sighed a grievous sigh. ‘Why, why don’t we all just quit, pack up, get outa here, move to a decent city? Stop this swelterin’ and fryin’ and sweatin’.’

‘Who’d buy a dead hotel in a ghost town?’ said Mr Terle, quietly. ‘No. No, we’ll just set here and wait, wait for that great day, January 29th.’

Slowly, all three men stopped rocking.

January 29th.

The one day in all the year when it really let go and rained.

‘Won’t wait long.’ Mr Smith tilted his gold railroad watch like the warm summer moon in his palm. ‘Two hours and nine minutes from now it’ll be January 29th. But I don’t see nary a cloud in ten thousand miles.’

‘It’s rained every January 29th since I was born!’ Mr Terle stopped, surprised at his own loud voice. ‘If it’s a day late this year, I won’t pull God’s shirt-tail.’

Mr Fremley swallowed hard and looked from east to west across the desert towards the hills. ‘I wonder … will there ever be a gold rush hereabouts again?’

‘No gold,’ said Mr Smith. ‘And what’s more, I’ll make you a bet – no rain. No rain tomorrow or the day after the day after tomorrow. No rain all the rest of this year.’

The three old men sat staring at the big sun-yellowed moon that burned a hole in the high stillness.

After a long while, painfully, they began to rock again.

The first hot morning breezes curled the calendar pages like a dried snakeskin against the flaking hotel front.

The three men, thumbing their braces up over their hat-rack shoulders, came barefoot downstairs to blink out at that idiot sky.

‘January 29th …’

‘Not a drop of mercy there.’

‘Day’s young.’

‘I’m not.’ Mr Fremley turned and went away.

It took him five minutes to find his way up through the delirious hallways to his hot, freshly baked bed.

At noon, Mr Terle peered in.

‘Mr Fremley …?’

‘Damn desert cactus, that’s us!’ gasped Mr Fremley, lying there, his face looking as if at any moment it might fall away in a blazing dust on the raw plank floor. ‘But even the best damn cactus got to have just a sip of water before it goes back to another year of the same damn furnace. I tell you I won’t move again, I’ll lie here an’ die if I don’t hear more than birds pattin’ around up on that roof!’

‘Keep your prayers simple and your umbrella handy,’ said Mr Terle, and tiptoed away.

At dusk, on the hollow roof a faint pattering sounded.

Mr Fremley’s voice sang out mournfully, from his bed.

‘Mr Terle, that ain’t rain! That’s you with the garden hose sprinklin’ well-water on the roof! Thanks for tryin’, but cut it out, now.’

The pattering sound stopped. There was a sigh from the yard below.

Coming around the side of the hotel a moment later, Air Terle saw the calendar fly out and down in the dust.

‘Damn January 29th!’ cried a voice. ‘Twelve more months! Have to wait twelve more months, now!’

Mr Smith was standing there in the doorway. He stepped inside and brought out two dilapidated suitcases and thumped them on the porch.

‘Mr Smith!’ cried Mr Terle. ‘You can’t leave after thirty years!’

‘They say it rains twenty days a month in Ireland,’ said Mr Smith. ‘I’ll get a job there and run around with my hat off and my mouth open.’

‘You can’t go!’ Mr Terle tried frantically to think of something; he snapped his fingers. ‘You owe me nine thousand dollars rent!’

Mr Smith recoiled; his eyes got a look of tender and unexpected hurt in them.

‘I’m sorry.’ Mr Terle looked away. ‘I didn’t mean that. Look now – you just head for Seattle. Pours two inches a week there. Pay me when you can, or never. But do me a favour: wait till midnight. It’s cooler then, anyhow. Get you a good night’s walk towards the city.’

‘Nothin’ll happen between now and midnight.’

‘You got to have faith. When everything else is gone, you got to believe a thing’ll happen. Just stand here, with me, you don’t have to sit, just stand here and think of rain. That’s the last thing I’ll ever ask of you.’

On the desert, sudden little whirlwinds of dust twisted up, sifted down. Mr Smith’s eye scanned the sunset horizon.

‘What do I think? Rain, oh you rain, come along here? Stuff like that?’

‘Anything. Anything at all!’

Mr Smith stood for a long time between his two mangy suitcases and did not move. Five, six minutes ticked by. There was no sound, save the two men’s breathing in the dusk.

Then at last, very firmly, Mr Smith stooped to grasp the luggage handles.

Just then, Mr Terle blinked. He leaned forward, cupping his hand to his ear.

Mr Smith froze, his hands still on the luggage.

From away among the hills, a murmur, a soft and tremulous rumble.

‘Storm coming!’ hissed Mr Terle.

The sound grew louder; a kind of whitish cloud rose up from the hills.

Mr Smith stood tall on tiptoe.

Upstairs, Mr Fremley sat up like Lazarus.

Mr Terle’s eyes grew wider and yet wider to take hold of what was coming. He held to the porch rail like the captain of a long-becalmed vessel feeling the first stir of some tropic breeze that smelled of lime and the ice-cool white meat of coconut. The smallest wind stroked over his aching nostrils as over the flues of a white-hot chimney.

‘There!’ cried Mr Terle. ‘There!’

And over the last hill, shaking out feathers of fiery dust, came the cloud, the thunder, the racketing storm.

Over the hill, the first car to pass in twenty days flung itself down the valley with a shriek, a thud, and a wail.

Mr Terle did not dare to look at Mr Smith.

Mr Smith looked up, thinking of Mr Fremley in his room.

Mr Fremley, at the window, looked down and saw the car expire and die in front of the hotel.

For the sound that the car made was curiously final. It had come a very long way on blazing sulphur roads, across salt flats abandoned ten million years ago by the shingling-off of waters. Now, with wire-ravellings like cannibal hair sprung up from seams, with a great eyelid of canvas top thrown back and melted to spearmint gum over rear seat, the auto, a Kissel car, vintage 1924, gave a final shuddering as if to expel its ghost upon the air.

The old woman in the front seat of the car waited patiently, looking in at the three men and the hotel as if to say, Forgive me, my friend is ill; I’ve known him a long while, and now I must see him through his final hour. So she just sat in the car waiting for the faint convulsions to cease and for the great relaxation of all the bones which signifies that the final process is over. She must have sat a full half-minute longer listening to her car, and there was something so peaceful about her that Mr Terle and Mr Smith leaned slowly towards her. At last she looked at them with a grave smile and raised her hand.

Mr Fremley was surprised to see his hand go out the window above, waving back to her.

On the porch, Mr Smith murmured, ‘Strange. It’s not a storm. And I’m not disappointed. How come?’

But Mr Terle was down the path and to the car.

‘We thought you were … that is …’ He trailed off. ‘Terle’s my name, Joe Terle.’

She took his hand and looked at him with absolutely clear and unclouded light-blue eyes like water that has melted from snow a thousand miles off and come a long way, purified by wind and sun.

‘Miss Blanche Hillgood,’ she said, quietly. ‘Graduate of the Grinnell College, unmarried teacher of music, thirty years high-school glee club and student orchestra conductor, Green City, Iowa, twenty years private teacher of piano, harp, and voice, one month retired and living on a pension and now, taking my roots with me, on my way to California.’

‘Miss Hillgood, you don’t look to be going anywhere from here.’

‘I had a feeling about that.’ She watched the two men circle the car, cautiously. She sat like a child on the lap of a rheumatic grandfather, undecided. ‘Is there nothing we can do?’

‘Make a fence of the wheels, dinner-gong of the brake drums, the rest’ll make a fine rock garden.’

Mr Fremley shouted from the sky. ‘Dead? I say, is the car dead? I can feel it from here! Well – it’s way past time for supper!’

Mr Terle put out his hand. ‘Miss Hillgood, that there is Joe Terle’s Desert Hotel, open twenty-six hours a day. Gila monsters and road runners please register before going upstairs. Get you a night’s sleep, free, we’ll knock our Ford off its blocks and drive you to the city come morning.’

She let herself be helped from the car. The machine groaned as if in protest at her going. She shut the door carefully, with a soft click.

‘One friend gone, but the other still with me. Mr Terle, could you please bring her in out of the weather?’

‘Her, ma’am?’

‘Forgive me, I never think of things but what they’re people. The car was a man, I suppose, because it took me places. But a harp, now, don’t you agree, is female?’

She nodded to the rear seat of the car. There, tilted against the sky like an ancient scrolled leather ship-prow cleaving the wind, stood a case which towered above any driver who might sit up in front and sail the desert calms or the city traffics.

‘Mr Smith,’ said Mr Terle, ‘lend a hand.’

They untied the huge case and hoisted it gingerly out between them.

‘What you got there?’ cried Mr Fremley from above.

Mr Smith stumbled. Miss Hillgood gasped. The case shifted in the two men’s arms.

From within the case came a faint musical humming.

Mr Fremley, above, heard. It was all the answer he needed. Mouth open, he watched the lady and the two men and their boxed friend sway and vanish in the cavernous porch below.

‘Watch out!’ said Mr Smith. ‘Some damn fool left his luggage here –’ He stopped. ‘Some damn fool? Me!’

The two men looked at each other. They were not perspiring any more. A wind had come up from somewhere, a gentle wind that fanned their shirt collars and flapped the strewn calendar gently in the dust.

‘My luggage …’ said Mr Smith.

Then they all went inside.

‘More wine, Miss Hillgood? Ain’t had wine on the table in years.’

‘Just a touch, if you please.’

They sat by the light of a single candle which made the room an oven and struck fire from the good silverware and the un-cracked plates as they talked and drank warm wine and ate.

‘Miss Hillgood, get on with your life.’

‘All my life,’ she said, ‘I’ve been so busy running from Beethoven to Bach to Brahms, I never noticed I was twenty-nine. Next time I looked up I was forty. Yesterday, seventy-one. Oh, there were men; but they’d given up singing at ten and given up flying when they were twelve. I always figured we were born to fly, one way or other, so I couldn’t stand most men shuffling along with all the iron in the earth in their blood. I never met a man who weighed less than nine hundred pounds. In their black business suits, you could hear them roll by like funeral wagons.’

‘So you flew away?’

‘Just in my mind, Mr Terle. It’s taken sixty years to make the final break. All that time I grabbed on to piccolos and flutes and violins because they make streams in the air, you know, like streams and rivers on the ground. I rode every tributary and tried every fresh-water wind from Handel on down to a whole slew of Strausses. It’s been the far way around that’s brought me here.’

‘How’d you finally make up your mind to leave?’ asked Mr Smith.

‘I looked around last week and said, “Why, look, you’ve been flying alone ! No one in all Green City really cares if you fly or how high you go. It’s always, ‘Fine, Blanche,’ or ‘Thanks for the recital at the PTA tea, Miss H.’ But no one really listening.” And when I talked a long time ago about Chicago or New York, folks swatted me and laughed. “Why be a little frog in a big pond when you can be the biggest frog in all Green City!” So I stayed on, while the folks who gave me advice moved away or died or both. The rest had wax in their ears. Just last week I shook myself and said, “Hold on! Since when do frogs have wings?”’

‘So now you’re headin’ west?’ said Mr Terle.

‘Maybe to play in pictures or in that orchestra under the stars. But somewhere I just must play at last for someone who’ll hear and really listen …’

They sat there in the warm dark. She was finished, she had said it all now, foolish or not – and she moved back quietly in her chair.

Upstairs someone coughed.

Miss Hillgood heard, and rose.

It took Mr Fremley a moment to ungum his eyelids and make out the shape of the woman bending down to place the tray by his rumpled bed.

‘What you all talking about down there just now?’

‘I’ll come back later and tell you word for word,’ said Miss Hillgood. ‘Eat now. The salad’s fine.’ She moved to leave the room.

He said, quickly, ‘You goin’ to stay?’

She stopped half out of the door and tried to trace the expression on his sweating face in the dark. He, in turn, could not see her mouth or eyes. She stood a moment longer, silently, then went on down the stairs.

‘She must not’ve heard me,’ said Mr Fremley.

But he knew she had heard.

Miss Hillgood crossed the downstairs lobby to fumble with the locks on the upright leather case.

‘I must pay you for my supper.’

‘On the house,’ said Mr Terle.

‘I must pay,’ she said, and opened the case.

There was a sudden flash of gold.

The two men quickened in their chairs. They squinted at the little old woman standing beside the tremendous heart-shaped object which towered above her with its shining columbined pedestal atop which a calm Grecian face with antelope eyes looked serenely at them even as Miss Hillgood looked now.

The two men shot each other the quickest and most startled of glances, as if each had guessed what might happen next. They hurried across the lobby, breathing hard, to sit on the very edge of the hot velvet lounge, wiping their faces with damp handkerchiefs.

Miss Hillgood drew a chair under her, rested the golden harp gently back on her shoulder, and put her hands to the strings.

Mr Terle took a breath of fiery air and waited.

A desert wind came suddenly along the porch outside, tilting the chairs so they rocked this way and that like boats on a pond at night.

Mr Fremley’s voice protested from above. ‘What’s goin’ on down there?’

And then Miss Hillgood moved her hands.

Starting at the arch near her shoulder, she played her fingers out along the simple tapestry of wires towards the blind and beautiful stare of the Greek goddess on her column, and then back. Then, for a moment, she paused and let the sounds drift up through the baked lobby air and into all the empty rooms.

If Mr Fremley shouted, above, no one heard. For Mr Terle and Mr Smith were so busy jumping up to stand riven in the shadows, they heard nothing save the storming of their own hearts and the shocked rush of all the air in their lungs. Eyes wide, mouths dropped, in a kind of pure insanity, they stared at the two women there, the blind Muse proud on her golden pillar, and the seated one, gentle eyes closed, her small hands stretched forth on the air.

Like a girl, they both thought wildly, like a little girl putting her hands out of a window to feel what? Why, of course, of course!

To feel the rain.

The echo of the first shower vanished down remote causeways and roof-drains, away.

Mr Fremley, above, rose from his bed as if pulled round by his ears.

Miss Hillgood played.

She played and it wasn’t a tune they knew at all, but it was a tune they had heard a thousand times in their long lives, words or not, melody or not. She played and each time her fingers moved, the rain fell pattering through the dark hotel.

The rain fell cool at the open windows and the rain rinsed down the baked floorboards of the porch. The rain fell on the rooftop and fell on hissing sand, it fell on rusted car and empty stable and dead cactus in the yard.

It washed the windows and laid the dust and filled the rain-barrels and curtained the doors with beaded threads that might part and whisper as you walked through. But more than anything, the soft touch and coolness of it fell on Mr Smith and Mr Terle. Its gentle weight and pressure moved them down and down until it had seated them again.

By its continuous budding and prickling on their faces, it made them shut up their eyes and mouths and raise their hands to shield it away. Seated there, they felt their heads tilt slowly back to let the rain fall where it would.

The flash flood lasted a minute, then faded away as the fingers trailed down the loom, let drop a few last bursts and squalls and then stopped.

The last chord hung in the air like a picture taken when lightning strikes and freezes a billion drops of water on their downward flight. Then the lightning went out. The last drops fell through darkness in silence.

Miss Hillgood took her hands from the strings, her eyes still shut.

Mr Terle and Mr Smith opened their eyes to see those two miraculous women, way over there across the lobby, somehow come through the storm untouched and dry.

They trembled. They leaned forward as if they wished to speak. They looked helpless, not knowing what to do.

And then a single sound from high above in the hotel corridors drew their attention and told them what to do.

The sound came floating down feebly, fluttering like a tired bird beating its ancient wings.

The two men looked up and listened.

It was the sound of Mr Fremley.

Mr Fremley, in his room, applauding.

It took five seconds for Mr Terle to figure out what it was. Then he nudged Mr Smith and began, himself, to beat his palms together. The two men struck their hands in mighty explosions. The echoes ricocheted around about in the hotel caverns above and below, striking walls, mirrors, windows, trying to fight free of the rooms.

Miss Hillgood opened her eyes now, as if this new storm had come on her in the open, unprepared.

The men gave their own recital. They smashed their hands together so fervently it seemed they had fistfuls of firecrackers to set off, one on another. Mr Fremley shouted. Nobody heard. Hands winged out, banged shut again and again until fingers puffed up and the old men’s breath came short and they put their hands at last on their knees, a heart pounding inside each one.

Then, very slowly, Mr Smith got up and still looking at the harp, went outside and carried in the suitcases. He stood at the foot of the lobby stairs looking for a long while at Miss Hillgood. He glanced down at her single piece of luggage resting there by the first tread. He looked from her suitcase to her and raised his eyebrows, questioningly.

Miss Hillgood looked at her harp, at her suitcase, at Mr Terle, and at last back to Mr Smith.

She nodded once.

Mr Smith bent down and with his own luggage under one arm and her suitcase in the other, he started the long slow climb up the stairs in the gentle dark. As he moved, Miss Hillgood put the harp back on her shoulder and either played in time to his moving or he moved in time to her playing, neither of them knew which.

Half up the flight, Mr Smith met Mr Fremley who, in a faded robe, was testing his slow way down.

Both stood there, looking deep into the lobby at the one man on the far side in the shadows, and the two women farther over, no more than a motion and a gleam. Both thought the same thoughts.

The sound of the harp playing, the sound of the cool water falling every night and every night of their lives, after this. No spraying the roof with the garden hose now, any more. Only sit on the porch or lie in your night bed and hear the falling … the falling … the falling Mr Smith moved on up the stair; Mr Fremley moved down.

The harp, the harp. Listen, listen!

The fifty years of drought were over.

The time of the long rains had come.

In a Season of Calm Weather

GEORGE and Alice Smith detrained at Biarritz one summer noon and in an hour had run through their hotel on to the beach into the ocean and back out to bake upon the sand.

To see George Smith sprawled burning there, you’d think him only a tourist flown fresh as iced lettuce to Europe and soon to be transhipped home. But here was a man who loved art more than life itself.

‘There …’ George Smith sighed. Another ounce of perspiration trickled down his chest. Boil out the Ohio tap-water, he thought, then drink down the best Bordeaux. Silt your blood with rich French sediment so you’ll see with native eyes!

Why? Why eat, breathe, drink everything French? So that, given time, he might really begin to understand the genius of one man.

His mouth moved, forming a name.

‘George?’ His wife loomed over him. ‘I know what you’ve been thinking. I can read your lips.’

He lay perfectly still, waiting.

‘And?’

‘Picasso,’ she said.

He winced. Some day she would learn to pronounce that name.

‘Please,’ she said. ‘Relax. I know you heard the rumour this morning, but you should see your eyes – your tic is back. All right, Picasso’s here, down the coast a few miles away, visiting friends in some small fishing town. But you must forget it or our vacation’s ruined.’

‘I wish I’d never heard the rumour,’ he said honestly.

‘If only,’ she said, ‘you liked other painters.’

Others? Yes, there were others. He could breakfast most congenially on Caravaggio still-lifes of autumn pears and midnight plums. For lunch: those fire-squirting, thick-wormed Van Gogh sunflowers, those blooms a blind man might read with one rush of scorched fingers down fiery canvas. But the great feast? The paintings he saved his palate for?

There, filling the horizon, like Neptune risen, crowned with limewood, alabaster, coral, paintbrushes clenched like tridents in horn-nailed fists, and with fishtail vast enough to fluke summer showers out over all Gibraltar – who else but the creator of Girl Before a Mirror and Guernica?

‘Alice,’ he said, patiently, ‘how can I explain? Coming down on the train I thought, Good Lord, it’s all Picasso country!’

But was it really, he wondered. The sky, the land, the people, the flushed-pink bricks here, scrolled electric-blue ironwork balconies there, a mandolin ripe as a fruit in some man’s thousand fingerprinting hands, billboard tatters blowing like confetti in night winds – how much was Picasso, how much George Smith staring round the world with wild Picasso eyes?

He despaired of answering. That old man had distilled turpentine and linseed oil so thoroughly through George Smith that they shaped his being, all Blue Period at twilight, all Rose Period at dawn.

‘I keep thinking,’ he said aloud, ‘if we saved our money …’

‘We’ll never have five thousand dollars.’

‘I know,’ he said quietly. ‘But it’s nice thinking we might bring it off some day. Wouldn’t it be great to just step up to him, say “Pablo, here’s five thousand! Give us the sea, the sand, that sky, or any old thing you want, we’ll be happy.…” ’

After a moment, his wife touched his arm.

‘I think you’d better go in the water now,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I’d better do just that.’

White fire showered up when he cut the water.

During the afternoon George Smith came out and went into the ocean with the vast spilling motions of now warm, now cool people who at last, with the sun’s decline, their bodies all lobster colours and colours of broiled squab and guinea hen, trudged for their wedding-cake hotels.

The beach lay deserted for endless mile on mile save for two people. One was George Smith, towel over shoulder, out for a last devotional.

Far along the shore another shorter, square-cut man walked alone in the tranquil weather. He was deeper tanned, his close-shaven head dyed almost mahogany by the sun, and his eyes were clear and bright as water in his face.

So the shoreline stage was set, and in a few minutes the two men would meet. And once again Fate fixed the scales for shocks and surprises, arrivals and departures. And all the while these two solitary strollers did not for a moment think on coincidence, that unswum stream which lingers at man’s elbow with every crowd in every town. Nor did they ponder the fact that if man dares dip into that stream he grabs a wonder in each hand. Like most they shrugged at such folly, and stayed well up the bank lest Fate should shove them in.

The stranger stood alone. Glancing about, he saw his alone-ness, saw the waters of the lovely bay, saw the sun sliding down the late colours of the day, and then half-turning spied a small wooden object on the sand. It was no more than the slender stick from a lime ice-cream delicacy long since melted away. Smiling he picked the stick up. With another glance around to re-insure his solitude, the man stooped again and holding the stick gently with light sweeps of his hand began to do the one thing in all the world he knew best how to do.

He began to draw incredible figures along the sand. He sketched one figure and then moved over and still looking down, completely focused on his work now, drew a second and a third figure, and after that a fourth and a fifth and a sixth.

George Smith, printing the shoreline with his feet, gazed here, gazed there, and then saw the man ahead. George Smith, drawing nearer, saw that the man, deeply tanned, was bending down. Nearer yet, and it was obvious what the man was up to. George Smith chuckled. Of course, of course … along on the beach this man – how old? Sixty-five? Seventy? – was scribbling and doodling away. How the sand flew! How the wild portraits flung themselves out there on the shore! How …

George Smith took one more step and stopped, very still.

The stranger was drawing and drawing and did not seem to sense that anyone stood immediately behind him and the world of his drawings in the sand. By now he was so deeply enchanted with his solitudinous creation that depth-bombs set off in the bay might not have stopped his flying hand nor turned him round.

George Smith looked down at the sand. And, after a long while, looking, he began to tremble.

For there on the flat shore were pictures of Grecian lions and Mediterranean goats and maidens with flesh of sand like powdered gold and satyrs piping on hand-carved horns and children dancing, strewing flowers along and along the beach with lambs gambolling after and musicians skipping to their harps and lyres, and unicorns racing youths towards distant meadows, woodlands, ruined temples and volcanoes.

Along the shore in a never-broken line, the hand, the wooden stylus of this man bent down in fever and raining perspiration, scribbled, ribboned, looped around over and up, across, in, out, stitched, whispered, stayed, then hurried on as if this travelling bacchanal must flourish to its end before the sun was put out by the sea. Twenty, thirty yards or more the nymphs and dryads and summer founts sprang up in unravelled hieroglyphs.

And the sand, in the dying light, was the colour of molten copper on which was now slashed a message that any man in any time might read and savour down the years. Everything whirled and poised in its own wind and gravity. Now wine was being crushed from under the grape-blooded feet of dancing vintners’ daughters, now steaming seas gave birth to coin-sheathed monsters while flowered kites strewed scent on blowing clouds … now … now … now….

The artist stopped.

George Smith drew back and stood away.

The artist glanced up, surprised to find someone so near. Then he simply stood there, looking from George Smith to his own creations flung like idle footprints down the way. He smiled at last and shrugged as if to say, Look what I’ve done; see what a child? You will forgive me, won’t you? One day or another we are all fools … you, too, perhaps? So allow an old fool this, eh? Good! Good!

But George Smith could only look at the little man with the sun-dark skin and the clear sharp eyes, and say the man’s name once, in a whisper, to himself.

They stood thus for perhaps another five seconds, George Smith staring at the sand-frieze, and the artist watching George Smith with amused curiosity. George Smith opened his mouth, closed it, put out his hand, took it back. He stepped towards the picture, stepped away. Then he moved along the line of figures, like a man viewing a precious series of marbles cast up from some ancient ruin on the shore. His eyes did not blink, his hand wanted to touch but did not dare to touch. He wanted to run but did not run.

He looked suddenly at the hotel. Run, yes! Run! What? Grab a shovel, dig, excavate, save a chunk of this all too crumbling sand? Find a repair-man, race him back here with plaster-of-paris to cast a mould of some small fragile part of these? No, no. Silly, silly. Or …? His eyes flicked to his hotel window. The camera! Run, get it, get back, and hurry along the shore, clicking, changing film, clicking unti l…

George Smith whirled to face the sun. It burned faintly on his face, his eyes were two small fires from it. The sun was half underwater and, as he watched, it sank the rest of the way in a matter of seconds.

The artist had drawn nearer and now was gazing into George Smith’s face with great friendliness as if he were guessing every thought. Now he was nodding his head in a little bow. Now the ice-cream stick had fallen casually from his fingers. Now he was saying good night, good night. Now he was gone, walking back down the beach towards the south.

George Smith stood looking after him. After a full minute, he did the only thing he could possibly do. He started at the beginning of the fantastic frieze of satyrs and fauns and wine-dipped maidens and prancing unicorns and piping youths and he walked slowly along the shore.

He walked a long way, looking down at the free-running bacchanal. And when he came to the end of the animals and men he turned round and started back in the other direction, just staring down as if he had lost something and did not quite know where to find it. He kept on doing this until there was no more light in the sky, or on the sand, to see by.

He sat down at the supper table.

‘You’re late,’ said his wife. ‘I just had to come down alone. I’m ravenous.’

‘That’s all right,’ he said.

‘Anything interesting happen on your walk?’ she asked.

‘No,’ he said.

‘You look funny; George, you didn’t swim out too far, did you, and almost drown? I can tell by your face. You did swim out too far, didn’t you?’

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Well,’ she said, watching him closely. ‘Don’t ever do that again. Now – what’ll you have?’

He picked up the menu and started to read it and stopped suddenly.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked his wife.

He turned his head and shut his eyes for a moment.

‘Listen.’

She listened.

‘I don’t hear anything,’ she said.

‘Don’t you?’

‘No. What is it?’

‘Just the tide,’ he said, after a while, sitting there, his eyes still shut. ‘Just the tide, coming in.’

The Dragon

THE night blew in the short grass on the moor; there was no other motion. It had been years since a single bird had flown by in the great blind shell of sky. Long ago a few small stones had simulated life when they crumbled and fell into dust. Now only the night moved in the souls of the two men bent by their lonely fire in the wilderness; darkness pumped quietly in their veins and ticked silently in their temples and their wrists.

Firelight fled up and down their wild faces and welled in their eyes in orange tatters. They listened to each other’s faint, cool breathing and the lizard blink of their eyelids. At last, one man poked the fire with his sword.

‘Don’t, idiot; you’ll give us away!’

‘No matter,’ said the second man. ‘The dragon can smell us miles off, anyway. God’s breath, it’s cold. I wish I was back at the castle.’

‘It’s death, not sleep, we’re after ’

‘Why? Why? The dragon never sets foot in the town!’

‘Quiet, fool! He eats men travelling alone from our town to the next!’

‘Let them be eaten and let us get home!’

‘Wait now; listen!’

The two men froze.

They waited a long time, but there was only the shake of their horses’ nervous skin like black velvet tambourines jingling the silver stirrup buckles, softly, softly.

‘Ah.’ The second man sighed. ‘What a land of nightmares. Everything happens here. Someone blows out the sun; it’s night. And then, and then, oh, God, listen! This dragon, they say his eyes are fire. His breath a white gas; you can see him burn across the dark lands. He runs with sulphur and thunder and kindles the grass. Sheep panic and die insane. Women deliver forth monsters. The dragon’s fury is such that tower walls shake back to dust. His victims, at sunrise, are strewn hither and thither on the hills. How many knights, I ask, have gone for this monster and failed, even as we shall fail?’

‘Enough of that!’

‘More than enough! Out here in this desolation I cannot tell what year this is!’

‘Nine hundred years since the Nativity.’

‘No, no,’ whispered the second man, eyes shut. ‘On this moor is no Time, is only Forever. I feel if I ran back on the road the town would be gone, the people yet unborn, things changed, the castles unquarried from the rocks, the timbers still uncut from the forests; don’t ask how I know, the moor knows, and tells me. And here we sit alone in the land of the fire dragon, God save us!’

‘Be you afraid, then gird on your armour!’

‘What use? The dragon runs from nowhere; we cannot guess its home. It vanishes in fog, we know not where it goes. Aye, on with our armour, we’ll die well-dressed.’

Half into his silver corselet, the second man stopped again and turned his head.

Across the dim country, full of night and nothingness from the heart of the moor itself, the wind sprang full of dust from clocks that used dust for telling time. There were black suns burning in the heart of this new wind and a million burnt leaves shaken from some autumn tree beyond the horizon.

This wind melted landscapes, lengthened bones like white wax, made the blood roil and thicken to a muddy deposit in the brain. The wind was a thousand souls dying and all time confused and in transit.

It was a fog inside of a mist inside of a darkness, and this place was no man’s place and there was no year or hour at all, but only these men in a faceless emptiness of sudden frost, storm, and white thunder which moved behind the great falling pane of green glass that was the lightning. A squall of rain drenched the turf, all faded away until there was unbreathing hush and the two men waiting alone with their warmth in a cool season.

‘There,’ whispered the first man. ‘Oh, there .. .’

Miles off, rushing with a great chant and a roar – the dragon.

In silence, the men buckled on their armour and mounted their horses. The midnight wilderness was split by a monstrous gushing as the dragon roared nearer, nearer; its flashing yellow glare spurted above a hill and then, fold on fold of dark body, distantly seen, therefore indistinct, flowed over that hill and plunged vanishing into a valley.

‘Quick!’

They spurred their horses forward to a small hollow.

‘This is where it passes!’

They seized their lances with mailed fists, and blinded their horses by flipping the visors down over their eyes.

‘Lord!’

‘Yes, let us use His name.’

On the instant, the dragon rounded a hill. Its monstrous amber eye fed on them, fired their armour in red glints and glitters. With a terrible wailing cry and a grinding rush it flung itself forward.

‘Mercy, God!’

The lance struck under the unlidded yellow eye, buckled, tossed the man through the air. The dragon hit, spilled him over, down, ground him under. Passing, the black brunt of its shoulder smashed the remaining horse and rider a hundred feet against the side of a boulder, wailing, wailing, the dragon shrieking, the fire all about, around, under it, a pink, yellow, orange sun-fire with great soft plumes of blinding smoke.

‘Did you see it?’ cried a voice. ‘Just like I told you!’

‘The same! The same! A knight in armour, by the Lord Harry! We hit him!’

‘You goin’ to stop?’

‘Did once; found nothing. Don’t like to stop on this moor. I get the willies. Got a feel, it has.’

‘But we hit something !’

‘Gave him plenty of whistle; chap wouldn’t budge.’

A steaming blast cut the mist aside.

‘We’ll make Stokely on time. More coal, eh, Fred?’

Another whistle shook dew from the empty sky. The night train, in fire and fury, shot through a gully, up a rise, and vanished over cold earth, towards the north, leaving black smoke and steam to dissolve in the numbed air minutes after it had passed and gone for ever.

The End of the Beginning

HE stopped the lawnmower in the middle of the yard because he felt that the sun at just that moment had gone down and the stars come out. The fresh-cut grass that had showered his face and body died softly away. Yes, the stars were there, faint at first, but brightening in the clear desert sky. He heard the porch screen-door tap shut and felt his wife watching him as he watched the night.

‘Almost time,’ she said.

He nodded; he did not have to check his watch. In the passing moments he felt very old, then very young, very cold, then very warm, now this, now that. Suddenly, he was miles away. He was his own son talking steadily, moving briskly to cover his pounding heart and the resurgent panics as he felt himself slip into fresh uniform, check food supplies, oxygen-flasks, pressure helmet, space-suiting and turn, as every man on earth tonight turned, to gaze at the swiftly filling sky.

Then, quickly, he was back, once more, the father of the son, hands gripped to the lawnmower handle. His wife called, ‘Come sit on the porch.’

‘I’ve got to keep busy!’

She came down the steps and across the lawn. ‘Don’t worry about Robert; he’ll be all right.’

‘But it’s all so new,’ he heard himself say. ‘It’s never been done before. Think of it – a manned rocket going up tonight to build the first space-station. Good Lord, it can’t be done, it doesn’t exist, there’s no rocket, no proving-ground, no take-off time, no technicians. For that matter, I don’t even have a son named Bob. The whole thing’s too much for me!’

‘Then what are you doing out here, staring?’

He shook his head. ‘Well, late this morning, walking to the office, I heard someone laugh out loud. It shocked me so I froze in the middle of the street. It was me, laughing! Why? Because finally I really knew what Bob was going to do tonight; at last I believed it. Holy is a word I never use, but that’s how I felt stranded in all that traffic. Then, middle of the afternoon I caught myself humming. You know the song. A wheel in a wheel.

Way in the middle of the air. I laughed again. The space-station, of course, I thought. The big wheel with hollow spokes where Bob’ll live six or eight months, then get along to the moon. Walking home, I remembered more of the song. Little wheel run by faith, Big wheel run by the grace of God. I wanted to jump, yell, and flame-out myself!’

His wife touched his arm. ‘If we stay out here, let’s at least be comfortable.’

They placed two wicker rockers in the centre of the lawn and sat quietly as the stars dissolved out of darkness in pale crushings of rock-salt strewn from horizon to horizon.

‘Why,’ said his wife, at last, ‘it’s like waiting for the fireworks at Sisley Field every year.’

‘Bigger crowd tonight….’

‘I keep thinking – a billion people watching the sky right now, their mouths all open at the same time.’

They waited, feeling the earth move under their chairs.

‘What time is it now?’

‘Eleven minutes to eight.’

‘You’re always right; there must be a clock in your head.’

‘I can’t be wrong, tonight. I’ll be able to tell you one second before they blast off. Look! The ten-minute warning!’

On the western sky they saw four crimson flares open out, float shimmering down the wind, above the desert, then sink silently to the extinguishing earth.

In the new darkness, the husband and wife did not rock in their chairs.

After a while, he said, ‘Eight minutes.’ A pause. ‘Seven minutes.’ What seemed a much longer pause. ‘Six …’

His wife, her head back, studied the stars immediately above her and murmured, ‘Why?’ She closed her eyes. ‘Why the rockets, why tonight? Why all this? I’d like to know.’

He examined her face, pale in the vast powdering light of the Milky Way. He felt the stirring of an answer, but let his wife continue.

‘I mean it’s not that old thing again, is it, when people asked why men climbed Mount Everest and they said, “Because it’s there”? I never understood. That was no answer to me.’

Five minutes, he thought. Time ticking … his wrist-watch … a wheel in a wheel … little wheel run by … big wheel run by … way in the middle of … four minutes! … the men snug in the rocket by now, the hive, the control board lit like Christmas morning….

His lips moved.

‘All I know is it’s really the end of the beginning. The Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age; from now on we’ll lump all those together under one big name for when we walked on Earth and heard the birds at morning and cried with envy. Maybe we’ll call it the Earth Age, or maybe the Age of Gravity. Millions of years we fought gravity.

When we were amoebas and fish we struggled to get out of the sea without gravity crushing us. Once safe on the shore we fought to stand upright without gravity breaking our new invention, the spine; tried to walk without stumbling, run without falling. A billion years, Gravity kept us home, mocked us with wind and clouds, cabbage-moths and locusts.

That’s what’s so god-awful big about tonight … it’s the end of old man Gravity and the Age we’ll remember him by, for once and all. I don’t know where they’ll divide the Ages, at the Persians who dreamt of flying-carpets, or the Chinese who all unknowing celebrated birthdays and New Years with strung ladyfingers and high skyrockets, or some minute, some incredible second in the next hour. But we’re in at the end of a billion years’ trying, the end of something long and to us humans, anyway, honourable.’

Three minutes … two minutes, fifty-nine seconds … two minutes fifty-eight seconds.…

‘Yes …’ He could hardly hear his wife’s voice. ‘Yes … I believe that’s true.’

Two minutes, he thought. Ready? Ready? Ready? The far radio voice calling. Ready! Ready! Ready! The quick faint replies from the humming rocket. Check! Check! Check!

Tonight, he thought, even if we fail with this first, we’ll send a second and a third ship and move on out to all the planets and, later, all the stars. We’ll just keep going until the big words like immortal and for ever take on meaning. Big words, yes, that’s what we want. Continuity. Since our tongues first moved in our mouths, we’ve asked, What does it all mean? No other question made sense, with death breathing down our necks.

But just let us settle in on ten thousand worlds spinning around ten thousand alien suns and the question will fade away. Man will be endless and infinite, even as space is endless and infinite. Man will go on, as space goes on, for ever. Individuals will die, as always, but our history will reach as far as we’ll ever need to see into the future, and with the knowledge of our survival for all time to come, we’ll know security and thus the answer we’ve always searched for. Gifted with life, the least we can do is preserve and pass on the gift to infinity. That’s a goal worth shooting for.

The wicker chairs whispered ever so softly on the grass.

One minute.

‘One minute,’ he said, aloud.

‘Oh!’ His wife moved suddenly, to seize his hands. ‘I hope that Bob…

‘He’ll be all right!’

‘Oh, God, take care.…’

Thirty seconds.

‘Watch, now.’

Fifteen, ten, five …

‘Watch!’

Four, three, two, one.

‘There! There! Oh, there, there!’

They both cried out. They both stood. The chairs toppled back, fell flat on the lawn. The man and his wife swayed, their hands struggled to find each other, grip hold. They saw the brightening colour in the sky and, ten seconds later, the great uprising comet burn the air, put out the stars, and rush away in firelight to become another star in the returning profusion of the Milky Way. The man and wife held each other as if they had stumbled on the rim of an incredible cliff that faced an abyss so deep and dark there seemed no end to it. Staring up, they heard themselves sobbing and crying. Only after a long time were they able to speak.

‘It got away, it did, didn’t it?’

‘Yes …’

‘It’s all right, isn’t it?’

‘Yes … yes …’

‘It didn’t fall back…?’

‘No, no, it’s all right, Bob’s all right, it’s all right.’

They stood away from each other at last.

He touched his face with his hand and looked at his wet fingers. ‘I’ll be damned,’ he said, ‘I’ll be damned.’

They waited another five and then ten minutes until the darkness in their heads, the retina, ached with a million specks of fiery salt. Then they had to close their eyes.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘now let’s go in.’

He could not move. Only his hand reached a long way out by itself to find the lawnmower handle. He saw what his hand had done and said, ‘There’s just a little more to do.…’

‘But you can’t see.’

‘Well enough,’ he said.’ I must finish this. Then we’ll sit on the porch awhile before we turn in.’

He helped her put the chairs on the porch and sat her down and then walked back out to put his hands on the guidebar of the lawnmower. The lawnmower. A wheel in a wheel. A simple machine which you held in your hands, which you sent on ahead with a rush and a clatter, while you walked behind with your quiet philosophy. Racket, followed by warm silence. Whirling wheel, then soft footfall of thought.

I’m a billion years old, he told himself; I’m one minute old. I’m one inch, not ten thousand miles, tall. I look down and can’t see my feet they’re so far off and gone away below.

He moved the lawnmower. The grass, showering up, fell softly around him; he relished and savoured it and felt that he was all mankind bathing at last in the fresh waters of the fountain of youth.

Thus bathed, he remembered the song again, about the wheels and the faith and the grace of God being way up there in the middle of the sky where that single star, among a million motionless stars, dared to move and keep on moving.

Then he finished cutting the grass.

The Wonderful Ice-Cream Suit

IT was summer twilight in the city and out front of the quiet-clicking pool-hall three young Mexican-American men breathed the warm air and looked around at the world. Sometimes they talked and sometimes they said nothing at all, but watched the cars glide by like black panthers on the hot asphalt or saw trolleys loom up like thunderstorms, scatter lightning, and rumble away into silence.

‘Hey,’ sighed Martinez, at last. He was the youngest, the most sweetly sad of the three. ‘It’s a swell night, huh? Swell.’

As he observed the world it moved very close and then drifted away and then came close again. People, brushing by, were suddenly across the street. Buildings five miles away suddenly leaned over him. But most of the time everything, people, cars, and buildings, stayed way out on the edge of the world and could not be touched. On this quiet warm summer evening, Martinez’s face was cold.

‘Nights like this you wish … lots of things.’

‘Wishing,’ said the second man, Villanazul, a man who shouted books out loud in his room, but spoke only in whispers on the street. ‘Wishing is the useless pastime of the unemployed.’

‘Unemployed?’ cried Vamenos, the unshaven. ‘Listen to him! We got no jobs, no money!’

‘So,’ said Martinez, ‘we got no friends.’

‘True.’ Villanazul gazed off towards the green plaza where the palm-trees swayed in the soft night wind. ‘Do you know what I wish? I wish to go into that plaza and speak among the businessmen who gather there nights to talk big talk. But dressed as I am, poor as I am, who would listen? So, Martinez, we have each other. The friendship of the poor is real friendship. We –’

But now a handsome young Mexican with a fine thin moustache strolled by. And on each of his careless arms hung a laughing woman.

‘Madre mía!’ Martinez slapped his own brow. ‘How does that one rate two friends?’

‘It’s his nice new white summer suit.’ Vamenos chewed a black thumbnail. ‘He looks sharp.’

Martinez leaned out to watch the three people moving away, and then the tenement across the street, in one fourth-floor window of which, far above, a beautiful girl leaned out, her dark hair faintly stirred by the wind.

She had been there for ever, which was to say, for six weeks. He had nodded, he had raised a hand, he had smiled, he had blinked rapidly, he had even bowed to her, on the street, in the hall when visiting friends, in the park, downtown. Even now, he put his hand up from his waist and moved his fingers. But all the lovely girl did was let the summer wind stir her dark hair. He did not exist. He was nothing.

‘Madre mía!’ He looked away and down the street where the man walked his two friends around a corner. ‘Oh, if I had just one suit, one! I wouldn’t need money if I looked okay.’

‘I hesitate to suggest,’ said Villanazul, ‘that you see Gomez. But he’s been talking some crazy talk for a month now, about clothes. I keep on saying I’ll be in on it to make him go away. That Gomez.’

‘Friend,’ said a quiet voice.

‘Gomez!’ Everyone turned to stare.

Smiling strangely, Gomez pulled forth an endless thin yellow ribbon which fluttered and swirled on the summer air.

‘Gomez,’ said Martinez, ‘what you doing with that tape-measure?’

Gomez beamed. ‘Measuring people’s skeletons.’

‘Skeletons!’

‘Hold on.’ Gomez squinted at Martinez. ‘gCaramba! Where you been all my life! Let’s try you !’

Martinez saw his arm seized and taped, his leg measured, his chest encircled.

‘Hold still!’ cried Gomez. ‘Arm – perfect. Leg – chest – perfectamente! Now, quick, the height! There! Yes! Five foot five! You’re in! Shake!’ Pumping Martinez’s hand he stopped suddenly. ‘Wait. You got … ten bucks?’

‘I have!’ Vamenos waved some grimy bills. ‘Gomez, measure me!’

‘All I got left in the world is nine dollars and ninety-two cents.’ Martinez searched his pockets. ‘That’s enough for a new suit? Why?’

‘Why? Because you got the right skeleton, that’s why!’

‘Señor Gomez, I don’t hardly know you –’

‘Know me? You’re going to live with me! Come on!’

Gomez vanished into the pool-room. Martinez, escorted by the polite Villanazul, pushed by an eager Vamenos, found himself inside.

‘Dominguez!’ said Gomez.

Dominguez, at a wall-telephone, winked at them. A woman’s voice squeaked on the receiver.

‘Manulo!’ said Gomez.

Manulo, a wine bottle tilted bubbling to his mouth, turned.

Gomez pointed at Martinez.

‘At last we found our fifth volunteer!’

Dominguez said, ‘I got a date, don’t bother me –’ and stopped. The receiver slipped from his fingers. His little black telephone book full of fine names and numbers went quickly back into his pocket. ‘Gomez, you – ?’

‘Yes, yes! Your money, now! Ándale!’

The woman’s voice sizzled on the dangling phone.

Dominguez glanced at it, uneasily.

Manulo considered the empty wine bottle in his hand and the liquor-store sign across the street.

Then, very reluctantly, both men laid ten dollars each on the green velvet pool-table.

Villanazul, amazed, did likewise, as did Gomez, nudging Martinez. Martinez counted out his wrinkled bills and change. Gomez flourished the money like a royal flush.

‘Fifty bucks! The suit costs sixty! All we need is ten bucks!’

‘Wait,’ said Martinez. ‘Gomez, are we talking about one suit? Uno?’

‘Uno!’ Gomez raised a finger. ‘One wonderful white ice-cream summer suit! White, white as the August moon!’

‘But who will own this one suit?’

‘Me!’ said Manulo.

‘Me!’ said Dominguez.

‘Me!’ said Villanazul.

‘Me!’ cried Gomez. ‘And you, Martinez. Men, let’s show him. Line up!’

Villanazul, Manulo, Dominguez, and Gomez rushed to plant their backs against the pool-room wall.

‘Martinez, you too, the other end, line up! Now, Vamenos, lay that billiard cue across our heads!’

‘Sure, Gomez, sure!’

Martinez, in line, felt the cue tap his head and leaned out to see what was happening. ‘Ah!’ he gasped.

The cue lay flat on all their heads, with no rise or fall, as Vamenos slid it, grinning, along.

‘We’re all the same height!’ said Martinez.

‘The same!’ Everyone laughed.

Gomez ran down the line rustling the yellow tape-measure here and there on the men so they laughed even more wildly.

‘Sure!’ he said. ‘It took a month, four weeks, mind you, to find four guys the same size and shape as me, a month of running around measuring. Sometimes I found guys with five-foot-five skeletons, sure, but all the meat on their bones was too much or not enough. Sometimes their bones were too long in the legs or too short in the arms. Boy, all the bones! I tell you! But now, five of us, same shoulders, chests, waists, arms, and as for weight? Men!’

Manulo, Dominguez, Villanazul, Gomez, and at last, Martinez stepped on to the scales which flipped ink-stamped cards at them as Vamenos, still smiling, wildly fed pennies. Heart pounding, Martinez read the cards.

‘One hundred thirty-five pounds … one thirty-six … one thirty-three … one thirty-four … one thirty-seven … a miracle!’

‘No,’ said Villanazul, simply, ‘Gomez.’

They all smiled upon that genius who now circled them with his arms.

‘Are we not fine?’ he wondered. ‘All the same size, all the same dream – the suit. So each of us will look beautiful at least one night each week, eh?’

‘I haven’t looked beautiful in years,’ said Martinez. ‘The girls run away.’

‘They will run no more, they will freeze,’ said Gomez, ‘when they see you in the cool white summer ice-cream suit.’

‘Gomez,’ said Villanazul, ‘just let me ask one thing.’

‘Of course, compadre.’

‘When we get this nice new white ice-cream summer suit, some night you’re not going to put it on and walk down to the Greyhound bus in it and go live in El Paso for a year in it, are you?’

‘Villanazul, Villanazul, how can you say that?’

‘My eye sees and my tongue moves,’ said Villanazul. ‘How about the Everybody Wins! Punchboard Lotteries you ran and you kept running when nobody won? How about the United Chili Con Carne and Frijole Company you were going to organize and all that ever happened was the rent ran out on a two-by-four office?’

‘The errors of a child now grown,’ said Gomez. ‘Enough! In this hot weather, someone may buy the special suit that is made just for us that stands waiting in the window of SHUMWAY’S SUNSHINE SUITS! We have fifty dollars. Now we need just one more skeleton!’

Martinez saw the men peer around the pool-hall. He looked where they looked. He felt his eyes hurry past Vamenos, then come reluctantly back to examine his dirty shirt, his huge nicotined fingers.

‘Me!’ Vamenos burst out, at last. ‘My skeleton, measure it, it’s great! Sure, my hands are big, and my arms, from digging ditches! But –’

Just then Martinez heard passing on the sidewalk outside, that same terrible man with his two girls, all laughing and yelling together.

He saw anguish move like the shadow of a summer cloud on the faces of the other men in this pool-room.

Slowly Vamenos stepped on to the scales and dropped his penny. Eyes closed, he breathed a prayer.

‘Madre mía, please …’

The machinery whirred, the card fell out. Vamenos opened his eyes.

‘Look! One thirty-five pounds! Another miracle!’

The men stared at his right hand and the card, at his left hand and a soiled ten-dollar bill.

Gomez swayed. Sweating, he licked his lips. Then, his hand shot out, seized the money.

‘The clothing store! The suit! Andale!’

Yelling, everyone ran from the pool-room.

The woman’s voice was still squeaking on the abandoned telephone. Martinez, left behind, reached out and hung the voice up. In the silence, he shook his head. ‘Santos, what a dream! Six men,’ he said, ‘one suit. What will come of this? Madness? Debauchery? Murder? But I go with God. Gomez, wait for me!’

Martinez was young. He ran fast.

Mr Shumway, of SHUMWAY’S SUNSHINE SUITS, paused while adjusting a tie-rack, aware of some subtle atmospheric change outside his establishment.

‘Leo,’ he whispered to his assistant. ‘Look …’

Outside, one man, Gomez, strolled by, looking in. Two men. Manulo and Dominguez, hurried by, staring in. Three men, Villanazul, Martinez, and Vamenos, jostling shoulders, did the same.

‘Leo,’ Mr Shumway swallowed. ‘Call the police!’

Suddenly, six men filled the doorway.

Martinez, crushed among them, his stomach slightly upset, his face feeling feverish, smiled so wildly at Leo that Leo let go the telephone.

‘Hey,’ breathed Martinez, eyes wide. ‘There’s a great suit, over there!’

‘No.’ Manulo touched a lapel. ‘This one!’

‘There is only one suit in all the world!’ said Gomez, coldly. ‘Mr Shumway, the ice-cream white, size thirty-four, was in your window just an hour ago! It’s gone! You didn’t –’

‘Sell it?’ Mr Shumway exhaled. ‘No, no. In the dressing-room. It’s still on the dummy.’

Martinez did not know if he moved and moved the crowd or if the crowd moved and moved him. Suddenly they were all in motion. Mr Shumway, running, tried to keep ahead of them.

‘This way, gents. Now which of you …?’

‘All for one, one for all!’ Martinez heard himself say, and laughed wildly. ‘We’ll all try it on!’

‘All?’ Mr Shumway clutched at the booth curtain as if his shop were a steamship that had suddenly tilted in a great swell. He stared.

That’s it, thought Martinez, look at our smiles. Now, look at the skeletons behind our smiles! Measure here, there, up, down, yes, do you see?

Mr Shumway saw. He nodded. He shrugged.

‘All!’ He jerked the curtain. ‘There! Buy it, and I’ll throw in the dummy, free!’

Martinez peered quietly into the booth, his motion drawing the others to peer, too.

The suit was there.

And it was white.

Martinez could not breathe. He did not want to. He did not need to. He was afraid his breath would melt the suit. It was enough, just looking.

But at last he took a great trembling breath and exhaled, whispering, ‘Ay. Ay, caramba!’

‘It puts out my eyes,’ murmured Gomez.

‘Mr Shumway.’ Martinez heard Leo hissing. ‘Ain’t it dangerous precedent, to sell it? I mean, what if everybody bought one suit for six people?’

‘Leo,’ said Mr Shumway, ‘you ever hear one single fifty-nine-dollar suit make so many people happy at the same time before?’

‘Angels’ wings,’ murmured Martinez. ‘The wings of white angels.’

Martinez felt Mr Shumway peering over his shoulder into the booth. The pale glow filled his eyes.

‘You know something, Leo?’ he said, in awe. ‘That’s a suit !’

Gomez, shouting, whistling, ran up to the third-floor landing and turned to wave to the others who staggered, laughed, stopped, and had to sit down on the steps below.

‘Tonight!’ cried Gomez. ‘Tonight you move in with me, eh? Save rent as well as clothes, eh? Sure! Martinez, you got the suit?’

‘Have I?’ Martinez lifted the white gift-wrapped box high. ‘From us to us! Ay-hah!’

‘Vamenos, you got the dummy?’

‘Here!’

Vamenos, chewing an old cigar, scattering sparks, slipped. The dummy, falling, toppled, turned over twice, and banged down the stairs.

‘Vamenos! Dumb! Clumsy!’

They seized the dummy from him. Stricken, Vamenos looked about as if he’d lost something.

Manulo snapped his fingers. ‘Hey, Vamenos, we got to celebrate ! Go borrow some wine!’

Vamenos plunged downstairs in a whirl of sparks.

The others moved into the room with the suit, leaving Martinez in the hall to study Gomez’s face.

‘Gomez, you look sick.’

‘I am,’ said Gomez. ‘For what have I done?’ He nodded to the shadows in the room working about the dummy. ‘I pick Dominguez, a devil with the women. All right. I pick Manulo, who drinks, yes, but who sings as sweet as a girl, eh? Okay.

Villanazul reads books. You, you wash behind your ears. But then what do I do? Can I wait? No! I got to buy that suit! So the last guy I pick is a clumsy slob who has the right to wear my suit –’ He stopped, confused. ‘Who gets to wear our suit one night a week, fall down in it, or not come in out of the rain in it! Why, why, why did I do it !’

‘Gomez,’ whispered Villanazul from the room. ‘The suit is ready. Come see if it looks as good using your light bulb.’

Gomez and Martinez entered.

And there on the dummy in the centre of the room was the phosphorescent, the miraculously white-fired ghost with the incredible lapels, the precise stitching, the neat button-holes. Standing with the white illumination of the suit upon his cheeks, Martinez suddenly felt he was in church.

White! White! It was white as the whitest vanilla ice-cream, as the bottled milk in tenement halls at dawn. White as a winter cloud all alone in the moonlit sky late at night. Seeing it here in the warm summer night room made their breath almost show on the air. Shutting his eyes, he could see it printed on his lids. He knew what colour his dreams would be this night.

‘White …’ murmured Villanazul. ‘White as the snow on that mountain near our town in Mexico which is called the Sleeping Woman.’

‘Say that again,’ said Gomez.

Villanazul, proud yet humble, was glad to repeat his tribute.

‘… white as the snow on the mountain called –’

‘I’m back!’

Shocked, the men whirled to see Vamenos in the door, wine bottles in each hand.

‘A party! Here! Now tell us, who wears the suit first tonight? Me?’

‘It’s too late!’ said Gomez.

‘Late! It’s only nine-fifteen!’

‘Late?’ said everyone, bristling. ‘Late?’

Gomez edged away from these men who glared from him to the suit to the open window.

Outside and below it was, after all, thought Martinez, a fine Saturday night in a summer month and through the calm warm darkness the women drifted like flowers on a quiet stream. The men made a mournful sound.

‘Gomez, a suggestion.’ Villanazul licked his pencil and drew a chart on a pad. ‘You wear the suit from nine-thirty to ten, Manulo till ten-thirty, Dominguez till eleven, myself till eleven-thirty, Martinez till midnight, and –’

‘Why me last?’ demanded Vamenos, scowling.

Martinez thought quickly and smiled. ‘After midnight is the best time, friend.’

‘Hey,’ said Vamenos, ‘that’s right. I never thought of that. Okay.’

Gomez sighed. ‘All right. A half-hour each. But from now on, remember, we each wear the suit just one night a week. Sundays we draw straws for who wears the suit the extra night.’

‘Me!’ laughed Vamenos. ‘I’m lucky!’

Gomez held on to Martinez tight.

‘Gomez,’ urged Martinez, ‘you first. Dress.’

Gomez could not tear his eyes from that disreputable Vamenos. At last, impulsively, he yanked his shirt off over his head. ‘Ay-yeah!’ he howled. ‘Ay-yeee!’

Whisper rustle … the clean shirt.

‘Ah…!’

How clean the new clothes feel, thought Martinez, holding the coat ready. How clean they sound, how clean they smell!

Whisper … the pants … the tie, rustle … the braces. Whisper … now Martinez let loose the coat which fell in place on flexing shoulders.

‘Olé!’

Gomez turned like a matador in his wondrous suit-of-lights.

‘Olé, Gomez, olé!’

Gomez bowed and went out the door.

Martinez fixed his eyes to his watch. At ten sharp he heard someone wandering about in the hall as if they had forgotten where to go. Martinez pulled the door open and looked out.

Gomez was there, heading for nowhere.

He looks sick, thought Martinez. No, stunned, shook up, surprised, many things.

‘Gomez! This is the place!’

Gomez turned around and found his way through the door.

‘Oh, friends, friends,’ he said. ‘Friends, what an experience! This suit! This suit!’

‘Tell us, Gomez!’ said Martinez.

‘I can’t, how can I say it!’ He gazed at the heavens, arms spread, palms up.

‘Tell us, Gomez!’

‘I have no words, no words. You must see, yourself! Yes, you must see –’ And here he lapsed into silence, shaking his head until at last he remembered they all stood watching him. ‘Who’s next? Manulo?’

Manulo, stripped to his shorts, leapt forward.

‘Ready!’

All laughed, shouted, whistled.

Manulo ready, went out the door. He was gone twenty-nine minutes and thirty seconds. He came back holding to doorknobs, touching the wall, feeling his own elbows, putting the flat of his hand to his face.

‘Oh, let me tell you,’ he said. ‘Compadres, I went to the bar, eh, to have a drink? But no, I did not go in the bar, do you hear? I did not drink. For as I walked I began to laugh and sing. Why, why?

I listened to myself and asked this. Because. The suit made me feel better than wine ever did. The suit made me drunk, drunk! So I went to the Guadalajara Refritería instead and played the guitar and sang four songs, very high! The suit, ah, the suit!’

Dominguez, next to be dressed, moved out through the world, came back from the world.

The black telephone book! thought Martinez. He had it in his hands when he left! Now, he returns, hands empty! What? What?

‘On the street,’ said Dominguez, seeing it all again, eyes wide, ‘on the street I walked, a woman cried, “Dominguez, is that you?” Another said, “Dominguez? No, Quetzalcoatl, the Great White God come from the East,” do you hear?

And suddenly I didn’t want to go with six women or eight, no. One, I thought. One! And to this one, who knows what I would say? “Be mine!” or “Marry me!” Caramba! This suit is dangerous! But I did not care! I live, I live! Gomez, did it happen this way with you?’

Gomez, still dazed by the events of the evening, shook his head. ‘No, no talk. It’s too much. Later. Villanazul…?’

Villanazul moved shyly forward.

Villanazul went shyly out.

Villanazul came shyly home.

‘Picture it, ’ he said, not looking at them, looking at the floor, talking to the floor. ‘The Green Plaza, a group of elderly business men gathered under the stars and they are talking, nodding, talking. Now one of them whispers.

All turn to stare. They move aside, they make a channel through which a white hot light burns its way as through ice. At the centre of the great light is this person. I take a deep breath. My stomach is jelly. My voice is very small, but it grows louder. And what do I say? I say, “Friends. Do you know Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus? In that book we find his Philosophy of Suits.…” ’

And at last it was time for Martinez to let the suit float him out to haunt the darkness.

Four times he walked around the block. Four times he paused beneath the tenement porches, looking up at the window where the light was lit. A shadow moved, the beautiful girl was there, not there, away and gone, and on the fifth time, there she was, on the porch above, driven out by the summer heat, taking the cooler air. She glanced down. She made a gesture.

At first he thought she was waving to him. He felt like a white explosion that had riveted her attention. But she was not waving. Her hand gestured and the next moment a pair of dark-framed glasses sat upon her nose. She gazed at him.

Ah, ah, he thought, so that’s it. So! Even the blind may see this suit! He smiled up at her. He did not have to wave. And at last, she smiled back. She did not have to wave either. Then, because he did not know what else to do, and he could not get rid of this smile that had fastened itself to his cheeks, he hurried, almost ran, around the corner, feeling her stare after him.

When he looked back, she had taken off her glasses and gazed now with the look of the nearsighted at what, at most, must be a moving blob of light in the great darkness here. Then, for good measure he went around the block again, through a city so suddenly beautiful he wanted to yell, then laugh, then yell again.

Returning, he drifted, oblivious, eyes half-closed, and seeing him in the door the others saw not Martinez but themselves come home. In that moment, they sensed that something had happened to them all.

‘You’re late!’ cried Vamenos, but stopped. The spell could not be broken.

‘Somebody tell me,’ said Martinez. ‘Who am I?’

He moved in a slow circle through the room.

Yes, he thought, yes, it’s the suit, yes, it had to do with the suit and them all together in that store on this fine Saturday night and then here, laughing and feeling more drunk without drinking, as Manulo said himself, as the night ran and each slipped on the pants and held, toppling, to the others and, balanced, let the feeling get bigger and warmer and finer as each man departed and the next took his place in the suit until now here stood Martinez all splendid and white as one who gives orders and the world grows quiet and moves aside.

‘Martinez, we borrowed three mirrors while you were gone. Look!’

The mirrors, set up as in the store, angled to reflect three Martinezes and the echoes and memories of those who had occupied this suit with him and known the bright world inside this thread and cloth. Now, in the shimmering mirror, Martinez saw the enormity of this thing they were living together and his eyes grew wet. The others blinked. Martinez touched the mirrors. They shifted. He saw a thousand, a million white-armoured Martinezes march off into eternity, reflected, reflected, for ever, indomitable, and unending.

He held the white coat out on the air. In a trance, the others did not at first recognize the dirty hand that reached to take the coat. Then:

‘Vamenos!’

‘Pig!’

‘You didn’t wash!’ cried Gomez. ‘Or even shave, while you waited! Compadres, the bath!’

‘The bath!’ said everyone.

‘No!’ Vamenos flailed. ‘The night air! I’m dead!’

They hustled him yelling out and down the hall.

Now here stood Vamenos, unbelievable in white suit, beard shaved, hair combed, nails scrubbed.

His friends scowled darkly at him.

For it was not true, thought Martinez, that when Vamenos passed by, avalanches itched on mountain-tops. If he walked under windows, people spat, dumped garbage, or worse. Tonight now, this night, he would stroll beneath ten thousand wide-opened windows, near balconies, past alleys. Suddenly the world absolutely sizzled with flies. And here was Vamenos, a fresh-frosted cake.

‘You sure look keen in that suit, Vamenos,’ said Manulo sadly.

‘Thanks.’ Vamenos twitched, trying to make his skeleton comfortable where all their skeletons had so recently been. In a small voice, Vamenos said, ‘Can I go now?’

‘Villanazul!’ said Gomez. ‘Copy down these rules.’

Villanazul licked his pencil.

‘First,’ said Gomez, ‘don’t fall down in that suit, Vamenos!’

‘I won’t.’

‘Don’t lean against buildings in that suit.’

‘No buildings.’

‘Don’t walk under trees with birds in them, in that suit. Don’t smoke. Don’t drink –’

‘Please,’ said Vamenos, ‘can I sit down in this suit?’

‘When in doubt, take the pants off, fold them over a chair.’

‘Wish me luck,’ said Vamenos.

‘Go with God, Vamenos.’

He went out. He shut the door.

There was a ripping sound.

"Vamenos!’ cried Martinez.

He whipped the door open.

Vamenos stood with two halves of a handkerchief torn in his hands, laughing.

‘Rrrip! Look at your faces! Rrrip!’ He tore the cloth again. ‘Oh, oh, your faces, your faces! Ha!’

Roaring, Vamenos slammed the door, leaving them stunned and alone.

Gomez put both hands on top of his head and turned away. ‘Stone me. Kill me. I have sold our souls to a demon!’

Villanazul dug in his pockets, took out a silver coin and studied it for a long while.

‘Here is my last fifty cents. Who else will help me buy back Vamenos’s share of the suit?’

‘It’s no use.’ Manulo showed them ten cents. ‘We got only enough to buy the lapels and the buttonholes.’

Gomez, at the open window, suddenly leaned out and yelled, ‘Vamenos! No!’

Below on the street, Vamenos, shocked, blew out a match, and threw away an old cigar butt he had found somewhere. He made a strange gesture to all the men in the window above, then waved airily and sauntered on.

Somehow, the five men could not move away from the window. They were crushed together there.

‘I bet he eats a hamburger in that suit,’ mused Villanazul. ‘I’m thinking of the mustard.’

‘Don’t!’ cried Gomez. ‘No, no!’

Manulo was suddenly at the door.

‘I need a drink, bad.’

‘Manulo, there’s wine here, that bottle, on the floor –’

Manulo went out and shut the door.

A moment later, Villanazul stretched with great exaggeration and strolled about the room.

‘I think I’ll walk down to the plaza, friends.’

He was not gone a minute when Dominguez, waving his black book at the others, winked, and turned the doorknob.

‘Dominguez,’ said Gomez.

‘Yes?’

‘If you see Vamenos, by accident,’ said Gomez, ‘warn him away from Mickey Murillo’s Red Rooster Café. They got fights not only on TV but out front of the TV, too.’

‘He wouldn’t go into Murillo’s,’ said Dominguez. ‘That suit means too much to Vamenos. He wouldn’t do anything to hurt it.’

‘He’d shoot his mother first,’ said Martinez.

‘Sure he would.’

Martinez and Gomez, alone, listened to Dominguez’s footsteps hurry away down the stairs. They circled the undressed window dummy.

For a long while, biting his lips, Gomez stood at the window, looking out. He touched his shirt pocket twice, pulled his hand away, and then at last pulled something from the pocket. Without looking at it, he handed it to Martinez.

‘Martinez, take this.’

‘What is it?’

Martinez looked at the piece of folded pink paper with print on it, with names and numbers. His eyes widened.

‘A ticket on the bus to El Paso, three weeks from now!’

Gomez nodded. He couldn’t look at Martinez. He stared out into the summer night.

‘Turn it in. Get the money,’ he said. ‘Buy us a nice white panama hat and a pale blue tie to go with the white ice-cream suit, Martinez. Do that.’

‘Gomez –’

‘Shut up. Boy, is it hot in here! I need air.’

‘Gomez. I am touched. Gomez –’

But the door stood open. Gomez was gone.

Mickey Murillo’s Red Rooster Café and Cocktail Lounge was squashed between two big brick buildings and, being narrow, had to be deep. Outside, serpents of red and sulphur-green neon fizzed and snapped. Inside, dim shapes loomed and swam away to lose themselves in a swarming night sea.

Martinez, on tiptoe, peeked through a flaked place on the red-painted front window.

He felt a presence on his left, heard breathing on his right. He glanced in both directions.

‘Manulo! Villanazul!’

‘I decided I wasn’t thirsty,’ said Manulo. ‘So I took a walk.’

‘I was just on my way to the plaza,’ said Villanazul, ‘and decided to go the long way round.’

As if by agreement the three men shut up now and turned together to peer on tiptoe through various flaked spots on the window.

A moment later, all three felt a new very warm presence behind them and heard still faster breathing.

‘Is our white suit in there?’ asked Gomez’s voice.

‘Gomez!’ said everybody, surprised. ‘Hi!’

‘Yes!’ cried Dominguez, having just arrived to find his own peephole. ‘There’s the suit! And, praise God, Vamenos is still in it!’

‘I can’t see!’ Gomez squinted, shielding his eyes. ‘What’s he doing?’

Martinez peered. Yes! There, way back in the shadows, was a big chunk of snow, and the idiot smile of Vamenos winking above it, wreathed in smoke.

‘He’s smoking!’ said Martinez.

‘He’s drinking!’ said Dominguez.

‘He’s eating a taco!’ reported Villanazul.

‘A juicy taco,’ added Manulo.

‘No,’ said Gomez. ‘No, no, no …’

‘Ruby Escadrillo’s with him!’

‘Let me see that!’ Gomez pushed Martinez aside.

Yes, there was Ruby! Two hundred pounds of glittering sequins and tight black satin on the hoof, her scarlet fingernails clutching Vamenos’s shoulder. Her cow-like face, floured with powder, greasy with lipstick, hung over him!

‘That hippo!’ said Dominguez. ‘She’s crushing the shoulder pads. Look, she’s going to sit on his lap!’

‘No, no, not with all that powder and lipstick!’ said Gomez. ‘Manulo, inside! Grab that drink! Villanazul, the cigar, the taco! Dominguez, date Ruby Escadrillo, get her away. Ándale, men!’

The three vanished, leaving Gomez and Martinez to stare, gasping, through the peephole.

‘Manulo, he’s got the drink, he’s drinking it!’

‘Olé! There’s Villanazul, he’s got the cigar, he’s eating the taco!’

‘Hey, Dominguez, he’s got Ruby! What a brave one!’

A shadow bulked through Murillo’s front door, travelling fast.

‘Gomez!’ Martinez clutched Gomez’s arm. ‘That was Ruby Escadrillo’s boy friend, Bull La Jolla. If he finds her with Vamenos, the ice-cream suit will be covered with blood, covered with blood –’

‘Don’t make me nervous,’ said Gomez. ‘Quickly!’

Both ran. Inside, they reached Vamenos just as Bull La Jolla grabbed about two feet of the lapels of that wonderful ice-cream suit.

‘Let go of Vamenos!’ said Martinez.

‘Let go that suit !’ corrected Gomez.

Bull La Jolla, tap-dancing Vamenos, leered at these intruders.

Villanazul stepped up, shyly.

Villanazul smiled. ‘Don’t hit him. Hit me.’

Bull La Jolla hit Villanazul smack on the nose.

Villanazul, holding his nose, tears stinging his eyes, wandered off.

Gomez grabbed one of Bull La Jolla’s arms, Martinez the other.

‘Drop him, let go, peón, coyote, vaca!!’

Bull La Jolla twisted the ice-cream suit material until all six men screamed in mortal agony. Grunting, sweating, Bull La Jolla dislodged as many as climbed on. He was winding up to hit Vamenos when Villanazul wandered back, eyes streaming.

‘Don’t hit him. Hit me!’

As Bull La Jolla hit Villanazul on the nose, a chair crashed on Bull’s head.

‘Olé!’ said Gomez.

Bull La Jolla swayed, blinking, debating whether to fall. He began to drag Vamenos with him.

‘Let go!’ cried Gomez. ‘Let go!’

One by one, with great care, Bull La Jolla’s banana-like fingers let loose of the suit. A moment later he was ruins at their feet.

‘Compadres, this way!’

They ran Vamenos outside and set him down where he freed himself of their hands with injured dignity.

‘Okay, okay. My time ain’t up. I still got two minutes and, let’s see – ten seconds.’

‘What!’ said everybody.

‘Vamenos,’ said Gomez, ‘you let a Guadalajara cow climb on you, you pick fights, you smoke, you drink, you eat tacos, and now you have the nerve to say your time ain’t up?’

‘I got two minutes and one second left!’

‘Hey, Vamenos, you sure look sharp!’ Distantly, a woman’s voice called from across the street.

Vamenos smiled and buttoned his coat.

‘It’s Ramona Alvarez! Ramona, wait!’ Vamenos stepped off the curb.

‘Vamenos,’ pleaded Gomez. ‘What can you do in one minute and –’ he checked his watch. ‘Forty seconds!’

‘Watch! Hey, Ramona!’

Vamenos loped.

‘Vamenos, look out!’

Vamenos, surprised, whirled, saw a car, heard the shriek of brakes.

‘No,’ said all five men on the sidewalk.

Martinez heard the impact and flinched. His head moved up. It looks like white laundry, he thought, flying through the air. His head came down.

Now he heard himself and each of the men make a different sound. Some swallowed too much air. Some let it out. Some choked. Some groaned. Some cried aloud for justice. Some covered their faces. Martinez felt his own fist pounding his heart in agony. He could not move his feet.

‘I don’t want to live,’ said Gomez quietly. ‘Kill me, someone.’

Then, shuffling, Martinez looked down and told his feet to walk, stagger, follow one after the other. He collided with other men. Now they were trying to run. They ran at last and somehow crossed a street like a deep river through which they could only wade, to look down at Vamenos.

‘Vamenos!’ said Martinez. ‘You’re alive!’

Strewn on his back, mouth open, eyes squeezed tight, tight, Vamenos motioned his head back and forth, back and forth, moaning.

‘Tell me, tell me, oh tell me, tell me.’

‘Tell you what, Vamenos?’

Vamenos clenched his fists, ground his teeth.

‘The suit, what have I done to the suit, the suit, the suit!’

The men crouched lower.

‘Vamenos, it’s … why, it’s okay !’

‘You lie!’ said Vamenos. ‘If s torn, it must be, it must be, it’s torn, all round, underneath?’

‘No.’ Martinez knelt and touched here and there. ‘Vamenos, all around, underneath even, it’s okay!’

Vamenos opened his eyes to let the tears run free at last. ‘A miracle,’ he sobbed. ‘Praise the saints!’ He quieted at last. ‘The car?’

‘Hit and run.’ Gomez suddenly remembered and glared at the empty street. ‘It’s good he didn’t stop. We’d have –’

Everyone listened.

Distantly, a siren wailed.

‘Someone phoned for an ambulance.’

‘Quick!’ said Vamenos, eyes rolling. ‘Set me up! Take off our coat!’

‘Vamenos –’

‘Shut up, idiots!’ cried Vamenos. ‘The coat, that’s it! Now, the pants, the pants, quick, quick, peónes ! Those doctors! You seen movies? They rip the pants with razors to get them off! They don’t care ! They’re maniacs! Ah, God, quick, quick!’

The siren screamed.

The men, panicking, all handled Vamenos at once.

‘Right leg, easy, hurry, cows! Good! Left leg, now, left, you hear, there, easy, easy ! Ow, God! Quick! Martinez, your pants, take them off!’

‘What?’ Martinez froze.

The siren shrieked.

‘Fool!’ wailed Vamenos. ‘All is lost! Your pants! Give me!’

Martinez jerked at his belt-buckle.

‘Close in, make a circle!’

Dark pants, light pants, flourished on the air.

‘Quick, here come the maniacs with the razors! Right leg on, left leg, there!’

‘The zipper, cows, zip my zipper!’ babbled Vamenos.

The siren died.

‘Madre mía, yes, just in time! They arrive.’ Vamenos lay back down and shut his eyes. ‘Gracias.’

Martinez turned, nonchalantly buckling on the white pants as the internes brushed past.

‘Broken leg,’ said one interne as they moved Vamenos on to a stretcher.

‘Compadres,’ said Vamenos, ‘don’t be mad with me.’

Gomez snorted. ‘Who’s mad?’

In the ambulance, head tilted back, looking out at them upside down, Vamenos faltered.

‘Compadres, when … when I come from the hospital … am I still in the bunch? You won’t kick me out? Look, I’ll give up smoking, keep away from Murillo’s, swear off women –’

‘Vamenos,’ said Martinez gently, ‘don’t promise nothing.’

Vamenos, upside-down, eyes brimming wet, saw Martinez there, all white now against the stars.

‘Oh, Martinez, you sure look great in that suit. Compadres, don’t he look beautiful?’

Villanazul climbed in beside Vamenos. The door slammed. The four remaining men watched the ambulance drive away.

Then, surrounded by his friends, inside the white suit, Martinez was carefully escorted back to the kerb.

In the tenement, Martinez got out the cleaning fluid and the others stood around, telling him how to clean the suit and later, how not to have the iron too hot and how to work the lapels and the crease and all. When the suit was cleaned and pressed so it looked like a fresh gardenia just opened, they fitted it to the dummy.

‘Two o’clock,’ murmured Villanazul. ‘I hope Vamenos sleeps well. When I left him, he looked good.’

Manulo cleared his throat. ‘Nobody else is going out with that suit tonight, huh?’

The others glared at him.

Manulo flushed. ‘I mean … it’s late. We’re tired. Maybe no one will use the suit for forty-eight hours, huh? Give it a rest. Sure. Well. Where do we sleep?’

The night being still hot and the room unbearable, they carried the suit on its dummy out and down the hall. They brought with them also some pillows and blankets. They climbed the stairs towards the roof of the tenement. There, thought Martinez, is die cooler wind, and sleep.

On the way, they passed a dozen doors that stood open, people still perspiring and awake, playing cards, drinking pop, fanning themselves with movie magazines.

I wonder, thought Martinez. I wonder if – yes!

On the fourth floor, a certain door stood open.

The beautiful girl looked up as the five men passed. She wore glasses and when she saw Martinez she snatched them off and hid them under a book.

The others went on, not knowing they had lost Martinez who seemed stuck fast in the open door.

For a long moment he could say nothing. Then he said:

‘José Martinez.’

And she said:

‘Celia Obregon.’

And then both said nothing.

He heard the men moving up on the tenement roof. He moved to follow.

She said, quickly, ‘I saw you tonight!’

He came back.

‘The suit,’ he said.

‘The suit,’ she said and paused. ‘But not the suit.’

‘Eh?’ he said.

She lifted the book to show the glasses lying in her lap. She touched the glasses.

‘I do not see well. You would think I would wear my glasses, but no. I walk around for years now, hiding them, seeing nothing. But tonight, even without glasses, I see. A great whiteness passes below in the dark. So white! And I put on my glasses quickly!’

‘The suit, as I said,’ said Martinez.

‘The suit for a little moment, yes, but there is another whiteness above the suit.’

‘Another?’

‘Your teeth! Oh, such white teeth, and so many!’

Martinez put his hand over his mouth.

‘So happy, Mr Martinez,’ she said. ‘I have not often seen such a happy face and such a smile.’

‘Ah,’ he said, not able to look at her, his face flushing now.

‘So you see,’ she said, quietly, ‘the suit caught my eye, yes, the whiteness filled the night, below. But, the teeth were much whiter. Now, I have forgotten the suit.’

Martinez flushed again. She too was overcome with what she had said. She put her glasses on her nose, and then took them off, nervously, and hid them again. She looked at her hands and at the door above his head.

‘May I –’ he said, at last.

‘May you –’

‘May I call for you,’ he asked, ‘when next the suit is mine to wear?’

‘Why must you wait for the suit?’ she said.

‘I thought –’

‘You do not need the suit,’ she said.

‘But –’

‘If it were just the suit,’ she said, ‘anyone would be fine in it. But no, I watched. I saw many men in that suit, all different, this night. So again I say, you do not need to wait for the suit.’

‘Madre mía, madre mía!’ he cried, happily. And then, quieter,

‘I will need the suit for a little while. A month, six months, a year. I am uncertain. I am fearful of many things. I am young.’

‘That is as it should be,’ she said.

‘Good night, Miss –’

‘Celia Obregon.’

‘Celia Obregon,’ he said and was gone from the door.

The others were waiting, on the roof of the tenement. Coming up through the trapdoor, Martinez saw they had placed the dummy and the suit in the centre of the roof and put their blankets and pillows in a circle round it. Now they were lying down. Now a cooler night was blowing here, up in the sky.

Martinez stood alone by the suit, smoothing the lapels, talking half to himself.

‘Aye, caramba, what a night! Seems ten years since seven o’clock, when it all started and I had no friends. Two in the morning, I got all kinds of friends …’ He paused and thought, Celia Obregon, Celia Obregon. ‘… all kinds of friends,’ he went on. ‘I got a room, I got clothes. You tell me. You know what?’ He looked around at the men lying on the rooftop, surrounding the dummy and himself.

‘It’s funny. When I wear this suit, I know I will win at pool, like Gomez. A woman will look at me like Dominguez. I will be able to sing like Manulo, sweetly. I will talk fine politics like Villanazul. I’m strong as Vamenos. So?

So, tonight, I am more than Martinez. I am Gomez, Manulo, Dominguez, Villanazul, Vamenos. I am everyone. Ay … ay …’ He stood a moment longer by this suit which could save all the ways they sat or stood or walked.

This suit which could move fast and nervous like Gomez or slow and thoughtfully like Villanazul or drift like Dominguez who never touched ground, who always found a wind to take him somewhere. This suit which belonged to them, but which also owned them all. This suit that was – what? A parade.

‘Martinez,’ said Gomez. ‘You going to sleep?’

‘Sure. I’m just thinking.’

‘What?’

‘If we ever get rich,’ said Martinez, softly, ‘it’ll be kind of sad. Then we’ll all have suits. And there won’t be no more nights like tonight. It’ll break up the old gang. It’ll never be the same after that.’

The men lay thinking of what had just been said.

Gomez nodded, gently.

‘Yeah … it’ll never be the same … after that.’

Martinez lay down on his blanket. In darkness, with the others, he faced the middle of the roof and the dummy, which was the centre of their lives.

And their eyes were bright, shining, and good to see in the dark as the neon lights from nearby buildings flicked on, flicked off, flicked on, flicked off, revealing and then vanishing, revealing and then vanishing, their wonderful white vanilla ice-cream summer suit.

Fever Dream

THEY put him between fresh, clean, laundered sheets and there was always a newly squeezed glass of thick orange juice on the table under the dim pink lamp. All Charles had to do was call and Mom or Dad would stick their heads into his room to see how sick he was. The acoustics of the room were fine; you could hear the toilet gargling its porcelain throat of mornings, you could hear rain tap the roof or sly mice run in the secret walls, the canary singing in its cage downstairs. If you were very alert, sickness wasn’t too bad.

He was fifteen, Charles was. It was mid September, with the land beginning to burn with autumn. He lay in the bed for three days before the terror overcame him.

His hand began to change. His right hand. He looked at it and it was hot and sweating there on the counterpane, alone. It fluttered, it moved a bit. Then it lay there, changing colour.

That afternoon the doctor came again and tapped his thin chest like a little drum. ‘How are you?’ asked the doctor, smiling. ‘I know, don’t tell me: “My cold is fine, Doctor, but I feel lousy!” Ha!’ He laughed at his own oft-repeated joke.

Charles lay there and for him that terrible and ancient jest was becoming a reality. The joke fixed itself in his mind. His mind touched and drew away from it in a pale terror. The doctor did not know how cruel he was with his jokes! ‘Doctor,’ whispered Charles, lying flat and colourless. ‘My hand, it doesn’t belong to me any more. This morning it changed into something else. I want you to change it back, Doctor, Doctor!’

The doctor showed his teeth and patted his hand. ‘It looks fine to me, son. You just had a little fever dream.’

‘But it changed, Doctor, oh, Doctor,’ cried Charles, pitifully holding up his pale wild hand. ‘It did !’

The doctor winked. ‘I’ll give you a pink pill for that.’ He popped a tablet on to Charles’s tongue. ‘Swallow!’

‘Will it make my hand change back and become me, again?’

‘Yes, yes.’

The house was silent when the doctor drove off down the road in his carriage under the quiet, blue September sky. A clock ticked far below in the kitchen world. Charles lay looking at his hand.

It did not change back. It was still – something else.

The wind blew outside. Leaves fell against the cool window.

At four o’clock his other hand changed. It seemed almost to become a fever, a chemical, a virus. It pulsed and shifted, cell by cell. It beat like a warm heart. The fingernails turned blue and then red. It took about an hour for it to change and when it was finished, it looked just like any ordinary hand. But it was not ordinary. It no longer was him any more. He lay in a fascinated horror and then fell into an exhausted sleep.

Mother brought the soup up at six. He wouldn’t touch it. ‘I haven’t any hands,’ he said, eyes shut.

‘Your hands are perfectly good,’ said Mother.

‘No,’ he wailed. ‘My hands are gone. I feel like I have stumps. Oh, Mama, Mama, hold me, hold me, I’m scared!’

She had to feed him herself.

‘Mama,’ he said, ‘get the doctor, please, again, I’m so sick.’

‘The doctor’ll be here tonight at eight,’ she said, and went out.

At seven, with night dark and close around the house, Charles was sitting up in bed when he felt the thing happening to first one leg then the other. ‘Mama! Come quick!’ he screamed.

But when Mama came the thing was no longer happening.

When she went downstairs, he simply lay without fighting as his legs beat and beat, grew warm, red hot, and the room filled with the warmth of his feverish change. The glow crept up from his toes to his ankles and then to his knees.

‘May I come in?’ The doctor smiled in the doorway.

‘Doctor!’ cried Charles. ‘Hurry, take off my blankets!’

The doctor lifted the blankets tolerantly. ‘There you are. Whole and healthy. Sweating, though. A little fever. I told you not to move around, bad boy.’ He pinched the moist pink cheek. ‘Did the pills help? Did your hand change back?’

‘No, no, now it’s my other hand and my legs!’

‘Well, well, I’ll have to give you three more pills, one for each limb, eh, my little peach?’ laughed the doctor.

‘Will they help me? Please, please. What’ve I got?’

‘A mild case of scarlet fever, complicated by a slight cold.’

‘Is it a germ that lives and has more little germs in me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you sure it’s scarlet fever? You haven’t taken any tests!’

‘I guess I know a certain fever when I see one,’ said the doctor, checking the boy’s pulse with cool authority.

Charles lay there, not speaking until the doctor was crisply packing his black kit. Then in the silent room, the boy’s voice made a small, weak pattern, his eyes alight with remembrance. ‘I read a book once. About petrified trees, wood turning to stone. About how trees fell and rotted and minerals got in and built up and they look just like trees, but they’re not, they’re stone.’ He stopped. In the quiet warm room his breathing sounded.

‘Well?’ asked the doctor.

‘I’ve been thinking,’ said Charles, after a time. ‘Do germs ever get big? I mean in biology class they told us about one-celled animals, amoebas and things, and how, millions of years ago, they got together until there was a bunch and they made the first body. And more and more cells got together and got bigger and then finally maybe there was a fish and finally here we are, and all we are is a bunch of cells that decided to get together, to help each other out. Isn’t that right?’ Charles wet his feverish lips.

‘What’s all this about?’ The doctor bent over him.

‘I’ve got to tell you this. Doctor, oh. I’ve got to!’ he cried. ‘What would happen, oh just pretend, please pretend, that just like in the old days, a lot of microbes got together and wanted to make a bunch, and reproduced and made more –’

His white hands were on his chest now, crawling towards his throat.

‘And they decided to take over a person!’ cried Charles.

‘Take over a person?’

‘Yes, become a person. Me, my hands, my feet! What if a disease somehow knew how to kill a person and yet live after him?’

He screamed.

The hands were on his neck.

The doctor moved forward, shouting.

At nine o’clock the doctor was escorted out to his carriage by the mother and father, who handed him up his bag. They conversed in the cool night wind for a few minutes. ‘Just be sure his hands are kept strapped to his legs,’ said the doctor. ‘I don’t want him hurting himself!’

‘Will he be all right, Doctor?’ The mother held to his arm a moment.

He patted her shoulder. ‘Haven’t I been your family physician for thirty years? It’s the fever, he imagines things.’

‘But those bruises on his throat, he almost choked himself.’

‘Just you keep him strapped; he’ll be all right in the morning.’

The horse and carriage moved off down the dark September road.

At three in the morning, Charles was still awake in his small back room. The bed was damp under his head and his back. He was very warm. Now he no longer had any arms or legs, and his body was beginning to change. He did not move on the bed, but looked at the vast blank ceiling space with insane concentration. For a while he had screamed and thrashed but now he was weak and hoarse from it, and his mother had gotten up a number of times to soothe his brow with a wet towel. Now he was silent, his hands strapped to his legs.

He felt the walls of his body change, the organs shift, the lungs catch fire like burning bellows of pink alcohol. The room was lighted up as with the flickerings of a hearthplace.

Now he had no body. It was all gone.

It was under him, but it was filled with a vast pulse of some burning, lethargic drug. It was as if a guillotine had neatly lopped off his head and his head lay shining on a midnight pillow while the body, below, still alive, belonged to somebody else. The disease had eaten his body and from the eating had reproduced itself in feverish duplicate. There were the little hand-hairs and the fingernails and the scars and the toenails and the tiny mole on his right hip, all done again in perfect fashion.

I am dead, he thought. I’ve been killed, and yet I live. My body is dead, it is all disease and nobody will know. I will walk around and it will not be me, it will be something else. It will be something all bad, all evil, so big and so evil it’s hard to understand or think about. Something that will buy shoes and drink water and get married some day maybe and do more evil in the world than has ever been done.

Now the warmth was stealing up his neck, into his cheeks, like a hot wine. His lips burned, his eyelids, like leaves, caught fire. His nostrils breathed out blue flame, faintly, faintly.

This will be all, he thought. It’ll take my head and my brain and fix each eye and every tooth and all the marks in my brain, and every hair and every wrinkle in my ears, and there’ll be nothing left of me.

He felt his brain fill with a boiling mercury. He felt his left eye clench in upon itself and, like a snail, withdraw, shift. He was blind in his left eye. It no longer belonged to him. It was enemy territory. His tongue was gone, cut out. His left cheek was numbed, lost. His left ear stopped hearing. It belonged to someone else now. This thing that was being born, this mineral thing replacing the wooden log, this disease replacing healthy animal cell.

He tried to scream and he was able to scream loud and high and sharply in the room, just as his brain flooded down, his right eye and right ear were cut out, he was blind and deaf, all fire and terror, all panic, all death.

His scream stopped before his mother ran through the door to his side.

It was a good, clear morning, with a brisk wind that helped carry doctor, horse and carriage along the road to halt before the house. In the window above, the boy stood, fully dressed. He did not wave when the doctor waved and called, ‘What’s this? Up? My God!’

The doctor almost ran upstairs. He came gasping into the bedroom.

‘What are you doing out of bed?’ he demanded of the boy. He tapped his thin chest, took his pulse and temperature. ‘Absolutely amazing! Normal. Normal, by God !’

‘I shall never be sick again in my life,’ declared the boy, quietly, standing there, looking out of the wide window. ‘Never.’

‘I hope not. Why, you’re looking fine, Charles.’

‘Doctor?’

‘Yes, Charles?’

‘Can I go to school now?’ asked Charles.

‘Tomorrow will be time enough. You sound positively eager.’

‘I am. I like school. All the kids. I want to play with them and wrestle with them, and spit on them and play with the girls’ pigtails and shake the teacher’s hand, and rub my hands on all the cloaks in the cloakroom, and I want to grow up and travel and shake hands with people all over the world, and be married and have lots of children, and go to libraries and handle books and – all of that I want to!’ said the boy, looking off into the September morning. ‘What’s the name you called me?’

‘What?’ The doctor puzzled. ‘I called you nothing but Charles.’

‘It’s better than no name at all, I guess,’ Charles shrugged.

‘I’m glad you want to go back to school,’ said the doctor.

‘I really anticipate it,’ smiled the boy. ‘Thank you for your help, Doctor. Shake hands.’

‘Glad to.’

They shook hands gravely, and the clear wind blew through the open window. They shook hands for almost a minute, the boy smiling up at the old man and thanking him.

Then, laughing, the boy raced the doctor downstairs and out to his carriage. His mother and father followed for the happy farewell.

‘Fit as a fiddle!’ said the doctor. ‘Incredible!’

‘And strong,’ said the father. ‘He got out of his straps himself during the night. Didn’t you, Charles?’

‘Did I?’ said the boy.

‘You did! How?’

‘Oh,’ the boy said, ‘that was a long time ago.’

‘A long time ago!’

They all laughed, and while they were laughing, the quiet boy moved his bare foot on the sidewalk and brushed against a number of red ants that were scurrying about on the sidewalk.

Secretly, his eyes shining, while his parents chatted with the old man, he saw the ants hesitate, quiver, and lie still on the cement. He knew they were cold now.

‘Good-bye!’

The doctor drove away, waving.

The boy walked ahead of his parents. As he walked he looked away towards the town and began to hum ‘School Days’ under his breath.

‘It’s good to have him well again,’ said the father.

‘Listen to him. He’s so looking forward to school!’

The boy turned quietly. He gave each of his parents a crushing hug. He kissed them both several times.

Then, without a word, he bounded up the steps into the house.

In the parlour, before the others entered, he quickly opened the birdcage, thrust his hand in, and petted the yellow canary, once.

Then he shut the cage door, stood back, and waited.

Referent

ROBY MORRISON fidgeted. Walking in the tropical heat he heard the wet thunder of waves on the shore. There was a green silence on Orthopaedic Island.

It was the year 1997, but Roby did not care.

All around him was the garden where he prowled, all ten years of him. This was Meditation Hour. Beyond the garden wall, to the north, were the High I.Q. Cubicles where he and the other boys slept in special beds.

With morning they popped up like bottle-corks, dashed into showers, gulped food, and were sucked down vacuum-tubes half across the island to Semantics School. Then to Physiology. After Physiology he was blown back underground and released through a seal in the great garden wall to spend this silly hour of meditative frustration, as prescribed by the island Psychologists.

Roby had his opinion of it. ‘Damned silly.’

Today, he was in furious rebellion. He glared at the sea, wishing he had the sea’s freedom to come and go. His eyes were dark, his cheeks flushed, his small hands twitched nervously.

Somewhere in the garden a chime vibrated softly. Fifteen more minutes of meditation. Huh! And then to the Robot Commissionary to stuff his dead hunger as taxidermists stuff birds.

And, after the scientifically pure lunch, through the tube again to Sociology. Of course, late in the warm green afternoon, games would be played in the Main Garden. Games some tremble-brained Psychologist had evolved from a nightmare-haunted sleep. This was the future! You must live, my lad, as the people of the past, of the year 1920, 1930, and 1942 predicted you would live! Everything fresh, brisk, sanitary, too, too fresh! No nasty old parents about to give one complexes. Everything controlled, dear boy!

Roby should have been in a perfect mood for something unique.

He wasn’t.

When the star fell from the sky a moment later he was only more irritated.

The star was a spheroid. It crashed and rolled to a stop on the hot green grass. A small door popped open in it.

Faintly, this incident recalled a dream to the child. A dream which with superior stubbornness he had refused to record in his Freud Book this morning. The dream-thought was in his mind at the exact instant that the star-door popped wide and some ‘thing’ emerged.

Some ‘thing’.

Young eyes, seeing an object for the first time, have to make a familiar thing of it. Roby didn’t know what this ‘thing’ was, stepping from the sphere. So, scowling, Roby thought of what it most resembled.

Instantly the ‘something’ became a certain thing.

Warm air ran cold. Light flickered, form changed, melted, shifted as the thing evolved into certainty.

Startled, a tall, thin, pale man stood beside the metal star.

The man had pink, terrified eyes. He trembled.

‘Oh, I know you.’ Roby was disappointed. ‘You’re only the Sandman.’

‘Sand – man?’

The stranger quivered like heat rising from boiling metal. His shaking hands went wildly up to touch his long coppery hair as if he’d never seen or felt of it before. The Sandman gazed in horror at his own hands, legs, feet, body, as if they were all new. ‘Sand-man?’ The word was difficult.

Talking was new to him, also. He seemed about to flee, but something stopped him.

‘Yeah,’ said Roby. ‘I dream about you every night. Oh, I know what you think. Semantically, our teachers say that ghosts, goblins and fairies, and sandmen are labels, only names for which there aren’t any actual referents, no actual objects or things. But to heck with that. We kids know more than teachers about it. You being here proves the teachers wrong. There are Sandmen after all, aren’t there?’

‘Don’t give me a label!’ cried the Sandman, suddenly. He seemed to understand now. For some reason he was unutterably frightened. He kept pinching, tugging, and feeling his own long new body as if it was a thing of terror. ‘Don’t name me, don’t label me!’

‘Huh?’

‘I’m a referent!’ screamed the Sandman. ‘I’m not a label! I’m just a referent! Let me go!’

Roby’s little green cat-eyes slitted. ‘Say –’ He put his hands on his hips. ‘Did Mr Grill send you? I bet he did! I bet this is another of those psychological tests!’

Roby flushed with dark anger. Always and for ever they were at him. They sorted his games, food, education, took away his friends and his mother, his father, and now – played tricks on him!

‘I’m not from Mr Grill,’ pleaded the Sandman. ‘Listen, before anyone else comes and sees me this way and makes it worse!’

Roby kicked violently. The Sandman danced back, gasping:

‘Listen. I’m not human! You are!’ he shouted. ‘Thought has moulded the flesh of all you here on this world! You’re all dictated to by labels. But I – I am a pure referent!’

‘Liar!’ More kicking from Roby.

The Sandman gibbered with frustration. ‘The truth, child! Centuries of thought have moulded your atoms to your present form; if you could undermine and destroy that belief, the beliefs of your friends, teachers, and parents, you could change form, be a pure referent, too! Like Freedom, Liberty, Humanity, or Time, Space, and Justice!’

‘Grill sent you; he’s always pestering me!’

‘No, no! Atoms are malleable. You’ve accepted certain labels on Earth, called Man, Woman, Child, Head, Hands, Fingers, Feet. You’ve changed from anything into something.’

‘Leave me alone,’ protested Roby. ‘I’ve a test today, I have to think.’ He sat on a rock, hands over his ears.

The Sandman glanced fearfully about, as if expecting disaster. Standing over Roby, he was beginning to tremble and cry. ‘Earth could have been a thousand other ways. Thought, using labels, went round tidying up a disordered cosmos. Now no one bothers trying to think things into other different shapes!’

‘Go away,’ sniffed Roby.

‘I landed near you, not suspecting the danger. I was curious. Inside my spheriod spaceship, thoughts cannot change my shape. I’ve travelled from world to world, over the centuries, and never been trapped like this !’ Tears sprang down his face. ‘And now, by the gods, you’ve labelled me, caught me, imprisoned me with thought! This Sandman idea. Horrible! I can’t fight it, I can’t change back! And if I can’t change back I’ll never fit into my ship again, I’m much too large. I’ll be stranded on Earth for ever. Release me!’

The Sandman screamed, wept, shouted. Roby’s mind wandered. He debated quietly with himself. What did he want most of all? Escape from this island. Silly. They always caught you. What then? Games, maybe. Like to play regular games, minus psycho-supervision. Yeah, that’d be nice. Kick-the-can, or spin-the-bottle, or even just a rubber ball to bounce on the garden wall and catch, all to himself. Yeah. A red ball.

The Sandman cried, ‘Don’t –’

Silence.

A red rubber ball bounced on the ground.

Up and down bounced the red rubber ball.

‘Hey!’ It took Roby a moment to realize the ball was there. ‘Where’d this come from?’ He hurled it against the wall, caught it. ‘Gee!’

He didn’t notice the absence of a certain stranger who had been shouting at him a few moments before.

The Sandman was gone.

Way off in the hot distance of the garden a bonging noise sounded. A cylinder was rushing up the tube to the wall’s circular door. The door peeled open with a faint hiss. Footsteps rustled measuredly along the path. Mr Grill stepped through a a lush frame of tiger-lilies.

‘Morning, Roby. Oh!’ Mr Grill stopped, his chubby pink face looked as if it had been kicked. ‘What have you there, boy?’ he cried.

Roby bounced the object against the wall.

‘This? A rubber ball.’

‘Eh?’ Grill’s small blue eyes blinked, narrowing. Then he relaxed. ‘Why, of course. For a moment I thought I saw – uh – er –’

Roby bounced the ball some more.

Grill cleared his throat. ‘Lunch time. Meditation Hour is over. And I’m not certain that Minister Locke would enjoy your playing unorthodox games.’

Roby swore under his breath.

‘Oh, well, then, go on. Play. I won’t tattle.’ Mr Grill was in a generous mood.

‘Don’t feel like playing.’ Roby sulked, shoving his sandal-tip into the dirt. Teachers spoiled everything. You couldn’t vomit without permission.

Grill tried to interest the boy. ‘If you come to lunch now, I’ll let you televise your mother in Chicago afterwards.’

‘Time limit, two minutes, ten seconds, no more, no less,’ was Roby’s acid reply.

‘I gather you don’t approve of things, boy.’

‘I’ll run away some day, wait and see!’

‘Tut, lad. We’ll always bring you back, you know.’

‘I didn’t ask to be brought here in the first place.’ Roby bit his lip, staring at his new red rubber ball. He thought he had seen it kind of, sort of, well – move. Funny. He held the ball in his hand. The ball shivered.

Grill patted his shoulder. ‘Your mother is neurotic. Bad environment. You’re better off here on the island. You have a high I.Q. and it is an honour for you to be here with the other little boy geniuses. You’re unstable and unhappy and we’re trying to change that. Eventually you’ll be the exact antithesis of your mother.’

‘I love Mother!’

‘You like her,’ corrected Grill, quietly.

‘I like Mother,’ replied Roby, disquieted. The red ball twitched in his hands, without his touching it. He looked at it with wonder.

‘You’ll only make it harder for yourself if you love her,’ said Grill.

‘You’re a goddam silly,’ said Roby.

Grill stiffened. ‘Don’t swear. Besides, you don’t really mean god and you don’t mean damn. There’s very little of either in the world. Semantics Book Seven, page 418. Labels and Referents.’

‘Now I remember!’ shouted Roby, looking around. ‘There was a Sandman here just now and he said –’

‘Come along,’ said Mr Grill. ‘Lunch time.’

Commissary food emerged from robot-servers on extension springs. Roby accepted the ovoid plate and milk-globe silently. Where he had hidden it, the red rubber ball pulsed and beat like a heart under his belt. A gong rang. He gulped food swiftly. The tumble for the tube began. They were blown like feathers across the island to Sociology and then, later, in the afternoon, back again for games. Hours passed.

Roby slipped away to the garden to be alone. Hatred for this insane, never-stopping routine, for his teachers and his fellow-students flashed through him in a scouring torrent. He sat alone and thought of his mother, a great distance away. In great detail he recalled how she looked and what she smelled like and how her voice was and how she touched and held and kissed him. He put his head down into his hands and began to fill the palms of his hands with small tears.

He dropped the red rubber ball.

He didn’t care. He only thought of his mother.

The jungle shivered. Something shifted, quickly.

A woman ran through the deep grass!

She ran away from Roby, slipped, cried out, and fell.

Something glittered in the sunlight. The woman was running towards that silvery glittering thing. The spheroid. The silver star ship! And where had she come from? And why was she running towards the sphere? And why had she fallen as he looked up? She didn’t seem to be able to get up. Roby leaped from his rock, gave chase. He caught up with her and stood over the woman.

‘Mother!’ he screamed.

Her face shivered and changed, like melting snow, then took on a hard cast, became definite and handsome.

‘I’m not your mother,’ she said.

He didn’t hear. He only heard his own breath moving over his shaking lips. He was so weak with shock he could hardly stand. He put out his hands towards her.

‘Can’t you understand?’ Her face was cold. ‘I’m not your mother. Don’t label me! Why must I have a name! Let me get back to my ship! I’ll kill you if you don’t!’

Roby swayed. ‘Mother, don’t you know me? I’m Roby, your son!’ He wanted only to cry against her, tell her of the long months of imprisonment. ‘Please, remember me!’

Sobbing, he moved forward and fell against her.

Her fingers tightened on his throat.

She strangled him.

He tried to scream. The scream was caught, pressed back into his bursting lungs. He flailed his legs.

Deep in her cold, hard, angry face, Roby found the answer even as her fingers tightened and things grew dark.

Deep in her face he saw a vestige of the Sandman.

The Sandman. The star falling on the summer sky. The silver sphere, the ship towards which this ‘woman’ had been running. The disappearance of the Sandman, the appearance of the red ball, the vanishing of the red ball and now the appearance of his mother. It all fitted.

Matrixes. Moulds. Thought habits. Patterns. Matter. The history of man, his body, all things in the universe.

She was killing him.

She would make him stop thinking, then she would be free.

Thoughts. Darkness. He could barely move, now. Weak, weak. He had thought ‘it’ was his mother. It wasn’t. Nevertheless ‘it’ was killing him. What if Roby thought something else? Try, anyway. Try it. He kicked. In the wild darkness he thought hard, hard.

With a wail, his ‘mother’ withered before him.

He concentrated.

Her fingers dwindled from his throat. Her bright face crumbled. Her body shrank to another size.

He was free. He rose up, gasping.

Through the jungle he saw the silver sphere lying in the sun. He staggered towards it, then cried out with the sharp thrill of the plan that formed in his mind.

He laughed triumphantly. He stared once more at ‘it’. What was left of the woman form changed before his eyes, like melting wax. He reshaped it into something new.

The garden wall trembled. A vacuum cylinder was hissing up through the tube. Mr Grill was coming. Roby would have to hurry or his plan would be ruined.

Roby ran to the spheroid, peered in. Simple controls. Just enough room for his small body – if the plan worked. It had to to work. It would work!

The garden trembled with the approaching thunder of the cylinder. Roby laughed. To hell with Mr Grill. To hell with this island.

He thrust himself into the ship. There was much he could learn, it would come in time. He was just on the skirt of knowledge now, but that little knowledge had saved his life, and now it would do even more.

A voice cried out behind him. A familiar voice. So familiar that it made Roby shudder. Roby heard small-boy feet crash the underbrush. Small feet on a small body. A small voice pleading.

Roby grasped the ship controls. Escape. Complete and unsuspected. Simple. Wonderful. Grill would never know.

The sphere door slammed. Motion.

The star, Roby inside, rose on the summer sky.

Mr Grill stepped out of the seal in the garden wall. He looked around for Roby. Sunlight struck him warmly in the face as he hurried down the path.

There! There was Roby. In the clearing ahead of him. Little Roby Morrison staring at the sky, making fists, crying out to nobody. At least Grill could see nobody about.

‘Hello, Roby,’ called Grill.

The boy jerked at the sound. He wavered – in colour, density, and quality. Grill blinked, decided it was only the sun.

‘I’m not Roby!’ cried the child. ‘Roby escaped! He left me to take his place, to fool you so you wouldn’t hunt for him! He fooled me, too!’ screamed the child, nastily, sobbing. ‘No, no, don’t look at me! Don’t think that I’m Roby, you’ll make it worse! You came expecting to find him, and you found me and made me into Roby! You’re moulding me and I’ll never, never change, now! Oh, God!’

‘Come now, Roby –’

‘Roby’ll never come back. I’ll always be him. I was a rubber ball, a woman, a Sandman. But, believe me, I’m only malleable atoms, that’s all. Let me go!’

Grill backed up slowly. His smile was sick.

‘I’m a referent. I’m not a label!’ cried the child.

‘Yes, yes, I understand. Now, now, Roby, Roby, you just wait right there, right there now, while I, while I, while I call the Psycho-Ward.’

Moments later, a corps of assistants ran through the garden.

‘Damn you all!’ screamed the child, kicking. ‘God damn you!’

‘Tut,’ declared Grill quietly, as they forced the child into the vac-cylinder. ‘You’re using a label for which there is no referent!’

The cylinder sucked them away.

A star blinked on the summer sky and vanished.

The Marriage Mender

IN the sun, the headboard was like a fountain, tossing up plumes of clear light. It was carved with lions and gargoyles and bearded goats. It was an awe-inspiring object even at midnight, as Antonio sat on the bed and unlaced his shoes, and put his large calloused hand out to touch its shimmering harp. Then he rolled over into this fabulous machine for dreaming, and he lay breathing heavily, his eyes beginning to close.

‘Every night,’ his wife’s voice said, ‘we sleep in the mouth of a calliope.’

Her complaint shocked him. He lay a long while before daring to reach up his hard-tipped fingers to stroke the cold metal of the intricate headboard, the threads of this lyre that had sung many wild and beautiful songs down the years.

‘This is no calliope,’ he said.

‘It cries like one,’ Maria said. ‘A billion people on this world tonight have beds. Why, I ask the saints, not us?’

‘This,’ said Antonio gently, ‘is a bed.’ He plucked a little tune on the imitation brass harp behind his head. To his ears it was Santa Lucia.

‘This bed has humps like a herd of camels was under it.’

‘Now, Mama,’ Antonio said. He called her Mama when she was mad, though they had no children. ‘You were never this way,’ he went on, ‘until five months ago when Mrs Brancozzi downstairs bought her new bed.’

Maria said wistfully, ‘Mrs Brancozzi’s bed. It’s like snow. It’s all flat and white and smooth.’

‘I don’t want any damn snow, all flat and white and smooth! These springs – feel them!’ he cried angrily. ‘They know me. They recognize that this hour of night I lie thus, at two o’clock, so! Three o’clock this way, four o’clock that. We are like a tumbling act, we’ve worked together for years, and know all the holds and falls.’

Maria sighed and said, ‘Sometimes, I dream we’re in the taffy machine at Bartole’s candy store.’

‘This bed,’ he announced to the darkness, ‘served our family before Garibaldi! From this wellspring alone came precincts of honest voters, a squad of clean-saluting Army men, two confectioners, a barber, four second-leads for Il Trovatore and Rigoletto, and two geniuses so complex they never could decide what to do in their lifetime! Not to forget enough beautiful women to provide ballrooms with their finest decoration. A cornucopia of plenty, this bed! A veritable harvesting machine!’

‘We have been married two years,’ she said, with dreadful control over her voice. ‘Where are our second-leads for Rigoletto, our geniuses, our ballroom decorations?’

‘Patience, Mama.’

‘Don’t call me Mama! While this bed is busy favouring you all night, never once has it done for me. Not even so much as a baby girl !’

He sat up. ‘You’ve let these women in this tenement ruin you with their dollar-down, dollar-a-week talk. Has Mrs Brancozzi children? Her and her new bed that she’s had for five months?’

‘No! But soon ! Mrs Brancozzi says … and her bed, so beautiful.’

He slammed himself down and yanked the covers over him. The bed screamed like all the Furies rushing through the night sky, fading away towards the dawn.

The moon changed the shape of the window pattern on the floor. Antonio awoke. Maria was not beside him.

He got up and went to peer through the half-open door of the bathroom. His wife stood at the mirror looking at her tired face.

‘I don’t feel well,’ she said.

‘We argued.’ He put out his hand to pat her. ‘I’m sorry. We’ll think it over. About the bed, I mean. We’ll see how the money goes. And if you’re not well tomorrow, see the doctor, eh? Now, come back to bed.’

At noon the next day, Antonio walked from the lumber-yard to a window where stood fine new beds with their covers invitingly turned back.

‘I,’ he whispered to himself, ‘am a beast.’

He checked his watch. Maria, at this time, would be going to the doctor’s. She had been like cold milk this morning; he had told her to go. He walked on to the candy-store window and watched the taffy machine folding and threading and pulling.

Does taffy scream? he wondered. Perhaps, but so high we cannot hear it. He laughed. Then, in the stretched taffy, he saw Maria. Frowning, he turned and walked back to the furniture store. No. Yes. No. Yes! He pressed his nose to the icy window. Bed, he thought, you in there, new bed, do you know me? Will you be kind to my back, nights?

He took out his wallet, slowly, and peered at the money. He sighed, gazed for a long time at that flat marble-top, that unfamiliar enemy, that new bed. Then, shoulders sagging, he walked into the store, his money held loosely in his hand.

‘Maria!’ He ran up the steps two at a time. It was nine o’clock at night and he had managed to beg off in the middle of his overtime at the lumber-yard to rush home. He rushed through the open doorway smiling.

The apartment was empty.

‘Ah,’ he said disappointedly. He laid the receipt for the new bed on top of the bureau where Maria might see it when she entered. On those few evenings when he worked late she visited with any one of several neighbours downstairs.

I’ll go find her, he thought, and stopped. No. I want to tell her alone, I’ll wait. He sat on the bed. ‘Old bed,’ he said, ‘goodbye to you. I am very sorry.’ He patted the brass lions nervously. He paced the floor. Come on, Maria. He imagined her smile.

He listened for her quick running on the stair, but he heard only a slow, measured tread. He thought: That’s not my Maria, slow like that, no.

The doorknob turned.

‘Maria!’

‘You’re early!’ She smiled happily at him. Did she guess? Was it written on his face? ‘I’ve been downstairs,’ she cried, ‘telling everyone!’

‘Telling everyone?’

‘The doctor! I saw the doctor!’

‘The doctor?’ He looked bewildered. ‘And?’

‘And, Papa, and –’

‘Do you mean – Papa?’

‘Papa, Papa, Papa, Papa!’

‘Oh,’ he said, gently, ‘you walked so carefully on the stairs.’

He took hold of her, but not too tight, and he kissed her cheeks, and he shut his eyes and he yelled. Then he had to wake a few neighbours and tell them, shake them, tell them again. There had to be a little wine and a careful waltz around, an embracing, a trembling, a kissing of brow, eyelids, nose, lips, temples, ears, hair, chin – and then it was past midnight.

‘A miracle,’ he sighed.

They were alone in their room again, the air warm from the people who had been there a minute before, laughing, talking. But now they were alone again.

Turning out the light, he saw the receipt on the bureau. Stunned, he tried to decide in what subtle and delicious way to break this additional news to her.

Maria sat upon her side of the bed in the dark, hypnotized with wonder. She moved her hands as if her body was a strange doll, taken apart, and now to be put back together again, limb by limb, her motions as slow as if she lived beneath a warm sea at midnight. Now, at last, careful not to break herself, she lay back, upon the pillow.

‘Maria, I have something to tell you.’

‘Yes?’ she said faintly.

‘Now that you are as you are,’ he squeezed her hand, ‘you deserve the comfort, the rest, the beauty of a new bed.’

She did not cry out happily or turn to him or seize him. Her silence was a thinking silence.

He was forced to continue. ‘This bed is nothing but a pipe organ, a calliope.’

‘It is a bed,’ she said.

‘A herd of camels sleep under it.’

‘No,’ she said quietly, ‘from it will come precincts of honest voters, captains enough for three armies, two ballerinas, a famous lawyer, a very tall policeman, and seven basso profundos, altos, and sopranos.’

He squinted across the dimly lighted room at the receipt upon the bureau. He touched the worn mattress under him. The springs moved softly to recognize each limb, each tired muscle, each aching bone.

He sighed. ‘I never argue with you, little one.’

‘Mama,’ she said.

‘Mama,’ he said.

And then as he closed his eyes and drew the covers to his chest and lay in the darkness by the great fountain, in the sight of a jury of fierce metal lions and amber goats and smiling gargoyles, he listened. And he heard it. It was very far away at first, very tentative, but it came clearer as he listened.

Softly, her arm back over her head, Maria’s finger-tips began to tap a little dance on the gleaming harp strings, on the shimmering brass pipes of the ancient bed. The music was – yes, of course: Santa Lucia! His lips moved to it in a warm whisper. Santa Lucia! Santa Lucia!

It was very beautiful.

The Town Where No One Got Off

CROSSING the continental United States by night, by day, on the train, you flash past town after wilderness town where nobody ever gets off. Or rather, no person who doesn’t belong, no person who hasn’t roots in these country graveyards ever bothers to visit their lonely stations or attend their lonely views.

I spoke of this to a fellow-passenger, another salesman like myself, on the Chicago-Los Angeles train as we crossed Iowa.

‘True,’ he said. ‘People get off in Chicago, everyone gets off there. People get off in New York, get off in Boston, get off in L.A. People who don’t live there go there to see and come back to tell.

But what tourist ever just got off at Fox Hill, Nebraska, to look at it? You? Me? No! I don’t know anyone, got no business there, it’s no health resort, so why bother?’

‘Wouldn’t it be a fascinating change,’ I said, ‘some year to plan a really different vacation? Pick some village lost on the plains where you don’t know a soul and go there for the hell of it?’

‘You’d be bored stiff.’

‘I’m not bored, thinking of it!’ I peered out of the window. ‘What’s the next town coming up on this line?’

‘Rampart Junction.’

I smiled. ‘Sounds good. I might get off there.’

‘You’re a liar and a fool. What you want? Adventure? Romance? Go ahead, jump off the train. Ten seconds later you’ll call yourself an idiot, grab a taxi and race us to the next town.’

‘Maybe.’

I watched telephone poles flick by, flick by, flick by. Far ahead I could see the first faint outlines of a town.

‘But I don’t think so,’ I heard myself say.

The salesman across from me looked faintly surprised.

For slowly, very slowly, I was rising to stand. I reached for my hat. I saw my hand fumble for my one suitcase. I was surprised, myself.

‘Hold on!’ said the salesman. ‘What’re you doing?’

The train rounded a curve suddenly. I swayed. Far ahead, I saw one church spire, a deep forest, a field of summer wheat.

‘It looks like I’m getting off the train,’ I said.

‘Sit down,’ he said.

‘No,’ I said. ‘There’s a something about that town up ahead. I’ve got to go see. I’ve got the time. I don’t have to be in L.A., really, until next Monday. If I don’t get off the train now, I’ll always wonder what I missed, what I let slip by when I had the chance to see it.’

‘We were just talking. There’s nothing there.’

‘You’re wrong,’ I said. ‘There is.’

I put my hat on my head and lifted the suitcase in my hand.

‘By God,’ said the salesman, ‘I think you’re really going to do it.’

My heart beat quickly. My face was flushed.

The train whistled. The train rushed down the track. The town was near!

‘Wish me luck,’ I said.

‘Luck!’ he cried.

I ran for the porter, yelling.

There was an ancient flake-painted chair tilted back against the station platform wall. In this chair, completely relaxed so he sank into his clothes, was a man of some seventy years whose timbers looked as if he’d been nailed there since the station was built.

The sun had burned his face dark and tracked his cheek with lizard folds and stitches that held his eyes in a perpetual squint. His hair smoked ash-white in the summer wind. His blue shirt, open at the neck to show white clocksprings, was bleached like the staring late afternoon sky. His shoes were blistered as if he had held them, uncaring, in the mouth of a stove, motionless, for ever. His shadow under him was stencilled a permanent black.

As I stepped down, the old man’s eyes flicked every door on the train and stopped, surprised, at me.

I thought he might wave.

But there was only a sudden colouring of his secret eyes; a chemical change that was recognition. Yet he had not twitched so much as his mouth, an eyelid, a finger. An invisible bulk had shifted inside him.

The moving train gave me an excuse to follow it with my eyes. There was no one else on the platform. No autos waited by the cobwebbed, nail-shut office. I alone had departed the iron thunder to set foot on the choppy waves of platform timber.

The train whistled over the hill.

Fool! I thought. My fellow-passenger had been right. I would panic at the boredom I already sensed in this place. All right, I thought, fool, yes, but run, no!

I walked my suitcase down the platform, not looking at the old man. As I passed, I heard his thin bulk shift again, this time so I could hear it. His feet were coming down to touch and tap the mushy boards.

I kept walking.

‘Afternoon,’ a voice said, faintly.

I knew he did not look at me but only at that great cloudless spread of shimmering sky.

‘Afternoon,’ I said.

I started up the dirt road towards the town. One hundred yards away, I glanced back.

The old man, still seated there, stared at the sun, as if posing a question.

I hurried on.

I moved through the dreaming late-afternoon town, utterly anonymous and alone, a trout going upstream, not touching the banks of a clear-running river of life that drifted all about me.

My suspicions were confirmed: it was a town where nothing happened, where occurred only the following events:

At four o’clock sharp, the Honneger Hardware door slammed as a dog came out to dust himself in the road.

Four-thirty, a straw sucked emptily at the bottom of a soda-glass, making a sound like a great cataract in the drug-store silence. Five o’clock, boys and pebbles plunged in the town river. Five-fifteen, ants paraded in the slanting light under some elm-trees.

And yet – I turned in a slow circle – somewhere in this town there must be something worth seeing. I knew it was there. I knew I had to keep walking and looking. I knew I would find it.

I walked. I looked.

All through the afternoon there was only one constant and unchanging factor: the old man in the bleached blue pants and shirt was never far away. When I sat in the drug store he was out front spitting tobacco that rolled itself into tumble-bugs in the dust. When I stood by the river he was crouched downstream making a great thing of washing his hands.

Along about seven-thirty in the evening, I was walking for the seventh or eight time through the quiet streets when I heard footsteps beside me.

I looked over and the old man was pacing me, looking straight ahead, a piece of dried grass in his stained teeth.

‘It’s been a long time,’ he said, quietly.

We walked along in the twilight.

‘A long time,’ he said, ‘waitin’ on that station platform.’

‘You?’ I said.

‘Me.’ He nodded in the tree shadows.

‘Were you waiting for someone at the station?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘You.’

‘Me?’ The surprise must have shown in my voice. ‘But why …? You never saw me before in your life.’

‘Did I say I did? I just said I was waitin’.’

We were on the edge of town now. He had turned and I had turned with him along the darkening river-bank towards the trestle where the night trains ran over going east, going west, but stopping rare few times.

‘You want to know anything about me?’ I asked, suddenly. ‘You the sheriff?’

‘No, not the sheriff. And no, I don’t want to know nothin’ about you.’ He put his hands in his pockets. The sun was set now. The air was suddenly cool. ‘I’m just surprised you’re here at last, is all.’

‘Surprised?’

‘Surprised,’ he said, ‘and … pleased.’

I stopped abruptly and looked straight at him.

‘How long have you been sitting on that station platform?’

‘Twenty years, give or take a few.’

I knew he was telling the truth; his voice was as easy and quiet as the river.

‘Waiting for me?’ I said.

‘Or someone like you,’ he said.

We walked on in the growing dark.

‘How you like our town?’

‘Nice, quiet,’ I said.

‘Nice, quiet.’ He nodded. ‘Like the people?’

‘People look nice and quiet.’

‘They are,’ he said. ‘Nice, quiet.’

I was ready to turn back but the old man kept talking and in order to listen and be polite I had to walk with him in the vaster darkness, the tides of field and meadow beyond town.

‘Yes,’ said the old man, ‘the day I retired, twenty years ago, I sat down on that station platform and there I been, sittin’ doin’ nothin’, waitin’ for something to happen, I didn’t know what, I didn’t know.

I couldn’t say. But when it finally happened, I’d know it, I’d look at it and say, Yes, sir, that’s what I was wait-in’ for. Train wreck? No. Old woman friend come back to town after fifty years? No. No. It’s hard to say. Someone. Something. And it seems to have something to do with you. I wish I could tell –’

‘Why don’t you try?’ I said.

The stars were coming out. We walked on.

‘Well,’ he said, slowly, ‘you know much about your own in-sides?’

‘You mean my stomach or you mean psychologically?’

‘That’s the word. I mean your head, your brain, you know much about that?’

The grass whispered under my feet. ‘A little.’

‘You hate many people in your time?’

‘Some.’

‘We all do. It’s normal enough to hate, ain’t it, and not only hate but, while we don’t talk about it, don’t we sometimes want to hit people who hurt us, even kill them?’

‘Hardly a week passes we don’t get that feeling,’ I said, ‘and put it away.’

‘We put away all our lives,’ he said. ‘The town says thus and so, mom and dad say this and that, the law says such and such. So you put away one killing and another and two more after that. By the time you’re my age, you got lots of that kind of stuff between your ears. And unless you went to war, nothin’ ever happened to get rid of it.’

‘Some men trap-shoot, or hunt ducks,’ I said. ‘Some men box or wrestle.’

‘And some don’t. I’m talkin’ about them that don’t. Me. All my life I’ve been saltin’ down those bodies, puttin’ ’em away on ice in my head. Sometimes you get mad at a town and the people in it for makin’ you put things aside like that. You like the old cavemen who just gave a hell of a yell and whanged someone on the head with a club.’

‘Which all leads up to …?’

‘Which all leads up to: everybody’d like to do one killin’ in his life, to sort of work off that big load of stuff, all those killin’s in his mind he never did have the guts to do. And once in a while a man has a chance.

Someone runs in front of his car and he forgets the brakes and keeps goin’. Nobody can prove nothin’ with that sort of thing. The man don’t even tell himself he did it. He just didn’t get his foot on the brake in time. But you know and I know what really happened, don’t we?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

The town was far away now. We moved over a small stream on a wooden bridge, just near the railway embankment.

‘Now,’ said the old man, looking at the water, ‘the only kind of killin’ worth doin’ is the one where nobody can guess who did it or why they did it or who they did it to, right? Well, I got this idea maybe twenty years ago.

I don’t think about it every day or every week. Sometimes months go by, but the idea’s this: only one train stops here each day, sometimes not even that. Now, if you wanted to kill someone you’d have to wait, wouldn’t you, for years and years, until a complete and actual stranger came to your town, a stranger who got off the train for no reason, a man nobody knows and who don’t know nobody in the town.

Then, and only then, I thought, sittin’ there on the station chair, you could just go up and when nobody’s around, kill him and throw him in the river. He’d be found miles downstream. Maybe he’d never be found. Nobody would ever think to come to Rampart Junction to find him. He wasn’t goin’ there. He was on his way some place else. There, that’s my whole idea. And I’d know that man the minute he got off the train. Know him, just as clear …’

I had stopped walking. It was dark. The moon would not be up for an hour.

‘Would you?’ I said.

‘Yes,’ he said. I saw the motion of his head looking at the stars. ‘Well, I’ve talked enough.’ He sidled close and touched my elbow. His hand was feverish, as if he had held it to a stove before touching me. His other hand, his right hand, was hidden, tight and bunched, in his pocket. ‘I’ve talked enough.’

Something screamed.

I jerked my head.

Above, a fast-flying night-express razored along the unseen tracks, flourished light on hill, forest, farm, town dwellings, field, ditch, meadow, ploughed earth, and water, then, raving high, cut off away, shrieking, gone. The rails trembled for a little while after that. Then, silence.

The old man and I stood looking at each other in the dark. His left hand was still holding my elbow. His other hand was still hidden.

‘May I say something?’ I said, at last.

The old man nodded.

‘About myself,’ I said. I had to stop. I could hardly breathe. I forced myself to go on. ‘It’s funny. I’ve often thought the same way as you. Sure, just today, going cross-country, I thought, how perfect, how perfect, how really perfect it could be. Business has been bad for me, lately. Wife sick. Good friend died last week. War in the world. Full of boils, myself. It would do me a world of good –’

‘What?’ the old man said, his hand on my arm.

‘To get off this train in a small town,’ I said, ‘where nobody knows me, with this gun under my arm, and find someone and kill them and bury them and go back down to the station and get on and go home and nobody the wiser and nobody ever to know who did it, ever. Perfect, I thought, a perfect crime. And I got off the train.’

We stood there in the dark for another minute, staring at each other. Perhaps we were listening to each other’s hearts beating very fast, very fast indeed.

The world turned under me. I clenched my fists. I wanted to fall. I wanted to scream, like the train.

For suddenly I saw that all the things I had just said were not lies put forth to save my life.

All the things I had just said to this man were true.

And now I knew why I had stepped from the train and walked up through this town. I knew what I had been looking for.

I heard the old man breathing hard and fast. His hand was tight on my arm as if he might fall. His teeth were clenched. He leaned towards me as I leaned towards him. There was a terrible silent moment of immense strain as before an explosion.

He forced himself to speak at last. It was the voice of a man crushed by a monstrous burden.

‘How do I know you got a gun under your arm?’

‘You don’t know.’ My voice was blurred. ‘You can’t be sure.’

He waited. I thought he was going to faint.

‘That’s how it is?’ he said.

‘That’s how it is,’ I said.

He shut his eyes tight. He shut his mouth tight.

After another five seconds, very slowly, heavily, he managed to take his hand away from my own immensely heavy arm. He looked down at his right hand then, and took it, empty, out of his pocket.

Slowly, with great weight, we turned away from each other and started walking blind, completely blind, in the dark.

The midnight PASSENGER TO BE PICKED UP flare sputtered on the tracks. Only when the train was pulling out of the station did I lean from the open Pullman door and look back.

The old man was seated there with his chair tilted against the station wall, with his faded blue pants and shirt and his sunbaked face and his sunbleached eyes. He did not glance at me as the train slid past. He was gazing east along the empty rails where tomorrow or the next day or the day after the day after that, a train, some train, any train, might fly by here, might slow, might stop. His face was fixed, his eyes were blindly frozen, towards the east. He looked a hundred years old.

The train wailed.

Suddenly old myself, I leaned out, squinting.

Now the darkness that had brought us together stood between. The old man, the station, the town, the forest, were lost in the night.

For an hour I stood in the roaring blast staring back at all that darkness.

Icarus Montgolfier Wright

HE lay on his bed and the wind blew through the window over his ears and over his half-opened mouth so it whispered to him in his dream.

It was like the wind of time hollowing the Delphic caves to say what must be said of yesterday, today, tomorrow. Sometimes one voice gave a shout far off away, sometimes two, a dozen, an entire race of men cried out through his mouth, but their words were always the same:

‘Look, look, we’ve done it!’

For suddenly he, they, one or many, were flung in the dream, and flew. The air spread in a soft warm sea where he swam, disbelieving.

‘Look, look! It’s done!’

But he didn’t ask the world to watch, he was only shocking his senses wide to see, taste, smell, touch the air, the wind, the rising moon. He swam alone in the sky. The heavy earth was gone.

But wait, he thought, wait now!

Tonight – what night is this?

The night before, of course. The night before the first flight of a rocket to the Moon. Beyond this room on the baked desert floor one hundred yards away the rocket waits for me.

Well, does it now? Is there really a rocket?

Hold on! he thought, and twisted, turned, sweating, eyes tight, to the wall, the fierce whisper in his teeth. Be certain-sure ! You, now, who are you?

Me? he thought. My name?

Jedediah Prentiss, born 1938, college graduate 1959, licensed rocket pilot, 1965. Jedediah Prentiss … Jedediah Prentiss….

The wind whistled his name away! He grabbed for it, yelling.

Then, gone quiet, he waited for the wind to bring his name back. He waited a long while, and there was only silence, and then after a thousand heartbeats, he felt motion.

The sky opened out like a soft blue flower. The Aegean Sea stirred soft white fans through a distant wine-coloured surf.

In the wash of the waves on the shore, he heard his name.

Icarus.

And again in a breathing whisper.

Icarus.

Someone shook his arm and it was his father saying his name and shaking away the night. And he himself lay small, half-turned to the window and the shore below and the deep sky, feeling the first wind of morning ruffle the golden feathers bedded in amber wax lying by the side of his cot. Golden wings stirred half-alive in his father’s arms, and the faint down on his own shoulders quilled trembling as he looked at these wings and beyond them to the cliff.

‘Father, how’s the wind?’

‘Enough for me, but never enough for you….’

‘Father, don’t worry. The wings seem clumsy, now, but my bones in the feathers will make them strong, my blood in the wax will make it live!’

‘My blood, my bones, too, remember; each man lends his flesh to his children, asking that they tend it well. Promise you’ll not go high, Icarus. The sun, or my son, the heat of one, the fever of the other, could melt these wings. Take care!’

And they carried the splendid golden wings into the morning and heard them whisper in their arms, whisper his name or a name or some name that blew, spun, and settled like a feather on the soft air.

Montgolfier.

His hands touched fiery rope, bright linen, stitched thread gone hot as summer. His hands fed wool and straw to a breathing flame.

Montgolfier.

And his eye soared up along the swell and sway, the oceanic tug and pull, the immensely wafted silver pear still filling with the shimmering tidal airs channelled up from the blaze. Silent as a god tilted slumbering above French countryside, this delicate linen envelope, this swelling sac of oven-baked air would soon pluck itself free.

Draughting upward to blue worlds of silence, his mind and his brother’s mind would sail with it, muted, serene among island clouds where uncivilized lightnings slept. Into that uncharted gulf and abyss where no bird-song or shout of man could follow, the balloon would hush itself. So cast adrift, he, Montgolfier, and all men, might hear the unmeasured breathing of God and the cathedral tread of eternity.

‘Ah …’ He moved, the crowd moved, shadowed by the warm balloon. ‘Everything’s ready, everything’s right….’

Right. His lips twitched in his dream. Right. Hiss, whisper, flutter, rush. Right.

From his father’s hands a toy jumped to the ceiling, whirled in its own wind, suspended, while he and his brother stared to see it flicker, rustle, whistle, heard it murmuring their names.

Wright.

Whispering: wind, sky, cloud, space, wing, fly .,.

‘Wilbur, Orville? Look; how’s that?’

Ah. In his sleep, his mouth sighed.

The toy helicopter hummed, bumped the ceiling, murmured eagle, raven, sparrow, robin, hawk; murmured eagle, raven, sparrow, robin, hawk. Whispered eagle, whispered raven, and at last, fluttering to their hands with a susurrance, a wash of blowing weather from summers yet to come, with a last whir and exhalation, whispered hawk.

Dreaming, he smiled.

He saw the clouds rush down the Aegean sky.

He felt the balloon sway drunkenly, its great bulk ready for the clear running wind.

He felt the sand hiss up the Atlantic shelves from the soft dunes that might save him if he, a fledgling bird, should fall. The framework struts hummed and chorded like a harp and himself caught up in its music.

Beyond this room he felt the primed rocket glide on the desert field, its fire-wings folded, its fire-breath kept, held ready to speak for three billion men. In a moment he would wake and walk slowly out to that rocket.

And stand on the rim of the cliff.

Stand cool in the shadow of the warm balloon.

Stand whipped by tidal sands drummed over Kitty Hawk.

And sheathe his boy’s wrists, arms, hands, fingers with golden wings in golden wax.

And touch for a final time the captured breath of man, the warm gasp of awe and wonder siphoned and sewn to lift their dreams.

And spark the gasoline engine.

And take his father’s hand and wish him well with his own wings, flexed and ready, here on the precipice.

Then whirl and jump.

Then cut the cords to free the great balloon.

Then rev the motor, prop the plane on air.

And crack the switch, to fire the rocket fuse.

And together in a single leap, swim, rush, flail, jump, sail, and glide, upturned to sun, moon, stars, they would go above Atlantic, Mediterranean; over country, wilderness, city, town; in gaseous silence, riffling feather, rattle-drum frame, in volcanic eruption, in timid, sputtering roar; in start, jar, hesitation, then steady ascension, beautifully held, wondrously transported, they would laugh and cry each his own name to himself. Or shout the names of others unborn or others long dead and blown away by the wine wind or the salt wind or the silent hush of balloon wind or the wind of chemical fire. Each feeling the bright feathers stir and bud deep-buried and thrusting to burst from their riven shoulder-blades! Each leaving behind the echo of their flying, a sound to encircle, recircle the earth in the winds and “speak again in other years to the sons of the sons of their sons, asleep but hearing the restless midnight sky.

Up, yet further up, higher, higher! A spring tide, a summer flood, an unending river of wings!

A bell rang softly.

No, he whispered, I’ll wake in a moment. Wait …

The Aegean slid away below the window, gone; the Atlantic dunes, the French countryside, dissolved down to New Mexico desert. In his room near his cot stirred no plumes in golden wax. Outside, no wind-sculpted pear, no trapdrum butterfly machine. Outside only a rocket, a combustible dream, waiting for the friction of his hand to set it off.

In the last moment of sleep, someone asked his name.

Quietly, he gave the answer as he had heard it during the hours from midnight on.

‘Icarus Montgolfier Wright.’

He repeated it slowly so the questioner might remember the order and spelling down to the last incredible letter.

‘Icarus Montgolfier Wright.

‘Born: nine hundred years before Christ. Grammar school: Paris, 1783. High school, college: Kitty Hawk, 1903. Graduation from Earth to Moon: this day, God willing, 1 August 1970. Death and burial, with luck, on Mars, summer 1999 in the Year of Our Lord.’

Then he let himself drift awake.

Moments later, crossing the desert tarmac, he heard someone shouting again and again and again.

And if no one was there or if someone was there behind him, he could not tell. And whether it was one voice or many, young or old, near or very far away, rising or falling, whispering or shouting to him all three of his brave new names, he could not tell, either. He did not turn to see.

For the wind was slowly rising and he let it take hold and blow him all the rest of the way across the desert to the rocket which stood waiting there.

Almost the End of the World

SIGHTING ROCK Junction, Arizona, at noon on 22 August 1961, Willy Bersinger let his miner’s boot rest easy on the jalopy’s accelerator and talked quietly to his partner, Samuel Fitts.

‘Yes, sir, Samuel, it’s great hitting town. After a couple of months out at the Penny Dreadful Mine, a juke-box looks like a stained-glass window to me. We need the town; without it, we might wake some morning and find ourselves all jerked beef and petrified rock. And then, of course, the town needs us, too.’

‘How’s that?’ asked Samuel Fitts.

‘Well, we bring things into the town that it hasn’t got – mountains, creeks, desert night, stars, things like that….’

And it was true, thought Willy, driving along. Set a man way out in the strange lands and he fills with wellsprings of silence. Silence of sagebrush, or a mountain lion purring like a warm beehive at noon. Silence of the river shallows deep in the canyons. All this a man takes in. Opening his mouth, in town, he breathes it out.

‘Oh, how I love to climb in that old barber-shop chair,’ Willy admitted. ‘And see all those city men lined up under the naked-lady calendars staring back at me, waiting while I chew over my philosophy of rocks and mirages and the kind of Time that just sits out there in the hills waiting for Man to go away. I exhale – and that wilderness settles in a fine dust on the customers. Oh, it’s nice, me talking, soft and easy, up and down, on and on….’

In his mind he saw the customers’ eyes strike fire. Some day they would yell and rabbit for the hills, leaving families and time-clock civilization behind.

‘It’s good to feel wanted,’ said Willy. ‘You and me, Samuel, are basic necessities for those city-dwelling folks. Gangway, Rock Junction!’

And with a tremulous tin whistling they steamed across city limits into awe and wonder.

They had driven perhaps a hundred feet through town when Willy kicked the brakes. A great shower of rust flakes sifted from the jalopy fenders. The car stood cowering in the road.

‘Something’s wrong,’ said Willy. He squinted his lynx eyes this way and that. He snuffed his huge nose. ‘You feel it? You smell it?’

‘Sure,’ said Samuel, uneasily, ‘but, what …?’

Willy scowled. ‘You ever see a sky-blue cigar-store Indian?’

‘Never did.’

‘There’s one over there. Ever see a pink dog-kennel, an orange out-house, a lilac-coloured bird-bath? There, there, and over there!’

Both men had risen slowly now to stand on the creaking floorboards.

‘Samuel,’ whispered Willy. ‘The whole damn shooting match, every kindling pile, porch-rail, gewgaw gingerbread, fence, fireplug, garbage truck, the whole blasted town, look at it! It was painted just an hour ago!’

‘No!’ said Samuel Fitts.

But there stood the band pavilion, the Baptist church, the firehouse, the Oddfellows’ orphanage, the railroad depot, the county jail, the cat hospital and all the bungalows, cottages, greenhouses, gazebos, shop-signs, mailboxes, telephone poles, and trash-bins, around and in between, and they all blazed with corn yellow, crab-apple greens, circus reds. From water-tank to tabernacle, each building looked as if God had jig-sawed it, coloured it, and set it out to dry a moment ago.

Not only that, but where weeds had always been, now cabbages, green onions, and lettuce crammed every yard, crowds of curious sunflowers clocked the noon sky, and pansies lay under unnumbered trees cool as summer puppies, their great damp eyes peering over rolled lawns mint-green as Irish travel posters. To top it all, ten boys, faces scrubbed, hair brilliantined, shirts, pants, and tennis shoes clean as chunks of snow, raced by.

‘The town,’ said Willy, watching them run, ‘has gone mad. Mystery. Mystery everywhere. Samuel, what kind of tyrant’s come to power? What law was passed that keeps boys clean, drives people to paint every toothpick, every geranium pot? Smell that smell? There’s fresh wallpaper in all those houses! Doom in some horrible shape has tried and tested these people. Human nature doesn’t just get this picky perfect overnight. I’ll bet all the gold I panned last month those attics, those cellars are cleaned out, all shipshape. I’ll bet you a real Thing fell on this town.’

‘Why, I can almost hear the cherubim singing in the Garden,’ Samuel protested. ‘How you figure Doom? Shake my hand, put ’er there. I’ll bet and take your money!’

The jalopy swerved around a corner through a wind that smelled of turpentine and whitewash. Samuel threw out a gum wrapper, snorting. He was somewhat surprised at what happened next. An old man in new overalls, with mirror-bright shoes, ran out in the street, grabbed the crumpled gum wrapper and shook his fist after the departing jalopy.

‘Doom …’ Samuel Fitts looked back, his voice fading. ‘Well … the bet still stands.’

They opened the door upon a barber-shop teeming with customers whose hair had already been cut and oiled, whose faces were shaved close and pink, yet who sat waiting to vault back into the chairs where three barbers flourished their shears and combs. A stock-market uproar filled the room as customers and barbers all talked at once.

When Willy and Samuel entered, the uproar ceased instantly. It was as if they had fired a shotgun blast through the door.

‘Sam … Willy …’

In the silence some of the sitting men stood up and some of the standing men sat down, slowly, staring.

‘Samuel,’ said Willy out of the corner of his mouth, ‘I feel like the Red Death standing here.’ Aloud he said, ‘Howdy! Here I am to finish my lecture on the “Interesting Flora and Fauna of the Great American Desert,” and –’

‘No!’

Antonelli, the head barber, rushed frantically at Willy, seized his arm, clapped his hand over Willy’s mouth like a snuffer on a candle. ‘Willy,’ he whispered, looking apprehensively over his shoulder at his customers. ‘Promise me one thing: buy a needle and thread, sew up your lips. Silence, man, if you value your life!’

Willy and Samuel felt themselves hurried forward. Two already neat customers leapt out of the barber chairs without being asked. As they stepped into the chairs, the two miners glimpsed their own images in the flyspecked mirror.

‘Samuel, there we are! Look! Compare!’

‘Why,’ said Samuel, blinking, ‘we’re the only men in all Rock Junction who really need a shave and a haircut.’

‘Strangers!’ Antonelli laid them out in the chairs as if to anaesthetize them quickly. ‘You don’t know what strangers you are!’

‘Why, we’ve only been gone a couple of months….’ A steaming towel inundated Willy’s face; he subsided with muffled cries. In steaming darkness he heard Antonelli’s low and urgent voice.

‘We’ll fix you to look like everyone else. Not that the way you look is dangerous, no, but the kind of talk you miners talk might upset folks at a time like this….’

‘Time like this, hell!’ Willy lifted the seething towel. One bleary eye fixed Antonelli. ‘What’s wrong with Rock Junction?’

‘Not just Rock Junction.’ Antonelli gazed off at some incredible mirage beyond the horizon. ‘Phoenix, Tucson, Denver. All the cities in America! My wife and I are going as tourists to Chicago next week. Imagine Chicago all painted and clean and new. The Pearl of the Orient they call it! Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Buffalo, the same! All because … well … get up now, walk over, and switch on that television set against the wall.’

Willy handed Antonelli the steaming towel, walked over, switched on the television set, listened to it hum, fiddled with the dials, and waited. White snow drifted down the screen.

‘Try the radio now,’ said Antonelli.

Willy felt everyone watch as he twisted the radio dial from station to station.

‘Hell,’ he said at last, ‘both your television and radio are broken.’

‘No,’ said Antonelli, simply.

Willy lay back down in the chair and closed his eyes.

Antonelli leaned forward, breathing hard.

‘Listen,’ he said.

‘Imagine four weeks ago, a late Saturday morning, women and children staring at clowns and magicians on TV. In beauty shops, women staring at TV fashions. In the barber-shop and hardware stores, men staring at baseball or trout fishing. Everybody everywhere in the civilized world staring. No sound, no motion, except on the little black and white screens.

‘And then, in the middle of all that staring …’

Antonelli paused to lift up one corner of the broiling cloth.

‘Sunspots on the sun,’ he said.

Willy stiffened.

‘Biggest damn sunspots in the history of mortal man,’ said Antonelli. ‘Whole damn world flooded with electricity. Wiped evry TV scren clear as a whistle, leaving nothing, and, after that, more nothing.’

His voice was remote as the voice of a man describing an Arctic landscape. He lathered Willy’s face not looking at what he was doing. Willy peered across the barber-shop, at the soft snow falling down and down that humming screen in an eternal winter. He could almost hear the rabbit-thumping of all the hearts in the shop.

Antonelli continued his funeral oration.

‘It took us all that first day to realize what had happened. Two hours after that first sunspot storm hit, every TV repairman in the United States was on the road. Everyone figured it was just their own set. With the radios conked out too it was only that night when newsboys, like in the old days, ran headlines through the streets that we got the shock about the sun-spots maybe going on – for the rest of our lives!’

The customers murmured.

Antonelli’s hand, holding the razor, shook. He had to wait.

‘All that blankness, that empty stuff falling down, falling down inside our television sets, oh, I tell you, it gave everyone the willies. It was like a good friend who talks to you in your front room and suddenly shuts up and lies there, pale, and you know he’s dead and you begin to turn cold yourself.

‘That first night, there was a run on the town’s movie houses. Films weren’t much, but it was like the Oddfellows’ Ball downtown till midnight. Drug-store fizzed up two hundred vanilla, three hundred chocolate sodas that first night of the Calamity. But you can’t buy movies and sodas every night. What then? Phone your in-laws for canasta or parchesi?’

‘Might as well,’ observed Willy, ‘blow your brains out.’

‘Sure, but people had to get out of their haunted houses. Walking through their parlours was like whistling past a graveyard. All that silence –’

Willy sat up a little. ‘Speaking of silence –’

‘On the third night,’ said Antonelli, quickly, ‘we were all still in shock. We were saved from outright lunacy by one woman. Somewhere in this town this woman strolled out of the house, and came back a minute later. In one hand she held a paintbrush. And in the other …’

‘A bucket of paint,’ said Willy.

Everyone smiled, seeing how well he understood.

‘If those psychologists ever strike off gold medals, they should pin one on that woman and every woman like her in every little town who saved our world from coming to an end. Those women who instinctively wandered in at twilight, and brought us the miracle cure …’

Willy imagined it. There were the glaring fathers and the scowling sons slumped by their dead TV sets waiting for the damn things to shout Ball One, or Strike Two! And then they looked up from their wake and there in the twilight saw the fair women of great purpose and dignity standing and waiting with brushes and paint. And a glorious light kindled their cheeks and eyes …’

‘Lord, it spread like wildfire!’ said Antonelli.

‘House to house, city to city. Jigsaw-puzzle craze, 1932; yo-yo craze, 1928, were nothing compared with the Everybody Do Everything Craze that blew this town to smithereens and glued it back again. Men everywhere slapped paint on anything that stood still ten seconds; men everywhere climbed steeples, straddled fences, fell off roofs and ladders by the hundreds. Women painted cupboards, closets; kids painted Tinkertoys, wagons, kites.

If they hadn’t kept busy, you could have built a wall around this town and renamed it Babbling Brook. All towns, everywhere, the same, where people had forgotten how to waggle their jaws, make their own talk. I tell you, men were moving in mindless circles, dazed, until their wives shoved a brush in their hand and pointed them towards the nearest unpainted wall!’

‘Looks like you finished the job,’ said Willy.

‘Paint stores ran out of paint three times the first week.’ Antonelli surveyed the town with pride. ‘The painting could only last so long, of course, unless you start painting hedges and spraying grass blades one by one.

Now that the attics and cellars are cleaned out, too, our fire is seeping off into, well – women canning fruit again, making tomato pickles, raspberry, strawberry preserves. Basement shelves are loaded. Big church doings, too.

Organized bowling, night donkey baseball, box socials, beer busts. Music shop sold five hundred ukeleles, two hundred twelve steel guitars, four hundred sixty ocarins and kazoos in four weeks. I’m studying trombone. Mac, there, the flute. Band concerts Thursday and Sunday nights. Hand-crank ice-cream machines? Bert Tyson’s sold two hundred last week alone. Twenty-eight days, Willy, Twenty-eight Days That Shook the World!’

Willy Bersinger and Samuel Fitts sat there, trying to imagine and feel the shock, the crushing blow.

‘Twenty-eight days, the barber-shop jammed with men, getting shaved twice a day so they can sit and stare at customers like they might say something,’ said Antonelli, shaving Willy now. ‘Once, remember, before TV, barbers were supposed to be great talkers. Well, this month it took us one whole week to warm up, get the rust out. Now we’re spouting fourteen to the dozen. No quality, but our quantity is ferocious. When you came in you heard the commotion. Oh, it’ll simmer down when we get used to the great Oblivion ’

‘Is that what everyone calls it?’

‘It sure looked that way to most of us, there for a while.’

Willy Bersinger laughed quietly and shook his head.

‘Now I know why you didn’t want me to start lecturing when I walked in that door.’

Of course, thought Willy, why didn’t I see it right off? Four short weeks ago the wilderness fell on this town and shook it good and scared it plenty. Because of the sunspots, all the towns in all the western world have had enough silence to last them ten years. And here I come by with another dose of silence, my easy talk about deserts and nights with no moon and only stars and just the little sound of the sand blowing along the empty river bottoms. No telling what might have happened if Antonelli hadn’t shut me up. I see me, tarred and feathered, leaving town.

‘Antonelli,’ he said aloud. ‘Thanks.’

‘For nothing,’ said Antonelli. He picked up his comb and shears. ‘Now, short on the sides, long in back?’

‘Long on the sides,’ said Willy Bersinger, closing his eyes again, ‘short in back.’

An hour later Willy and Samuel climbed back into their jalopy, which someone, they never knew who, had washed and polished while they were in the barber-shop.

‘Doom.’ Samuel handed over a small sack of gold-dust. ‘With a capital D.’

‘Keep it.’ Willy sat, thoughtful, behind the wheel. ‘Let’s take this money and hit out for Phoenix, Tucson, Kansas City, why not? Right now, we’re a surplus commodity around here. We won’t be welcome again until those little sets begin to herring-bone and dance and sing. Sure as hell, if we stay, we’ll open our traps and the Gila monsters and chicken hawks and the wilderness will slip out and make us trouble.’

Willy squinted at the highway straight ahead.

‘Pearl of the Orient, that’s what he said. Can you imagine that dirty old town, Chicago, all painted up fresh and new as a babe in the morning light? We just got to go see Chicago, by God!’

He started the car, let it idle, and looked at the town.

‘Man survives,’ he murmured. ‘Man endures. Too bad we missed the big change. It must have been a fierce thing, a time of trials and testings. Samuel, I don’t recall, do you? What have we ever seen on TV?’

‘Saw a woman wrestle a bear two falls out of three, one night.’

‘Who won?’

‘Damned if I know. She –’

But then the jalopy moved and took Willy Bersinger and Samuel Fitts with it, their hair cut, oiled, and neat on their sweet-smelling skulls, their cheeks pink-shaven, their fingernails flashing the sun. They sailed under clipped green, fresh-watered trees, through flowered lanes, past daffodil, lilac, violet, rose, and peppermint-coloured houses on the dustless road.

‘Pearl of the Orient, here we come!’

A perfumed dog, with permed hair, ran out, nipped their tyres, and barked, until they were gone away and completely out of sight.

Dark They were and Golden-eyed

THE rocket’s metal cooled in the meadow winds. Its lid gave a bulging pop. From its clock interior stepped a man, a woman, and three children. The other passengers whispered away across the Martian meadow, leaving the man alone among his family.

The man felt his hair flutter and the tissues of his body draw tight as if he were standing at the centre of a vacuum. His wife, before him, trembled. The children, small seeds, might at any instant be sown to all the Martian climes.

The children looked up at him. His face was cold.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked his wife.

‘Let’s get back on the rocket.’

‘Go back to Earth?’

‘Yes! Listen!’

The wind blew, whining. At any moment the Martian air might draw his soul from him, as marrow comes from a white bone.

He looked at Martian hills that time had worn with a crushing pressure of years. He saw the old cities, lost and lying like children’s delicate bones among the blowing lakes of grass.

‘Chin up, Harry,’ said his wife. ‘It’s too late. We’ve come at least sixty-five million miles or more.’

The children with their yellow hair hollered at the deep dome of Martian sky. There was no answer but the racing hiss of wind through the stiff grass.

He picked up the luggage in his cold hands. ‘Here we go,’ he said – a man standing on the edge of a sea, ready to wade in and be drowned.

They walked into town.

Their name was Bittering. Harry and his wife Cora; Tim, Laura, and David. They built a small white cottage and ate good breakfasts there, but the fear was never gone. It lay with Mr Bittering and Mrs Bittering, a third unbidden partner at every midnight talk, at every dawn awakening.

‘I feel like a salt crystal,’ he often said, ‘in a mountain stream, being washed away. We don’t belong here. We’re Earth people. This is Mars. It was meant for Martians. For heaven’s sake, Cora, let’s buy tickets for home!’

But she only shook her head. ‘One day the atom bomb will fix Earth. Then we’ll be safe here.’

‘Safe and insane!’

Tick-tock, seven o’clock sang the voice clock; time to get up. And they did.

Something made him check everything each morning – warm hearth, potted blood-geraniums – precisely as if he expected something to be amiss. The morning paper was toast-warm from the six a.m. Earth rocket. He broke its seal and tilted it at his breakfast plate. He forced himself to be convivial.

‘Colonial days all over again,’ he declared. ‘Why, in another year there’ll be a million Earthmen on Mars. Big cities, everything ! They said we’d fail. Said the Martians would resent our invasion. But did we find any Martians? Not a living soul! Oh, we found their empty cities, but no one in them. Right?’

A river of wind submerged the house. When the windows ceased rattling, Mr Bittering swallowed and looked at the children.

‘I don’t know,’ said David. ‘Maybe there’re Martians around we don’t see. Sometimes nights I think I hear ’em. I hear the wind. The sand hits my window. I get scared. And I see those towns way up in the mountains where the Martians lived a long time ago. And I think I see things moving around those towns, Papa. And I wonder if those Martians mind us living here. I wonder if they won’t do something to us for coming here.’

‘Nonsense!’ Mr Bittering looked out of the windows. ‘We’re clean, decent people.’ He looked at his children. ‘All dead cities have some kind of ghosts in them. Memories, I mean.’ He stared at the hills. ‘You see a staircase and you wonder what Martians looked like climbing it. You see Martian paintings and you wonder what the painter was like. You make a little ghost in your mind, a memory. It’s quite natural. Imagination.’ He stopped. ‘You haven’t been prowling up in those ruins, have you?’

‘No, Papa.’ David looked at his shoes.

‘See that you stay away from them. Pass the jam.’

‘Just the same,’ said little David, ‘I bet something happens.’

Something happened that afternoon.

Laura stumbled through the settlement, crying. She dashed blindly on to the porch.

‘Mother, Father – the war, Earth!’ she sobbed. ‘A radio flash just came. Atom bombs hit New York! All the space rockets blown up. No more rockets to Mars, ever!’

‘Oh, Harry!’ The mother held on to her husband and daughter.

‘Are you sure, Laura?’ asked the father quietly.

Laura wept. ‘We’re stranded on Mars, for ever and ever!’

For a long time there was only the sound of the wind in the late afternoon.

Alone, thought Bittering. Only a thousand of us here. No way back. No way. No way. Sweat poured from his face and his hands and his body; he was drenched in the hotness of his fear. He wanted to strike Laura, cry, ‘No, you’re lying! The rockets will come back!’ Instead, he stroked Laura’s head against him and said, ‘The rockets will get through, some day.’

‘In five years maybe. It takes that long to build one. Father, Father, what will we do?’

‘Go about our business, of course. Raise crops and children. Wait. Keep things going until the war ends and the rockets come again.’

The two boys stepped out on to the porch.

‘Children,’ he said, sitting there, looking beyond them, ‘I’ve something to tell you.’

‘We know,’ they said.

Bittering wandered into the garden to stand alone in his fear. As long as the rockets had spun a silver web across space, he had been able to accept Mars. For he had always told himself: Tomorrow, if I want, I can buy a ticket and go back to Earth.

But now: the web gone, the rockets lying in jigsaw heaps of molten girder and unsnaked wire. Earth people left to the strangeness of Mars, the cinnamon dusts and wine airs, to be baked like gingerbread shapes in Martian summers, put into harvested storage by Martian winters. What would happen to him, the others? This was the moment Mars had waited for. Now it would eat them.

He got down on his knees in the flower bed, a spade in his nervous hands. Work, he thought, work and forget.

He glanced up from the garden to the Martian mountains. He thought of the proud old Martian names that had once been on those peaks. Earthmen, dropping from the sky, had gazed upon hills, rivers, Martian seas left nameless in spite of names. Once Martians had built cities, named cities; climbed mountains, named mountains; sailed seas, named seas. Mountains melted, seas drained, cities tumbled. In spite of this, the Earth-men had felt a silent guilt at putting new names to these ancient hills and valleys.

Nevertheless, man lives by symbol and label. The names were given.

Mr Bittering felt very alone in his garden under the Martian sun, bent here, planting Earth flowers in a wild soil.

Think. Keep thinking. Different things. Keep your mind free of Earth, the atom war, the lost rockets.

He perspired. He glanced about. No one watching. He removed his tie. Pretty bold, he thought. First your coat off, now your tie. He hung it neatly on a peach tree he had imported as a sapling from Massachusetts.

He returned to his philosophy of names and mountains. The Earthmen had changed names. Now there were Hormel Valleys, Roosevelt Seas, Ford Hills, Vanderbilt Plateaus, Rockefeller Rivers, on Mars. It wasn’t right. The American settlers had shown wisdom, using old Indian prairie names: Wisconsin, Minnesota, Idaho, Ohio, Utah, Milwaukee, Waukegan, Osseo. The old names, the old meanings.

Staring at the mountains wildly he thought: Are you up there? All the dead ones, you Martians? Well, here we are, alone, cut off! Come down, move us out! We’re helpless!

The wind blew a shower of peach blossoms.

He put out his sun-browned hand, gave a small cry. He touched the blossoms, picked them up. He turned them, he touched them again and again. Then he shouted for his wife.

‘Cora!’

She appeared at a window. He ran to her.

‘Cora, these blossoms!’

She handled them.

‘Do you see? They’re different. They’ve changed! They’re not peach blossoms any more!’

‘Look all right to me,’ she said.

‘They’re not. They’re wrong ! I can’t tell how. An extra petal, a leaf, something, the colour, the smell!’

The children ran out in time to see their father hurrying about the garden, pulling up radishes, onions, and carrots from their beds.

‘Cora, come look!’

They handled the onions, the radishes, the carrots among them.

‘Do they look like carrots?’

‘Yes … No.’ She hesitated. ‘I don’t know.’

‘They’re changed.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘You know they have! Onions but not onions, carrots but not carrots. Taste: the same but different. Smell: not like it used to be.’ He felt his heart pounding, and he was afraid. He dug his fingers into the earth. ‘Cora, what’s happening? What is it? We’ve got to get away from this.’ He ran across the garden. Each tree felt his touch. ‘The roses. The roses. They’re turning green!’

And they stood looking at the green roses.

And two days later, Tim came running. ‘Come see the cow. I was milking her and I saw it. Come on!’

They stood in the shed and looked at their one cow.

It was growing a third horn.

And the lawn in front of their house very quietly and slowly was colouring itself, like spring violets. Seed from Earth but growing up a soft purple.

‘We must get away,’ said Bittering. ‘We’ll eat this stuff and then we’ll change – who knows to what. I can’t let it happen. There’s only one thing to do. Burn this food!’

‘It’s not poisoned.’

‘But it is. Subtly, very subtly. A little bit. A very little bit. We mustn’t touch it.’

He looked with dismay at their house. ‘Even the house. The wind’s done something to it. The air’s burned it. The fog at night. The boards, all warped out of shape. It’s not an Earthman’s house any more.’

‘Oh, your imagination!’

He put on his coat and tie. ‘I’m going into town. We’ve got to do something now. I’ll be back.’

‘Wait, Harry!’ his wife cried.

But he was gone.

In town, on the shadowy step of the grocery store, the men sat with their hands on their knees, conversing with great leisure and ease.

Mr Bittering wanted to fire a pistol in the air.

What are you doing, you fools! he thought. Sitting here! You’ve heard the news – we’re stranded on this planet. Well, move! Aren’t you frightened? Aren’t you afraid? What are you going to do?

‘Hello, Harry,’ said everyone.

‘Look,’ he said to them. ‘You did hear the news, the other day, didn’t you?’

They nodded and laughed. ‘Sure. Sure, Harry.’

‘What are you going to do about it?’

‘Do, Harry, do? What can we do?’

‘Build a rocket, that’s what!’

‘A rocket, Harry? To go back to all that trouble? Oh, Harry!’

‘But you must want to go back. Have you noticed the peach blossoms, the onions, the grass?’

‘Why, yes, Harry, seems we did,’ said one of the men.

‘Doesn’t it scare you?’

‘Can’t recall that it did, much, Harry.’

‘Idiots!’

‘Now, Harry.’

Bittering wanted to cry. ‘You’ve got to work with me. If we stay here, we’ll all change. The air. Don’t you smell it? Something in the air. A Martian, virus, maybe; some seed, or a pollen. Listen to me!’

They stared at him.

‘Sam,’ he said to one of them.

‘Yes, Harry?’

‘Will you help me build a rocket?’

‘Harry, I got a whole load of metal and some blueprints. You want to work in my metal shop, on a rocket, you’re welcome. I’ll sell you that metal for five hundred dollars. You should be able to construct a right pretty rocket if you work alone, in about thirty years.’

Everyone laughed.

‘Don’t laugh.’

Sam looked at him with quiet good humour.

‘Sam,’ Bittering said. ‘Your eyes –’

‘What about them, Harry?’

‘Didn’t they used to be grey?’

‘Well, now, I don’t remember.’

‘They were, weren’t they?’

‘Why do you ask, Harry?’

‘Because now they’re kind of yellow-coloured.’

‘Is that so, Harry?’ Sam said, casually.

‘And you’re taller and thinner –’

‘You might be right, Harry.’

‘Sam, you shouldn’t have yellow eyes.’

‘Harry, what colour eyes have you got?’ Sam said.

‘My eyes? They’re blue, of course.’

‘Here you are, Harry.’ Sam handed him a pocket mirror. ‘Take a look at yourself.’

Mr Bittering hesitated, and then raised the mirror to his face.

There were little, very dim flecks of new gold captured in the blue of his eyes.

‘Now look what you’ve done,’ said Sam, a moment later. ‘You’ve broken my mirror.’

Harry Bittering moved into the metal shop and began to build the rocket. Men stood in the open door and talked and joked without raising their voices. Once in a while they gave him a hand on lifting something. But mostly they just idled and watched him with their yellowing eyes.

‘It’s supper-time, Harry,’ they said.

His wife appeared with his supper in a wicker basket.

‘I won’t touch it,’ he said. ‘I’ll eat only food from our deepfreeze. Food that came from Earth. Nothing from our garden.’

His wife stood watching him. ‘You can’t build a rocket.’

‘I worked in a shop once, when I was twenty. I know metal. Once I get it started, the others will help,’ he said, not looking at her, laying out the blueprints.

‘Harry, Harry,’ she said, helplessly.

‘We’ve got to get away, Cora. We’ve got to!’

The nights were full of wind that blew down the empty moonlit sea-meadows past the little white chess cities lying for their twelve-thousandth year in the shallows. In the Earthmen’s settlement, the Bittering house shook with a feeling of change.

Lying abed, Mr Bittering felt his bones shifted, shaped, melted like gold. His wife, lying beside him, was dark from many sunny afternoons. Dark she was, and golden, burnt almost black by the sun, sleeping, and the children metallic in their beds, and the wind roaring forlorn and changing through the old peach trees, the violet grass, shaking out green rose petals.

The fear would not be stopped. It had his throat and heart. It dripped in a wetness of the arm and the temple and the trembling palm.

A green star rose in the east.

A strange word emerged from Mr Bittering’s lips.

‘Iorrt. Iorrt.’ He repeated it.

It was a Martian word. He knew no Martian.

In the middle of the night he arose and dialled a call through to Simpson, the archaeologist.

‘Simpson, what does the word “Iorrt” mean?’

‘Why that’s the old Martian word for our planet Earth. Why?’

‘No special reason.’

The telephone slipped from his hand.

‘Hello, hello, hello, hello,’ it kept saying while he sat gazing out at the green star. ‘Bittering? Harry, are you there?’

The days were full of metal sound. He laid the frame of the rocket with the reluctant help of three indifferent men. He grew very tired in an hour or so and had to sit down.

‘The altitude,’ laughed a man.

‘Are you eating, Harry?’ asked another.

‘I’m eating,’ he said, angrily.

‘From your deep-freeze?’

‘Yes!’

‘You’re getting thinner, Harry.’

‘I’m not!’

‘And taller.’

‘Liar!’

His wife took him aside a few days later. ‘Harry, I’ve used up all the food in the deep-freeze. There’s nothing left. I’ll have to make sandwiches using food grown on Mars.’

He sat down heavily.

‘You must eat,’ she said. ‘You’re weak.’

‘Yes,’ he said.

He took a sandwich, opened it, looked at it, and began to nibble at it.

‘And take the rest of the day off,’ she said. ‘It’s hot. The children want to swim in the canals and hike. Please come along.’

‘I can’t waste time. This is a crisis!’

‘Just for an hour,’ she urged. ‘A swim’ll do you good.’

He rose, sweating. ‘All right, all right. Leave me alone. I’ll come.’

‘Good for you, Harry.’

The sun was hot, the day quiet. There was only an immense staring burn upon the land. They moved along the canal, the father, the mother, the racing children in their swimsuits. They stopped and ate meat sandwiches. He saw their skin baking brown.

And he saw the yellow eyes of his wife and his children, their yes that were never yellow before. A few tremblings shook him, but were carried off in waves of pleasant heat as he lay in the sun. He was too tired to be afraid.

‘Cora, how long have your eyes been yellow?’

She was bewildered. ‘Always, I guess.’

‘They didn’t change from brown in the last three months?’

She bit her lips. ‘No. Why do you ask?’

‘Never mind.’

They sat there.

‘The children’s eyes,’ he said. ‘They’re yellow, too.’

‘Sometimes growing children’s eyes change colour.’

‘Maybe we’re children, too. At least to Mars. That’s a thought.’ He laughed. ‘Think I’ll swim.’

They leaped into the canal water, and he let himself sink down and down to the bottom like a golden statue and lie there in green silence. All was water, quiet and deep, all was peace. He felt the steady, slow current drift him easily.

If I lie here long enough, he thought, the water will work and eat away my flesh until the bones show like coral. Just my skeleton left. And then the water can build on that skeleton – green things, deep-water things, red things, yellow things. Change. Change. Slow, deep, silent change. And isn’t that what it is up there?

He saw the sky submerged above him, the sun made Martian by atmosphere and time and space.

Up there, a big river, he thought, a Martian river, all of us lying deeep in it, in our pebble houses, in our sunken boulder houses, like crayfish hidden, and the water washing away our old bodies and lengthening the bones and –

He let himself drift up through the soft light.

Tim sat on the edge of the canal, regarding his father seriously.

‘Utha,’ he said.

‘What?’ asked his father.

The boy smiled. ‘You know. Utha’s the Martian word for “father”.’

‘Where did you learn it?’

‘I don’t know. Around. Utha!’

‘What do you want?’

The boy hesitated. ‘I – I want to change my name.’

‘Change it?’

‘Yes.’

His mother swam over. ‘What’s wrong with Tim for a name?’

Tim fidgeted. ‘The other day you called Tim, Tim, Tim. I didn’t even hear. I said to myself, That’s not my name. I’ve a new name I want to use.’

Mr Bittering held to the side of the canal, his body cold and his heart pounding slowly. ‘What is this new name?’

‘Linnl. Isn’t that a good name? Can I use it? Can I, please?’

Mr Bittering put his hand to his head. He thought of the rocket, himself working alone, himself alone even among his family, so alone.

He heard his wife say, ‘Why not?’

He heard himself say, ‘Yes, you can use it.’

‘Yaaa!’ screamed the boy. ‘I’m Linnl, Linnl!’

Racing down the meadowlands, he danced and shouted.

Mr Bittering looked at his wife. ‘Why did we do that?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘It just seemed like a good idea.’

They walked into the hills. They strolled on old mosaic paths, beside still-pumping fountains. The paths were covered with a thin film of cool water all summer long. You kept your bare feet cool all the day, splashing as in a creek, wading.

They came to a small deserted Martian villa with a good view of the valley. It was on top of a hill. Blue-marble halls, large murals, a swimming-pool. It was refreshing in this hot summertime. The Martians hadn’t believed in large cities.

‘How nice,’ said Mrs Bittering, ‘if you could move up here to this villa for the summer.’

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘We’re going back to town. There’s work to be done on the rocket.’

But as he worked that night, the thought of the cool blue-marble villa entered his mind. As the hours passed, the rocket seemed less important.

In the flow of days and weeks, the rocket receded and dwindled. The old fever was gone. It frightened him to think he had let it slip this way. But somehow the heat, the air, the working conditions –

He heard the men murmuring on the porch of his metal shop.

‘Everyone’s going. You heard?’

‘All right. That’s right.’

Bittering came out. ‘Going where?’ He saw a couple of trucks, loaded with children and furniture, drive down the dusty street.

‘Up to the villa,’ said the man.

‘Yeah, Harry. I’m going. So is Sam. Aren’t you, Sam?’

‘That’s right, Harry. What about you?’

‘I’ve got work to do here.’

‘Work! You can finish that rocket in the autumn, when it’s cooler.’

He took a breath. ‘I got the frame all set up.’

‘In the autumn is better.’ Their voices were lazy in the heat.

‘Got to work,’ he said.

‘Autumn,’ they reasoned. And they sounded so sensible, so right.

‘Autumn would be best,’ he thought. ‘Plenty of time, then.’

No! cried part of himself, deep down, put away, locked tight, suffocating. No! No!

‘In the autumn,’ he said.

‘Come on, Harry,’ they all said.

‘Yes,’ he said, feeling his flesh melt in the hot liquid air. ‘Yes, in the autumn. I’ll begin work again then.’

‘I got a villa near the Tirra Canal,’ said someone.

‘You mean the Roosevelt Canal, don’t you?’

‘Tirra. The old Martian name.’

‘But on the map –’

‘Forget the map. It’s Tirra now. Now I found a place in the Pillan mountains –’

‘You mean the Rockefeller range,’ said Bittering.

‘I mean the Pillan mountains,’ said Sam.

‘Yes,’ said Bittering, buried in the hot, swarming air. ‘The Pillan mountains.’

Everyone worked at loading the truck in the hot, still afternoon of the next day.

Laura, Tim, and David carried packages. Or, as they preferred to be known, Ttil, Linnl, and Werr carried packages.

The furniture was abandoned in the little white cottage.

‘It looked just fine in Boston,’ said the mother. ‘And here in the cottage. But up at the villa? No. We’ll get it when we come back in the autumn.’

Bittering himself was quiet.

‘I’ve some ideas on furniture for the villa,’ he said, after a time. ‘Big, lazy furniture.’

‘What about your Encyclopedia? You’re taking it along, surely?’

Mr Bittering glanced away. ‘I’ll come and get it next week.’

They turned to their daughter. ‘What about your New York dresses?’

The bewildered girl stared. ‘Why, I don’t want them any more.’

They shut off the gas, the water, they locked the doors and walked away. Father peered into the truck.

‘Gosh, we’re not taking much,’ he said. ‘Considering all we brought to Mars, this is only a handful!’

He started the truck.

Looking at the small white cottage for a long moment, he was filled with a desire to rush to it, touch it, say good-bye to it, for he felt as if he were going away on a long journey, leaving something to which he could never quite return, never understand again.

Just then Sam and his family drove by in another truck.

‘Hi, Bittering! Here we go!’

The truck swung down the ancient highway out of town. There were sixty others travelling the same direction. The town filled with a silent, heavy dust from their passage. The canal waters lay blue in the sun, and a quiet wind moved in the strange trees.

‘Good-bye, town!’ said Mr Bittering.

‘Good-bye, good-bye,’ said the family, waving to it.

They did not look back again.

Summer burned the canals dry. Summer moved like flame upon the meadows. In the empty Earth settlement, the painted houses flaked and peeled. Rubber tyres upon which children had swung in back yards hung suspended like stopped clock pendulums in the blazing air.

At the metal shop, the rocket frame began to rust.

In the quiet autumn, Mr Bittering stood, very dark now, very golden-eyed, upon the slope above his villa, looking at the valley.

‘It’s time to go back,’ said Cora.

‘Yes, but we’re not going,’ he said, quietly. ‘There’s nothing there any more.’

‘Your books,’ she said. ‘Your fine clothes.’

‘Your Illes and your fine ior uele rre,’ she said.

‘The town’s empty. No one’s going back,’ he said. ‘There’s no reason to, none at all.’

The daughter wove tapestries and the sons played songs on ancient flutes and pipes, their laughter echoing in the marble villa.

Mr Bittering gazed at the Earth settlement far away in the low valley. ‘Such odd, such ridiculous houses the Earth people built.’

‘They didn’t know any better,’ his wife mused. ‘Such ugly people. I’m glad they’ve gone.’

They both looked at each other, startled by all they had just finished saying. They laughed.

‘Where did they go?’ he wondered. He glanced at his wife. She was golden and slender as his daughter. She looked at him, and he seemed almost as young as their eldest son.

‘I don’t know,’ she said.

‘We’ll go back to town maybe next year, or the year after, or the year after that,’ he said, calmly. ‘Now – I’m warm. How about taking a swim?’

They turned their backs to the valley. Arm in arm they walked silently down a path of clear running spring water.

Five years later, a rocket fell out of the sky. It lay steaming in the valley. Men leaped out of it, shouting.

‘We won the war on Earth! We’re here to rescue you! Hey!’

But the American-built town of cottages, peach trees, and theatres was silent. They found a half-finished rocket frame, rusting in an empty shop.

The rocket men searched the hills. The captain established headquarters in an abandoned bar. His lieutenant came back to report.

‘The town’s empty, but we found native life in the hills, sir. Dark people. Yellow eyes. Martians. Very friendly. We talked a bit, not much. They learn English fast. I’m sure our relations will be most friendly with them, sir.’

‘Dark, eh?’ mused the captain. ‘How many?’

‘Six, eight hundred, I’d say, living in those marble ruins in the hills, sir. Tall, healthy. Beautiful women.’

‘Did they tell you what became of the men and women who built this Earth settlement, Lieutenant?’

‘They hadn’t the foggiest notion of what happened to this town or its people.’

‘Strange. You think those Martians killed them?’

‘They look surprisingly peaceful. Chances are a plague did this town in, sir.’

‘Perhaps. I suppose this is one of those mysteries we’ll never solve. One of those mysteries you read about.’

The captain looked at the room, the dusty windows, the blue mountains rising beyond, the canals moving in the light, and he heard the soft wind in the air. He shivered. Then, recovering, he tapped a large fresh map he had thumb-tacked to the top of an empty table.

‘Lots to be done, Lieutenant.’ His voice droned on and quietly on as the sun sank behind the blue hills. ‘New settlements. Mining sites, minerals to be looked for. Bacteriological specimens taken. The work, all the work.

And the old records were lost. We’ll have a job of remapping to do, renaming the mountains and rivers and such. Calls for a little imagination.

‘What do you think of naming those mountains the Lincoln Mountains, this canal the Washington Canal, those hills – we can name those hills for you, Lieutenant. Diplomacy. And you, for a favour, might name a town for me. Polishing the apple. And why not make this the Einstein Valley, and further over … are you listening, Lieutenant?’

The lieutenant snapped his gaze from the blue colour and the quiet mist of the hills far beyond the town.

‘What? Oh, yes, sir!’

The Smile

IN the town square the queue had formed at five in the morning, while cocks were crowing far out in the rimed country and there were no fires. All about, among the ruined buildings, bits of mist had clung at first, but now with the new light of seven o’clock it was beginning to disperse. Down the road, in twos and threes, more people were gathering in for the day of marketing, the day of festival.

The small boy stood immediately behind two men who had been talking loudly in the clear air, and all of the sounds they made seemed twice as loud because of the cold. The small boy stamped his feet and blew on his red, chapped hands, and looked up at the soiled gunny-sack clothing of the men, and down the long line of men and women ahead.

‘Here, boy, what’re you doing out so early?’ said the man behind him.

‘Got my place in line, I have,’ said the boy.

‘Whyn’t you run off, give your place to someone who appreciates?’

‘Leave the boy alone,’ said the man ahead, suddenly turning.

‘I was joking.’ The man behind put his hand on the boy’s head. The boy shook it away coldly. ‘I just thought it strange, a boy out of bed so early.’

‘This boy’s an appreciator of arts, I’ll have you know,’ said the boy’s defender, a man named Grigsby. ‘What’s your name, lad?’

‘Tom.’

‘Tom here is going to spit clean and true, right, Tom?’

‘I sure am!’

Laughter passed down the line.

A man was selling cracked cups of hot coffee up ahead. Tom looked and saw the little hot fire and the brew bubbling in a rusty pan. It wasn’t really coffee. It was made from some berry that grew on the meadowlands beyond town, and it sold a penny a cup to warm their stomachs; but not many were buying, not many had the wealth.

Tom stared ahead to the place where the line ended, beyond a bombed-out stone wall.

‘They say she smiles,’ said the boy.

‘Aye, she does,’ said Grigsby.

‘They say she’s made of oil and canvas.’

‘True. And that’s what makes me think she’s not the original one. The original, now, I’ve heard, was painted on wood a long time ago.’

‘They say she’s four centuries old.’

‘Maybe more. No one knows what year this is, to be sure.’

‘It’s 2061!’

‘That’s what they say, boy, yes. Liars. Could be 3,000 or 5,000, for all we know. Things were in a fearful mess there for a while. All we got now is bits and pieces.’

They shuffled along the cold stones of the street.

‘How much longer before we see her?’ asked Tom, uneasily.

‘Just a few more minutes. They got her set up with four brass poles and velvet rope, all fancy, to keep folks back. Now mind, no rocks, Tom; they don’t allow rocks thrown at her.’

‘Yes, sir.’

The sun rose higher in the heavens, bringing heat which made the men shed their grimy coats and greasy hats.

‘Why’re we all here in line?’ asked Tom, at last. ‘Why’re we all here to spit?’

Grigsby did not glance down at him, but judged the sun. ‘Well, Tom, there’s lots of reasons.’ He reached absently for a pocket that was long gone, for a cigarette that wasn’t there. Tom had seen the gesture a million times. ‘Tom, it has to do with hate. Hate for everything in the Past. I ask you, Tom, how did we get in such a state, cities all junk, roads like jigsaws from bombs, and half the cornfields glowing with radio-activity at night? Ain’t that a lousy stew, I ask you?’

‘Yes, sir, I guess so.’

‘It’s this way, Tom. You hate whatever it was that got you all knocked down and ruined. That’s human nature. Unthinking, maybe, but human nature anyway.’

‘There’s hardly nobody or nothing we don’t hate,’ said Tom.

‘Right! The whole blooming caboodle of them people in the Past who run the world. So here we are on a Thursday morning with our guts plastered to our spines, cold, live in caves and such, don’t smoke, don’t drink, don’t nothing except have our festivals, Tom, our festivals.’

And Tom thought of the festivals in the past few years. The year they tore up all the books in the square and burned them and everyone was drunk and laughing. And the festival of science a month ago when they dragged in the last motor-car and picked lots and each lucky man who won was allowed one smash of a sledge-hammer at the car.

‘Do I remember that, Tom? Do I remember? Why, I got to smash the front window, the window, you hear? My God, it made a lovely sound! Crash!’

Tom could hear the glass falling in glittering heaps.

‘And Bill Henderson, he got to bash the engine. Oh, he did a smart job of it, with great efficiency. Wham!’

But the best of all, recalled Grigsby, there was the time they smashed a factory that was still trying to turn out aeroplanes.

‘Lord, did we feel good blowing it up!’ said Grigsby. ‘And then we found that newspaper plant and the munitions depot and exploded them together. Do you understand, Tom?’

Tom puzzled over it. ‘I guess.’

It was high noon. Now the odours of the ruined city stank on the hot air and things crawled among the tumbled buildings.

‘Won’t it ever come back, mister?’

‘What, civilization? Nobody wants it. Not me!’

‘I could stand a bit of it,’ said the man behind another man. ‘There were a few spots of beauty in it.’

‘Don’t worry your heads,’ shouted Grigsby. ‘There’s no room for that, either.’

‘Ah,’ said the man behind the man. ‘Someone’ll come along some day with imagination and patch it up. Mark my words. Someone with a heart.’

‘No,’ said Grigsby.

‘I say yes. Someone with a soul for pretty things. Might give us back a kind of limited sort of civilization, the kind we could live in in peace.’

‘First thing you know there’s war!’

‘But maybe next time it’d be different.’

At last they stood in the main square. A man on horseback was riding from the distance into the town. He had a piece of paper in his hand. In the centre of the square was the roped-off area. Tom, Grigsby, and the others were collecting their spittle and moving forward – moving forward prepared and ready, eyes wide. Tom felt his heart beating very strongly and excitedly, and the earth was hot under his bare feet.

‘Here we go, Tom, let fly!’

Four policemen stood at the corners of the roped area, four men with bits of yellow twine on their wrists to show their authority over other men. They were there to prevent rocks being hurled.

‘This way,’ said Grigsby at the last moment, ‘everyone feels he’s had his chance at her, you see, Tom? Go on, now!’

Tom stood before the painting and looked at it for a long time.

‘Tom, spit!’

His mouth was dry.

‘Get on, Tom! Move!’

‘But,’ said Tom, slowly, ‘she’s BEAUTIFUL!’

‘Here, I’ll spit for you!’ Grigsby spat and the missile flew in the sunlight. The woman in the portrait smiled serenely, secretly, at Tom, and he looked back at her, his heart beating, a kind of music in his ears.

‘She’s beautiful,’ he said.

The line fell silent. One moment they were berating Tom for not moving forward, now they were turning to the man on horseback.

‘What do they call it, sir?’ asked Tom, quietly.

‘The picture? Mono. Lisa, Tom, I think. Yes, the Mona Lisa.’

‘I have an announcement,’ said the man on horseback. ‘The authorities have decreed that as of high noon today the portrait in the square is to be given over into the hands of the populace there, so they may participate in the destruction of –’

Tom hadn’t even time to scream before the crowd bore him, shouting and pummelling about, stampeding towards the portrait. There was a sharp ripping sound. The police ran to escape. The crowd was in full cry, their hands like so many hungry birds pecking away at the portrait.

Tom felt himself thrust almost through the broken thing. Reaching out in blind imitation of the others, he snatched a scrap of oily canvas, yanked, felt the canvas give, then fell, was kicked, sent rolling to the outer rim of the mob. Bloody, his clothing torn, he watched old women chew pieces of canvas, men break the frame, kick the ragged cloth, and rip it into confetti.

Only Tom stood apart, silent in the moving square. He looked down at his hand. It clutched the piece of canvas close to his chest, hidden.

‘Hey there, Tom!’ cried Grigsby.

Without a word, sobbing, Tom ran. He ran out and down the bomb-pitted road, into a field, across a shallow stream, not looking back, his hand clenched tightly, tucked under his coat.

At sunset he reached the small village and passed on through. By nine o’clock he came to the ruined farm dwelling. Around back, in the half-silo, in the part that still remained upright, tented over, he heard the sounds of sleeping, the family – his mother, father, and brother. He slipped quickly, silently, through the small door and lay down, panting.

‘Tom?’ called his mother in the dark.

‘Yes.’

‘Where’ve you been?’ snapped his father. ‘I’ll beat you in the morning.’

Someone kicked him. His brother, who had been left behind to work their little patch of ground.

‘Go to sleep,’ cried his mother, faintly.

Another kick.

Tom lay getting his breath. All was quiet. His hand was pushed to his chest, tight, tight. He lay for half an hour this way, eyes closed.

Then he felt something, and it was a cold white light. The moon rose very high and the little square of light moved in the silo and crept slowly over Tom’s body. Then, and only then, did his hand relax. Slowly, carefully, listening to those who slept about him, Tom drew his hand forth. He hesitated, sucked in his breath, and then, waiting, opened his hand and uncrumpled the tiny fragment of painted canvas.

All the world was asleep in the moonlight.

And there on his hand was the Smile.

He looked at it in the white illumination from the midnight sky. And he thought, over and over to himself, quietly, the Smile, the lovely Smile.

An hour later he could still see it, even after he had folded it carefully and hidden it. He shut his eyes and the Smile was there in the darkness. And it was still there, warm and gentle, when he went to sleep and the world was silent and the moon sailed up and then down the cold sky towards morning.

Here there be Tygers

‘YOU have to beat a planet at its own game,’ said Chatterton. ‘Get in, rip it up, poison its animals, dam its rivers, sow its fields, depollinate its air, mine it, nail it down, hack away at it, and get the hell out from under when you have what you want.

Otherwise, a planet will fix you good. You can’t trust planets. They’re bound to be different, bound to be bad, bound to be out to get you, especially this far off, a billion miles from nowhere, so you get them first. Tear their skin off, I say. Drag out the minerals and run away before the damn world explodes in your face. That’s the way to treat them.’

The rocket ship sank down towards planet 7 cf star system 84. They had travelled millions upon millions of miles. Earth was far away, her system and her sun forgotten, her system settled and investigated and profited on, and other systems rummaged through and milked and tidied up, and now the rockets of these tiny men from an impossibly remote planet were probing out to far universes.

In a few months, a few years, they could travel anywhere, for the speed of their rocket was the speed of a god, and now for the ten thousandth time one of the rockets of the far-circling hunt was feathering down towards an alien world.

‘No,’ said Captain Forester. ‘I have too much respect for other worlds to treat them the way you want to, Chatterton. It’s not my business to rape or ruin, anyway, thank God. I’m glad I’m just a rocket man. You’re the anthropologist-mineralogist. Go ahead, do your mining and ripping and scraping. I’ll just watch. I’ll just go around looking at this new world, whatever it is, however it seems.

I like to look. All rocket men are lookers or they wouldn’t be rocket men. You like to smell new airs, if you’re a rocket man, and see new colours and new people if there are new people to see, and new oceans and islands.’

‘Take your gun along,’ said Chatterton.

‘In my holster,’ said Forester.

They turned to the port together and saw the green world rising to meet their ship. ‘I wonder what it thinks of us?’ said Forester.

‘It won’t like me,’ said Chatterton. ‘By God, I’ll see to it it won’t like me. And I don’t care, you know. I don’t give a damn. I’m out for the money. Land us over there, will you, Captain; that looks like iron country if I ever saw it.’

It was the freshest green colour they had seen since childhood.

Lakes lay like clear blue water droplets through the soft hills; there were no loud highways, signboards, or cities. It’s a sea of green golf-links, thought Forester, which goes on for ever. Putting greens, driving greens, you could walk ten thousand miles in any direction and never finish your game. A Sunday planet, a croquet-lawn world, where you could lie on your back, clover in your lips, eyes half-shut, smiling at the sky, smelling the grass, drowse through an eternal Sabbath, rousing only on occasion to turn the Sunday paper or crack the red-striped wooden ball through the hoop.

‘If ever a planet was a woman, this one is.’

‘Woman on the outside, man on the inside,’ said Chatterton. ‘All hard underneath, all male iron, copper, uranium, black sod. Don’t let the cosmetics fool you.’

He walked to the bin where the Earth Drill waited. Its great screw-snout glittered bluely, ready to stab seventy feet deep and suck out corks of earth, deeper still with extensions into the heart of the planet. Chatterton winked at it. ‘We’ll fix your woman, Forester, but good.’

‘Yes, I know you will,’ said Forester, quietly.

The rocket landed.

‘It’s too green, too peaceful,’ said Chatterton. ‘I don’t like it.’ He turned to the captain. ‘We’ll go out with our rifles.’

‘I give orders, if you don’t mind.’

‘Yes, and my company pays our way with millions of dollars of machinery we must protect; quite an investment.’

The air on the new planet 7 in star system 84 was good. The port swung wide. The men filed out into the greenhouse world.

The last man to emerge was Chatterton, gun in hand.

As Chatterton set foot to the green lawn, the earth trembled. The grass shook. The distant forest rumbled. The sky seemed to blink and darken imperceptibly. The men were watching Chatterton when it happened.

‘An earthquake, by God!’

Chatterton’s face paled. Everyone laughed.

‘It doesn’t like you, Chatterton!’

‘Nonsense!’

The trembling died away at last.

‘Well,’ said Captain Forester, ‘it didn’t quake for us, so it must be that it doesn’t approve of your philosophy.’

‘Coincidence,’ Chatterton smiled. ‘Come on now on the double. I want the Drill out here in a half-hour for a few samplings.’

‘Just a moment.’ Forester stopped laughing. ‘We’ve got to clear the area first, be certain there’re no hostile people or animals. Besides, it isn’t every year you hit a planet like this, very nice; can you blame us if we want to have a look at it?’

‘All right.’ Chatterton joined them. ‘Let’s get it over with.’

They left a guard at the ship and they walked away over fields and meadows, over small hills and into little valleys. Like a bunch of boys out hiking on the finest day of the best summer in the most beautiful year in history, walking in the croquet weather where if you listened you could hear the whisper of the wooden ball across grass, the click through the hoop, the gentle undulations of voices, a sudden high drift of women’s laughter from some ivy-shaded porch, the tinkle of ice in the summer tea-pitcher.

‘Hey,’ said Driscoll, one of the younger crewmen, sniffing the air. ‘I brought a baseball and bat; we’ll have a game later. What a diamond!’

The men laughed quietly in the baseball season, in the good quiet wind for tennis, in the weather for bicycling and picking wild grapes.

‘How’d you like the job of mowing all this?’ asked Driscoll.

The men stopped.

‘I knew there was something wrong!’ cried Chatterton. ‘This grass; it’s freshly cut!’

‘Probably a species of dichondra, always short.’

Chatterton spat on the green grass and rubbed it in with his boot. ‘I don’t like it, I don’t like it. If anything happened to us, no one on Earth would ever know. Silly policy: if a rocket fails to return, we never send a second rocket to check the reason why.’

‘Natural enough,’ explained Forester. ‘We can’t waste time on a thousand hostile worlds, fighting futile wars. Each rocket represents years, money, lives. We can’t afford to waste two rockets if one rocket proves a planet hostile. We go on to peaceful planets. Like this one.’

‘I often wonder,’ said Driscoll, ‘what happened to all those lost expeditions on worlds we’ll never try again.’

Chatterton eyed the distant forest. ‘They were shot, stabbed, broiled for dinner. Even as we may be, any minute. It’s time we got back to work, Captain!’

They stood at the top of a little rise.

‘Feel,’ said Driscoll, his hands and arms out loosely. ‘Remember how you used to run when you were a kid, and how the wind felt? Like feathers on your arms. You ran and thought any minute you’d fly, but you never quite did.’

The men stood remembering. There was a smell of pollen and new rain drying upon a million grass blades.

Driscoll gave a little run. ‘Feel it, by God, the wind! You know, we never have really flown by ourselves. We have to sit inside tons of metal, away from flying, really. We’ve never flown like birds fly, to themselves. Wouldn’t it be nice to put your arms out like this –’ He extended his arms. ‘And run.’ He ran ahead of them, laughing at his idiocy. ‘And fly!’ he cried.

He flew.

Time passed on the silent gold wrist-watches of the men standing below. They stared up. And from the sky came a high sound of almost unbelievable laughter.

‘Tell him to come down,’ whispered Chatterton. ‘He’ll be killed.’

Nobody heard. Their faces were raised away from Chatterton; they were stunned and smiling.

At last Driscoll landed at their feet. ‘Did you see me? My God, I flew!’

They had seen.

‘Let me sit down, oh Lord, Lord.’ Driscoll slapped his knees, chuckling. ‘I’m a sparrow, I’m a hawk, God bless me. Go on, all of you, try it!’

‘It’s the wind. It picked me up and flew me!’ he said, a moment later, gasping, shivering with delight.

‘Let’s get out of here.’ Chatterton started turning slowly in circles, watching the blue sky. ‘It’s a trap, it wants us all to fly in the air. Then it’ll drop us all at once and kill us. I’m going back to the ship.’

‘You’ll wait for my order on that,’ said Forester.

The men were frowning, standing in the warm-cool air, while the wind sighed about them. There was a kite sound in the air, a sound of eternal March.

‘I asked the wind to fly me,’ said Driscoll. ‘And it did !’

Forester waved the others aside. ‘I’ll chance it next. If I’m killed, back to the ship, all of you.’

‘I’m sorry, I can’t allow this; you’re the captain,’ said Chatterton. ‘We can’t risk you.’ He took out his gun. ‘I should have some sort of authority or force here. This game’s gone on too long; I’m ordering us back to the ship!’

‘Holster your gun,’ said Forester quietly.

‘Stand still, you idiot!’ Chatterton blinked now at this man, now at that. ‘Haven’t you felt it? This world’s alive, it has a look to it, it’s playing with us, biding its time.’

‘I’ll be the judge of that,’ said Forester. ‘You’re going back to the ship, in a moment, under arrest, if you don’t put up that gun.’

‘If you fools won’t come with me, you can die out here. I’m going back, get my samples, and get out.’

‘Chatterton!’

‘Don’t try to stop me!’

Chatterton started to run. Then, suddenly, he gave a cry.

Everyone shouted and looked up.

‘There he goes,’ said Driscoll.

Chatterton was up in the sky.

Night had come on like the closing of a great but gentle eye. Chatterton sat stunned on the side of the hill. The other men sat around him, exhausted and laughing. He would not look at them, he would not look at the sky, he would only feel of the earth, and his arms and his legs and his body, tightening in on himself.

‘God, wasn’t it perfect!’ said a man named Koestler.

They had all flown, like orioles and eagles and sparrows, and they were all happy.

‘Come out of it, Chatterton, it was fun, wasn’t it?’ said Koestler.

‘It’s impossible.’ Chatterton shut his eyes, tight, tight. ‘It can’t do it. There’s only one way for it to do it; it’s alive. The air’s alive. Like a fist, it picked me up. Any minute now, it can kill us all. It’s alive!’

‘All right,’ said Koestler, ‘say it’s alive. And a living thing must have purposes. Suppose the purpose of this world is to make us happy.’

As if to add to this, Driscoll came flying up, canteens in each hand. ‘I found a creek, tested and pure water, wait’ll you try it!’

Forester took a canteen, nudged Chatterton with it, offering a drink. Chatterton shook his head and drew hastily away. He put his hands over his face. ‘It’s the blood of this planet. Living blood. Drink that, put that inside and you put this world inside you to peer out your eyes and listen through your ears. No thanks!’

Forester shrugged and drank.

‘Wine!’ he said.

‘It can’t be!’

‘It is. Smell it, taste it! A rare white wine!’

‘French domestic’ Driscoll sipped his.

‘Poison,’ said Chatterton.

They passed the canteens round.

They idled on through the gentle afternoon, not wanting to do anything to disturb the peace that lay all about them. They were like very young men in the presence of great beauty, of a fine and famous woman, afraid that by some word, some gesture, they might turn her face away, avert her loveliness and her kindly attentions.

They had felt the earthquake that had greeted Chatterton, thought Forester, and they did not want earthquake. Let them enjoy this Day After School Lets Out, this fishing weather. Let them sit under the shade trees or walk on the tender hills, but let them drill no drillings, test no testings, contaminate no contaminations.

They found a small stream which poured into a boiling water pool. Fish, swimming in the cold creek above, fell glittering into the hot spring and floated, minutes later, cooked, to the surface.

Chatterton reluctantly joined the others, eating.

‘It’ll poison us all. There’s always a trick to things like this. I’m sleeping in the rocket tonight. You can sleep out if you want. To quote a map I saw in medieval history: “Here there be tygers.” Some time tonight when you’re sleeping, the tigers and cannibals will show up.’

Forester shook his head. ‘I’ll go along with you, this planet is alive. It’s a race unto itself. But it needs us to show off to, to appreciate its beauty. What’s the use of a stage full of miracles if there’s no audience?’

But Chatterton was busy. He was bent over, being sick.

‘I’m poisoned! Poisoned!’

They held his shoulders until the sickness passed. They gave him water. The others were feeling fine.

‘Better eat nothing but ship’s food from now on,’ advised Forester. ‘It’d be safer.’

‘We’re starting work right now.’ Chatterton swayed, wiping his mouth. ‘We’ve wasted a whole day. I’ll work alone if I have to. I’ll show this damned thing.’

He staggered away towards the rocket.

‘He doesn’t know when he’s well off,’ murmured Driscoll. ‘Can’t we stop him, Captain?’

‘He practically owns the expedition. We don’t have to help him; there’s a clause in our contract that guarantees refusal to work under dangerous conditions. So … do unto this Picnic Ground as you would have it do unto you. No initial-cutting on the trees. Replace the turf on the greens. Clean up your banana-peels after you.’

Now, below, in the ship there was an immense humming. From the storage port rolled the great shining Drill. Chatterton followed it, called directions to its robot radio. ‘This way, here!’

‘The fool.’

‘Now!’ cried Chatterton.

The Drill plunged its long screw-bore into the green grass.

Chatterton waved up at the other men. ‘I’ll show it!’

The sky trembled.

The Drill stood in the centre of a little sea of grass. For a moment it plunged away, bringing up moist corks of sod which it spat unceremoniously into a shaking analysis bin.

Now the Drill gave a wrenched, metallic squeal like a monster interrupted at its feed. From the soil beneath it, slow, bluish liquids bubbled up.

Chatterton shouted, ‘Get back, you fool!’

The Drill lumbered in a prehistoric dance. It shrieked like a mighty train turning on a sharp curve, throwing out red sparks. It was sinking. The black slime gave under it in a dark pool.

With a coughing sigh, a series of pants and churnings, the Drill sank into a black scum like an elephant shot and dying, trumpeting, like a mammoth at the end of an Age, vanishing limb by ponderous limb into the pit.

‘My God,’ said Forester under his breath, fascinated with the scene. ‘You know what that is, Driscoll? It’s tar. The damn fool machine hit a tar-pit!’

‘Listen, listen!’ cried Chatterton at the Drill, running about on the edge of the oily lake. ‘This way, over here!’

But like the old tyrants of the earth, the dinosaurs with their tubed and screaming necks, the Drill was plunging and thrashing in the one lake from where there was no returning to bask on the firm and understandable shore.

Chatterton turned to the other men far away. ‘Do something, someone!’

The Drill was gone.

The tar-pit bubbled and gloated, sucking the hidden monster bones. The surface of the pool was silent. A huge bubble, the last, rose, expelled a scent of ancient petroleum, and fell apart.

The men came down and stood on the edge of the little black sea.

Chatterton stopped yelling.

After a long minute of staring into the silent tar-pool, Chatterton turned and looked at the hills, blindly, at the green rolling lawns. The distant trees were growing fruit now and dropping it, softly, to the ground.

‘I’ll show it,’ he said quietly.

‘Take it easy, Chatterton.’

‘I’ll fix it,’ he said.

‘Sit down, have a drink.’

‘I’ll fix it good, I’ll show it it can’t do this to me.’

Chatterton started off back to the ship.

‘Wait a minute, now,’ said Forester.

Chatterton ran. ‘I know what to do, I know how to fix it!’

‘Stop him!’ said Forester. He ran, then remembered he could fly. ‘The A-Bomb’s on the ship, if he should get to that….’

The other men had thought of that and were in the air. A small grove of trees stood between the rocket and Chatterton as he ran on the ground, forgetting that he could fly, or afraid to fly, or not allowed to fly, yelling. The crew headed for the rocket to wait for him, the Captain with them. They arrived, formed a line, and shut the rocket port. The last they saw of Chatterton he was plunging through the edge of the tiny forest.

The crew stood waiting.

‘That fool, that crazy guy.’

Chatterton did not come out on the other side of the small woodland.

‘He’s turned back, waiting for us to relax our guard.’

‘Go bring him in,’ said Forester.

Two men flew off.

Now, softly, a great and gentle rain fell upon the green world.

‘The final touch,’ said Driscoll. ‘We’d never have to build houses here. Notice it’s not raining on us. It’s raining all around, ahead, behind us. What a world!’

They stood dry in the middle of the blue, cool rain. The sun was setting. The moon, a large one the colour of ice, rose over the freshened hills.

‘There’s only one more thing this world needs.’

‘Yes,’ said everyone, thoughtfully, slowly.

‘We’ll have to go looking,’ said Driscoll. ‘It’s logical. The wind flies us, the trees and streams feed us, everything is alive. Perhaps if we asked for companionship …’

‘I’ve thought a long time, today and other days,’ said Koestler. ‘We’re all bachelors, been travelling for years, and tired of it. Wouldn’t it be nice to settle down somewhere. Here, maybe. On Earth you work like hell just to save enough to buy a house, pay taxes; the cities stink. Here, you won’t even need a house, with this weather. If it gets monotonous you can ask for rain, clouds, snow, changes. You don’t have to work here for anything.’

‘It’d be boring. We’d go crazy.’

‘No,’ Koestler said, smiling. ‘If life got too soft, all we’d have to do is repeat a few times what Chatterton said: “Here there be tygers.” Listen!’

Far away, wasn’t there the faintest roar of a giant cat, hidden in the twilight forest?

The men shivered.

‘A versatile world,’ said Koestler dryly. ‘A woman who’ll do anything to please her guests, as long as we’re kind to her. Chatterton wasn’t kind.’

‘Chatterton. What about him?’

As if to answer this, someone cried from a distance. The two men who had flown off to find Chatterton were waving at the edge of the woods.

Forester, Driscoll, and Koestler flew down alone.

‘What’s up?’

The men pointed into the forest. ‘Thought you’d want to see this, Captain. It’s damned eerie.’ One of the men indicated a pathway. ‘Look here, sir.’

The marks of great claws stood on the path, fresh and clear.

‘And over here.’

A few drops of blood.

A heavy smell of some feline animal hung in the air.

‘Chatterton?’

‘I don’t think we’ll ever find him, Captain.’

Faintly, faintly, moving away, now gone in the breathing silence of twilight, came the roar of a tiger.

The men lay on the resilient grass by the rocket and the night was warm. ‘Reminds me of nights when I was a kid,’ said Driscoll. ‘My brother and I waited for the hottest night in July and then we slept on the Court House lawn, counting the stars, talking; it was a great night, the best night of the year, and now, when I think back on it, the best night of my life.’ Then he added, ‘Not counting tonight, of course.’

‘I keep thinking about Chatterton,’ said Koestler.

‘Don’t,’ said Forester. ‘We’ll sleep a few hours and take off. We can’t chance staying here another day. I don’t mean the danger that got Chatterton. No. I mean, if we stayed on we’d get to liking this world too much. We’d never want to leave.’

A soft wind blew over them.

‘I don’t want to leave now.’ Driscoll put his hands behind his head, lying quietly. ‘And it doesn’t want us to leave.’

‘If we go back to Earth and tell everyone what a lovely planet it is, what then, Captain? They’ll come smashing in here and ruin it.’

‘No,’ said Forester, idly. ‘First, this planet wouldn’t put up with a full-scale invasion. I don’t know what it’d do, but it could probably think of some interesting things. Secondly, I like this planet too much; I respect it. We’ll go back to Earth and lie about it. Say it’s hostile. Which it would be to the average man, like Chatterton, jumping in here to hurt it. I guess we won’t be lying after all.’

‘Funny thing,’ said Koestler. ‘I’m not afraid. Chatterton vanishes, is killed most horribly, perhaps, yet we lie here, no one runs, no one trembles. It’s idiotic. Yet it’s right. We trust it, and it trusts us.’

‘Did you notice, after you drank just so much of the wine-water, you didn’t want more? A world of moderation.’

They lay listening to something like the great heart of this earth beating slowly and warmly under their bodies.

Forester thought, I’m thirsty.

A drop of rain splashed on his lips.

He laughed quietly.

I’m lonely, he thought.

Distantly, he heard soft high voices.

He turned his eyes in upon a vision. There was a group of hills from which flowed a clear river, and in the shallows of that river, sending up spray, their faces shimmering, were the beautiful women.

They played like children on the shore. And it came to Forester to know about them and their life. They were nomads, roaming the face of this world as was their desire. There were no highways or cities, there were only hills and plains and winds to carry them like white feathers where they wished.

As Forester shaped the question, some invisible answerer whispered the answers. There were no men. These women, alone, produced their race. The men had vanished fifty thousand years ago. And where were these women now? A mile down from the green forest, a mile over on the wine-stream by the six white stones, and a third mile to the large river. There, in the shallows, were the women who would make fine wives, and raise beautiful children.

Forester opened his eyes. The other men were sitting up.

‘I had a dream.’

They had all dreamed.

‘A mile down from the green forest …’

"… a mile over on the wine-stream …’

‘… by the six white stones …’ said Koestler.

‘… and a third mile to the large river,’ said Driscoll, sitting there.

Nobody spoke again for a moment. They looked at the silver rocket standing there in the starlight.

‘Do we walk or fly, Captain?’

Forester said nothing.

Driscoll said, ‘Captain, let’s stay. Let’s never go back to Earth. They’ll never come and investigate to see what happened to us, they’ll think we were destroyed here. What do you say?’

Forester’s face was perspiring. His tongue moved again and again on his lips. His hands twitched over his knees. The crew sat waiting.

‘It’d be nice,’ said the captain.

‘Sure.’

‘But …’ Forester sighed. ‘We’ve got our job to do. People invested in our ship. We owe it to them to go back.’

Forester got up. The men still sat on the ground, not listening to him.

‘It’s such a goddamn nice night,’ said Koestler.

They stared at the soft hills and the trees and the river running off to other horizons.

‘Let’s get aboard ship,’ said Forester, with difficulty.

‘Captain …’

‘Get aboard,’ he said.

The rocket rose into the sky. Looking back, Forester saw every valley and every tiny lake.

‘We should’ve stayed,’ said Koestler.

‘Yes, I know.’

‘It’s not too late to turn back.’

‘I’m afraid it is.’ Forester made an adjustment on the port telescope. ‘Look now.’

Koestler looked.

The face of the world was changed. Tigers, dinosaurs, mammoths appeared. Volcanoes erupted, cyclones and hurricanes tore over the hills in a welter and fury of weather.

‘Yes, she was a woman all right,’ said Forester. ‘Waiting for visitors for millions of years, preparing herself, making herself beautiful. She put on her best face for us. When Chatterton treated her badly, she warned him a few times, and then, when he tried to ruin her beauty, she eliminated him.

She wanted to be loved, like every woman, for herself, not for her wealth. So now, after she had offered us everything, we turn our backs. She’s the woman scorned. She let us go, yes, but we can never come back. She’ll be waiting for us with those …’ He nodded to the tigers and the cyclones and the boiling seas.

‘Captain,’ said Koestler.

‘Yes.’

‘It’s a little late to tell you this. But just before we took off, I was in charge of the air-lock. I let Driscoll slip away from the ship. He wanted to go. I couldn’t refuse him. I’m responsible. He’s back there now on mat planet.’

They both turned to the viewing port.

After a long while, Forester said, ‘I’m glad. I’m glad one of us had enough sense to stay.’

‘But he’s dead by now!’

‘No, that display down there is for us, perhaps a visual hallucination. Underneath all the tigers and lions and hurricanes, Driscoll is quite safe and alive, because he’s her only audience now. Oh, she’ll spoil him rotten.

He’ll lead a wonderful life, he will, while we’re slugging it out up and down the system looking for but never finding a planet quite like this again. No, we won’t try to go back and rescue Driscoll. I don’t think "she" would let us anyway. Full speed ahead, Koestler, make it full speed.’

The rocket leaped forward into greater acceleration.

And just before the planet dwindled away in brightness and mist, Forester imagined he could see Driscoll very clearly, walking away down from the green forest, whistling quietly, all of the fresh planet around him, a wine-creek flowing for him, baked fish lolling in the hot springs, fruit ripening in the midnight trees, and distant forests and lakes waiting for him to happen by. Driscoll walked away across the endless green lawns, near the six white stones, beyond the forest to the edge of the large bright river.

The Headpiece

THE parcel arrived in the late afternoon mail. Mr Andrew Lemon knew what was inside by shaking it. It whispered in there like a large hairy tarantula.

It took him some time to get up his courage, tremble the wrappings open, and remove the lid from the white cardboard box.

There the bristly thing lay on its snowy tissue bed, as impersonal as the black horsechair clock-springs stuffed in an old sofa. Andrew Lemon chuckled.

‘Indians come and gone, left this piece of a massacre behind as a sign, a warning. Well. There!’

And he fitted the new patent-leather black shining toupee to his naked scalp. He tugged at it like someone touching his cap to passers-by.

The toupee fitted perfectly, covering the neat coin-round hole which marred the top of his brow. Andrew Lemon gazed at the strange man in the mirror and yelled with delight.

‘Hey there, who’re you? Face’s familiar, but, by gosh now, pass you on the street without looking twice! Why? Because, it’s gone! Darn hole’s covered, nobody’d guess it was ever there. Happy New Year, man, that’s what it is, Happy New Year!’

He walked around and around his little apartment, smiling, needing to do something, but not yet ready to open the door and surprise the world. He walked by the mirror, glancing sidewise at someone going past there, and each time laughed and shook his head.

Then he sat down in the rocker and rocked, grinning, and tried to look at a couple of copies of Wild West Weekly and then Thrilling Movie Magazine. But he couldn’t keep his right hand from crawling up along his face, tremulously, to feel at the rim of that crisp new sedge above his ears.

‘Let me buy you a drink, young fellow!’

He opened the fly-specked medicine cabinet and took three gulps from a bottle. Eyes watering, he was on the verge of cutting himself a chew of tobacco when he stopped, listening.

Outside, in the dark hallway, there was a sound like a field-mouse moving softly, daintily on the threadbare carpeting.

‘Miss Fremwell!’ he said to the mirror.

Suddenly the toupee was off his head and into the box as if, frightened, it had scuttled back there of itself. He clapped the lid down, sweating cold, afraid of even the sound that woman made moving by like a summer breeze.

He tiptoed to the door that was nailed shut in one wall and bent his raw and now furiously blushing head. He heard Miss Fremwell unlock her door and shut it and move delicately about her room with little tinkles of chinaware and chimes of cutlery, turning in a merry-go-round to make her dinner.

He backed away from that door that was bolted, locked, latched, and driven shut with its four-inch hard-steel nails. He thought of the nights he had flinched in bed, thinking he heard her quietly pulling out the nails, pulling out the nails, touching at the bolts and slithering the latch…. And how it always took him an hour to turn away towards sleep after that.

Now she would rustle about her room for an hour or so. It would grow dark. The stars would be out and shining when he tapped on her door and asked if she’d sit on the porch or walk in the park. Then the only way she could possibly know of this third blind and staring eye in his head would be to run her hand in a Braille-like motion there.

But her small white fingers had never moved within a thousand miles of that scar which was no more to her than, well, one of those pockmarks off on the full moon tonight. His toe brushed a copy of Wonder Science Tales.

He snorted. Perhaps if she thought at all of his damaged head – she wrote songs and poems, didn’t she, once in a while? – she figured that a long time back a meteor had run and hit him and vanished up there where there were no shrubs or trees, where it was just white, above his eyes. He snorted again and shook his head. Perhaps, perhaps. But however she thought, he would see her only when the sun had set.

He waited another hour, from time to time spitting out the window into the warm summer night.

‘Eight-thirty. Here goes.’

He opened the hall door and stood for a moment looking back at that nice new toupee hidden in its box. No, he still could not bring himself to wear it.

He stepped along the hall to Miss Naomi Fremwell’s door, a door so thinly made it seemed to beat with the sound of her small heart there behind it.

‘Miss Fremwell,’ he whispered.

He wanted to cup her like a small white bird in his great bowled hands, speak soft to her quietness. But then, in wiping the sudden perspiration from his brow, he found again the pit and only at the last quick moment saved himself from falling over, in, and screaming, down! He clapped his hand to that place to cover that emptiness.

After he had held his hand tight tight to the hole for a long moment he was then afraid to pull his hand away. It had changed. Instead of being afraid he might fall in there, he was afraid something terrible, something secret, something private, might gush out and drown him.

He brushed his free hand across her door, disturbing little more than dust.

‘Miss Fremwell?’

He looked to see if there were too many lamps lit under her doorsill, the light of which might strike out at him when she swung the door wide. The very thrust of lamplight alone might knock his hand away, and reveal that sunken wound. Then mightn’t she peer through it like a keyhole, into his life?

The light was dim under the doorsill.

He made a fist of one hand and brought it down gently, three times, on Miss Fremwell’s door.

The door opened and moved slowly back.

Later, on the front porch, feverishly adjusting and re-adjusting his senseless legs, perspiring, he tried to work around to asking her to marry him. When the moon rose high, the hole in his brow looked like a leaf-shadow fallen there. If he kept one profile to her, the crater did not show, it was hidden away over on the other side of his world. It seemed that when he did this, though, he only had half as many words and felt only half a man.

‘Miss Fremwell,’ he managed to say, at last.

‘Yes?’ She looked at him as if she didn’t quite see him.

‘Miss Naomi, I don’t suppose you ever really noticed me, lately.’

She waited. He went on.

‘I’ve been noticing you. Fact is, well, I might as well put it right out on the line and get it over with. We been sitting out here on the porch for quite a few months. I mean we’ve known each other a long time. Sure, you’re good fifteen years younger than me, but would there be anything wrong with our getting engaged, do you think?’

‘Thank you very much, Mr Lemon,’ she said quickly. She was very polite. ‘But –’

‘Oh, I know,’ he said, edging forward with the words. ‘I know! It’s my head, it’s always this darn thing up here on my head!’

She looked at his turned-away profile in the uncertain light.

‘Why, no, Mr Lemon, I don’t think I would say that, I don’t think that’s it at all. I have wondered a bit about it, certainly, but I don’t think it’s an interference in any way. A friend of mine, a very dear friend, married a man once, I recall, who had a wooden leg. She told me she didn’t even know he had it, after a while.’

‘It’s always this darn hole,’ cried Mr Lemon bitterly. He took out his plug of tobacco, looked at it as if he might bite it, decided not to and put it away. He formed a couple of fists and stared at them bleakly as if they were big rocks. ‘Well, I’ll tell you all about it, Miss Naomi. I’ll tell you how it happened.’

‘You don’t have to if you don’t want.’

‘I was married once. Miss Naomi. Yes, I was, darn it. And one day my wife she just took hold of a hammer and hit me right on the head!’

Miss Fremwell gasped. It was as if she had been struck herself.

Mr Lemon brought one clenching fist down through the warm air.

‘Yes, ma’am, she hit me straight-on with that hammer, she did. I tell you, the world blew up on me. Everything fell down on me. It was like the house coming down in one heap. That one little hammer buried me, buried me! The pain? I can’t tell you!’

Miss Fremwell turned in on herself. She shut her eyes and thought, biting her lips. Then she said, ‘Oh, poor Mr Lemon.’

‘She did it so calm,’ said Mr Lemon, puzzled. ‘She just stood over me where I lay on the couch and it was a Tuesday afternoon about two o’clock and she said, “Andrew, wake up!” and I opened my eyes and looked at her is all and then she hit me with that hammer. Oh, Lord.’

‘But why?’ asked Miss Fremwell.

‘For no reason, no reason at all. Oh, what an ornery woman.’

‘But why should she do a thing like that?’ said Miss Fremwell.

‘I told you: for no reason.’

‘She was crazy?’

‘Must have been. Oh, yes, she must of been.’

‘Did you prosecute her?’

‘Well, no, I didn’t. After all, she didn’t know what she was doing.’

‘Did it knock you out?’

Mr Lemon paused and there it was again, so clear, so tall, in his mind, the old thought of it. Seeing it there, he put it in words.

‘No, I remember just standing up, I stood up and I said to her, "What’d you do?" and I stumbled towards her. There was a mirror. I saw the hole in my head, deep, and blood coming out. It made an Indian of me. She just stood there, my wife did. And at last she screamed three kinds of horror and dropped that hammer on the floor and ran out the door.’

‘Did you faint then?’

‘No. I didn’t faint. I got out on the street some way and I mumbled to somebody I needed a doctor. I got on a bus, mind you, a bus! And paid my fare! And said to leave me by some doctor’s house downtown. Everybody screamed, I tell you. I got sort of weak then, and next thing I knew the doctor was working on my head, had it cleaned out like a new thimble, like a bunghole in a barrel….’

He reached up and touched that spot now, fingers hovering over it as a delicate tongue hovers over the vacated area where once grew a fine tooth.

‘A neat job. The doctor kept staring at me, too, as if he expected me to fall down dead any minute.’

‘How long did you stay in the hospital?’

‘Two days. Then I was up and around, feeling no better, no worse. By that time my wife had picked up and skedaddled.’

‘Oh, my goodness, my goodness,’ said Miss Fremwell, recovering her breath. ‘My heart’s going like an eggbeater. I can hear and feel and see it all, Mr Lemon. Why, why, oh, why did she do it?’

‘I already told you, for no reason I could see. She was just took with a notion, I guess.’

‘But there must have been an argument – ?’

Blood drummed in Mr Lemon’s cheeks. He felt that place up there on his head glow like a fiery crater. ‘There wasn’t no argument. I was just sitting, peaceful as you please. I like to sit, my shoes off, my shirt unbuttoned, afternoons.’

‘Did you – did you know any other women?’

‘No, never, none!’

‘You didn’t – drink?’

‘Just a nip once in a while, you know how it is.’

‘Did you gamble?’

‘No, no, no!’

‘But a hole punched in your head like that, Mr Lemon, my land, my land! All over nothing?’

‘You women are all alike. You see something and right off you expect the worst. I tell you there was no reason. She just fancied hammers.’

‘What did she say before she hit you?’

‘Just "Wake up, Andrew".’

‘No, before that.’

‘Nothing. Not for half an hour or an hour, anyway. Oh, she said something about wanting to go shopping for something or other, but I said it was too hot. I’d better lie down, I didn’t feel so good. She didn’t appreciate how I felt. She must have got mad and thought about it for an hour and grabbed that hammer and come in and gone kermash. I think the weather got her, too.’

Miss Fremwell sat back thoughtfully in the lattice shadow, her brows moving slowly up and then slowly down.

‘How long were you married to her?’

‘A year. I remember we got married in July and in July it was I got sick.’

‘Sick?’

‘I wasn’t a well man. I worked in a garage. Then I got these backaches so I couldn’t work and had to lie down afternoons. Ellie, she worked in the First National Bank.’

‘I see,’ said Miss FremwelL

‘What?’

‘Nothing,’ she said.

‘I’m an easy man to get on with. I don’t talk too much. I’m easy-going and relaxed. I don’t waste money. I’m economical. Even Ellie had to admit that. I don’t argue. Why, sometimes Ellie would jaw at me and jaw at me, like bouncing a ball hard on a house, but me not bouncing back. I just sat. I took it easy. What’s the use of always stirring around and talking, right?’

Miss Fremwell looked over at Mr Lemon’s brow in the moonlight. Her lips moved but he could not hear what she said.

Suddenly, she straightened up and took a deep breath and blinked around surprised to see the world out beyond the porch lattice. The sounds of traffic came in to the porch now, as if they had been tuned up, they had been so quiet for a time. Miss Fremwell took a deep breath and let it out.

‘As you yourself say, Mr Lemon, nobody ever got anywhere arguing.’

‘Right!’ he said. ‘I’m easy-going, I tell you –’

But Miss Fremwell’s eyes were lidded now and her mouth was strange. He sensed this and tapered off.

A night wind blew fluttering her light summer dress and the sleeves of his shirt.

‘It’s late,’ said Miss Fremwell.

‘Only nine o’clock!’

‘I have to get up early tomorrow.’

‘But you haven’t answered my question yet. Miss Fremwell.’

‘Question?’ She blinked. ‘Oh, the question. Yes.’ She rose from the wicker seat. She hunted around in the dark for the screen doorknob. ‘Oh now, Mr Lemon, let me think it over.’

‘That’s fair enough,’ he said. ‘No use arguing, is there?’

The screen door closed. He heard her find her way down the dark warm hall. He breathed shallowly, feeling of the third eye in his head, the eye that saw nothing.

He felt a vague unhappiness shift around inside his chest like an illness brought on by too much talking. And then he thought of the fresh white gift-box waiting with its lid on in his room. He quickened.

Opening the screen door he walked down the silent hall and went into his room. Inside, he slipped and almost fell on a slick copy of True Romance Tales. He switched on the light, excitedly, smiling, fumbled the box open and lifted the toupee from the tissues. He stood before the bright mirror and followed directions with the spirit gum and tapes, and tucked it here and stuck it there and shifted it again and combed it neat. Then he opened the door and walked along the hall to knock for Miss Fremwell.

‘Miss Naomi?’ he called, smiling.

The light under her door clicked out at the sound of his voice.

He stared at the dark keyhole with disbelief.

‘Oh, Miss Naomi?’ he said again, quickly.

Nothing happened in the room. It was dark. After a moment he tried the knob, experimentally. The knob rattled. He heard Miss Fremwell sigh. He heard her say something. Again, the words were lost. Her small feet tapped to the door. The light came on.

‘Yes?’ she said, behind the panel.

‘Look, Miss Naomi,’ he entreated. ‘Open the door. Look.’

The bolt of the door snapped back. She jerked the door open about an inch. One of her eyes looked at him sharply.

‘Look,’ he announced proudly, adjusting the toupee so it very definitely covered the sunken crater. He imagined he saw himself in her bureau mirror and was pleased. ‘Look here, Miss Fremwell!’

She opened the door a bit wider and looked. Then she slammed the door and locked it. From behind the thin panelling, her voice was toneless.

‘I can still see the hole, Mr Lemon,’ she said.

Perchance to Dream

YOU don’t want death and you don’t expect death. Something goes wrong, your rocket tilts in space, a planetoid jumps up, blackness, movement, hands over the eyes, a violent pulling back of available powers in the forejets, the crash.

The darkness. In the darkness, the senseless pain. In the pain, the nightmare.

He was not unconscious.

Your name? asked hidden voices. Sale, he replied in whirling nausea. Leonard Sale. Occupation? cried the voices. Space man! he cried, alone in the night. Welcome, said the voices. Welcome, welcome. They faded.

He stood up in the wreckage of his ship. It lay like a folded, tattered garment around him.

The sun rose and it was morning.

Sale prised himself out of the small airlock and stood breathing heavily. Luck. Sheer luck. His suit was intact; his oxygen breathable. A few minutes’ checking showed him he had two months’ supply of oxygen and food. Fine! And this – he prowled through the wreckage. Miracle of miracles! The radio was intact.

He shuttered out the message on the sending key. CRASHED ON PLANETOID 787. SALE. HELP. SALE. HELP.

Minutes passed; the reply came: HELLO, SALE, THIS IS ADDAMS IN MARSPORT. SENDING RESCUE SHIP LOGARITHM. WILL ARRIVE PLANETOID 787 SIX DAYS. HANG ON.

Sale did a little dance.

It was simple as that. One crashed. One had food. One radioed for help. Help came. Voilà! he shouted.

The sun rose and was warm. He felt no sense of mortality. Six days would be no time at all. He would eat, he would read, he would sleep. He glanced at his surroundings. No dangerous animals; a tolerable oxygen supply. What more could one ask? Beans and bacon, was the answer. He touched the machinery in his helmet that popped food into his mouth.

After breakfast he smoked a cigarette slowly, deeply, blowing out through the special helmet tube. He nodded contentedly. What a life! Not a scratch on him. Luck, sheer luck!

His head nodded. Sleep, he thought.

Good idea. Forty winks. Plenty of time to sleep, take it easy. Six whole long, luxurious days of idling and philosophizing. Sleep.

He stretched himself out, tucked his arm under his head, and shut his eyes.

Insanity came in to take him. The voices whispered.

Sleep, yes, sleep, said the voices. Ah, sleep, sleep.

He opened his eyes. The voices stopped. Everything was normal. He shrugged. He shut his eyes casually, fitfully. He settled his long body.

Eeeeeeeeeeee, sang the voices far away.

Ahhhhhhhhh, sang the voices.

Sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sang the voices.

Die, die, die, die, die, sang the voices.

Oooooooooooo, cried the voices.

Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm, a bee ran through his brain.

He sat up. He shook his head. He blinked at the crashed ship. Hard metal. He felt the solid rock under his fingers. He saw the real sun warming the blue sky.

Let’s try sleeping on our back, he thought. He adjusted himself, lying back down. His watch ticked on his wrist. The blood burned in his veins.

Sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sang the voices.

Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh, sang the voices.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh, sang the voices.

Die, die, die, die, die. Sleep, sleep, die, sleep, die, sleep, die! Oohhh. Ahhhh. Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

Blood tapped in his ears. The sound of the wind rising.

Mine, mine, said a voice. Mine, mine, he’s mine; he’s mine!

No mine, mine, said another voice. No, mine, mine, he’s mine!

No, ours, ours, sang ten voices. Ours, ours, he’s ours!

His fingers twitched. His jaws spasmed. His eyelids jerked.

At last, at last, sang a high voice. Now, now. The long time, the waiting. Over, over, sang the high voice. Over, over at last!

It was like being undersea. Green songs, green visions, green time. Bubbled voices drowning in deep liquors of sea tide. Faraway choruses chanting senseless rhymes. Leonard Sale stirred in agony.

Mine, mine, cried a loud voice. Mine, mine! shrieked another. Ours, ours, shrieked the chorus.

The din of metal, the crash of sword, the conflict, the battle, the fight, the war. All of it exploding, his mind fiercely torn apart.

Eeeeeeeeee!

He leaped up, screaming. The landscape melted and flowed.

A voice said, ‘I am Tylle of Rathalar. Proud Tylle, Tylle of the Blood Mound and the Death Drum. Tylle of Rathalar, Killer of Men!’

Another spoke, ‘I am Iorr of Wendillo, Wise Iorr, Destroyer of Infidels!’

The chorus chanted. ‘And we the warriors, we the steel, we the warriors, we the red blood rushing, the red blood falling, the red blood steaming in the sun –’

Leonard Sale staggered under the burden. ‘Go away!’ he cried. ‘Leave me, in God’s name, leave me!’

Eeeeeee, shrieked the high sound of steel hot on steel.

Silence.

He stood with the sweat boiling out of him. He was trembling so violently he could not stand. Insane, he thought. Absolutely insane. Raving insane. Insane!

He jerked the food kit open, did something to a chemical packet. Hot coffee was ready in an instant. He mouthed it through the helmet tube greedily. He shivered. He sucked in raw gulps of breath.

Let’s be logical, he thought, sitting down heavily. The coffee seared his tongue. No record of insanity in the family for two hundred years. All healthy, well-balanced. No reason for insanity now. Shock? Silly. No shock. I’m to be rescued in six days. No shock to that. No danger. Just an ordinary planetoid. Ordinary, ordinary, ordinary place. No reason for insanity. I’m sane.

Oh? cried a small metal voice within. An echo. Fading.

‘Yes!’ he cried, beating his fists together. ‘Sane!’

Hahhahhahhahhahhahhahhah. Somewhere a vanishing laughter.

He whirled about. ‘Shut up, you!’ he cried.

We didn’t say anything, said the mountains. We didn’t say anything, said the sky. We didn’t say anything, said the wreckage.

‘All right then,’ he said, swaying. ‘See that you don’t.’

Everything was normal.

The pebbles were getting hot. The sky was big and dark. He looked at his fingers and saw the way the sun burned on every black hair. He looked at his boots and the dust on them. Suddenly he felt very happy because he made a decision. I won’t go to sleep, he thought. I’m having nightmares, so why sleep? There’s your solution.

He made a routine. From nine o’clock in the morning, which was this minute, until twelve, he would walk around and see the planetoid. He would write on a pad with a yellow pencil everything he saw. Then he would sit down and open a can of oily sardines, and some canned fresh bread with good butter on it, and pass it in through the helmet airlocks. From twelve-thirty until four he would read nine chapters of War and Peace. He took the book from the wreckage, and laid it where he might find it later. There was a book of T. S. Eliot’s poetry, too. That might be nice.

Supper would come at five-thirty and then from six until ten he would listen to the radio from Earth. There would be a couple of bad comedians telling jokes and a bad singer singing some songs, and the latest news flashes, signing off at midnight with the U.N. anthem.

After that?

He felt sick.

I’ll play solitaire until dawn, he thought. I’ll sit up and drink hot black coffee and play solitaire, no cheating, until sunrise.

Ho, ho, he thought.

‘What did you say?’ he asked himself, aloud.

‘I said "Ha ha",’ he replied. ‘Some time, you’ll have to sleep.’

‘I’m wide awake,’ he said.

‘Liar!’ he retorted, enjoying the conversation.

‘I feel fine,’ he said.

‘Hypocrite,’ he replied.

‘I’m not afraid of the night or sleep or anything,’ he said.

‘Very funny,’ he said.

He felt bad. He wanted to sleep. And the fact that he was afraid of sleep made him want to lie down all the more and shut his eyes and curl up. ‘Comfy-cosy?’ asked his ironic censor.

‘I’ll just walk and look at the rocks and the geological formations and think how good it is to be alive,’ he said.

‘Ye gods!’ cried his censor. ‘William Saroyan!’

You’ll go on, he thought, maybe one day, maybe one night, but what about the next night and the next and the next? Can you stay awake all that time, for six nights? Until the rescue ship comes? Are you that good, that strong?

The answer was no.

What are you afraid of ? I don’t know. Those voices. Those sounds. But they can’t hurt you – can they?

They might. You’ve got to face them some time. Must I? Brace up to it, old man. Chin up, and all that rot.

He sat down on the hard ground. He felt very much like crying. He felt as if life was over and he was entering new and unknown territory. It was such a deceiving day, with the sun warm; physically, he felt able and well, one might fish on such a day as this, or pick flowers or kiss a woman or anything. But in the midst of a lovely day, what did one get?

Death.

Well, hardly that.

Death, he insisted.

He lay down and closed his eyes. He was tired of messing around.

All right, he thought, if you are death, come get me. I want to know what all this nonsense is about.

Death came.

Eeeeeeeeeeeee, said a voice.

Yes, I know, said Leonard Sale, lying there. But what else?

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, said a voice.

I know that, also, said Leonard Sale, irritably. He turned cold. His mouth hung open wildly.

‘I am Tylle of Rathalar, Killer of Men!’

‘I am Iorr of Wendillo, Destroyer of Infidels!’

What is this place? asked Leonard Sale, struggling against horror.

‘Once a mighty planet!’ said Tylle of Rathalar. ‘Once a place of battles!’ said Iorr of Wendillo.

‘Now dead,’ said Tylle.

‘Now silent,’ said Iorr.

‘Until you came,’ said Tylle.

‘To give us life again,’ said Iorr.

You’re dead, insisted Leonard Sale, flesh writhing. You’re nothing but empty wind.

‘We live, through you.’

‘And fight, through you !’

So that’s it, thought Leonard Sale. I’m to be a battleground, am I? Are you friends?

‘Enemies!’ cried Iorr.

‘Foul enemies!’ cried Tylle.

Leonard smiled a rictal smile. He felt ghastly. How long have you waited? he demanded.

‘How long is time?’ Ten thousand years? ‘Perhaps.’ Ten million years ? ‘Perhaps.’

What are you? Thoughts, spirits, ghosts? ‘All of those, and more.’ Intelligence? ‘Precisely.’ How did you survive?

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee, sang the chorus, far away.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, sang another army, waiting to fight.

‘Once upon a time, this was fertile land, a rich planet. And there were two nations, strong nations, led by two strong men. I, Iorr. And he, that one who calls himself Tylle. And the planet declined and gave way to nothingness. The peoples and the armies languished in the midst of a great war which had lasted five thousand years. We lived long lives and loved long loves, drank much, slept much, fought much. And when the planet died, our bodies withered, and, only in time, and with much science, did we survive.’

Survive, wondered Leonard Sale. But there is nothing of you!

‘Our minds, fool, our minds ! What is a body without a mind?’

What is a mind without a body, laughed Leonard Sale. I’ve got you there. Admit it, I’ve got you!

‘True,’ said the cruel voice. ‘One is useless, lacking the other. But survival is survival even when unconscious. The minds of our nations, through science, through wonder, survived.’

But without senses, lacking eyes, ears, lacking touch, smell, and the rest? ‘Lacking all those, yes. We were vapours, merely. For a long time. Until today.’

And now I am here, thought Leonard Sale. ‘You are here,’ said the voice. ‘To give substance to our souls. To give us our needed body.’

I’m only one, thought Sale. ‘Nevertheless, you are of use.’

I’m an individual, thought Sale. I resent your intrusion.

‘He resents our intrusion! Did you heard him, Iorr? He resents!’

‘As if he had a right to resent!’

Be careful, warned Sale. I’ll blink my eyes and you’ll be gone, phantoms! I’ll wake up and rub you out!

‘But you’ll have to sleep again, some time!’ cried Iorr. ‘And when you do, we’ll be here, waiting, waiting, waiting. For you.’

What do you want? ‘Solidity. Mass. Sensation again!’ You can’t both have it. ‘We’ll fight that out between us.’

A hot clamp twisted his skull. It was as if a spike had been thrust and beaten down between the bivalvular halves of his brain.

Now he was terribly clear. Horribly, magnificently clear. He was their universe. The world of his thoughts, his brain, his skull, divided into two camps, that of Iorr, that of Tylle. They were using him!

Pennants flung up on a pink mind sky! Brass shields caught the sun. Grey animals shifted and came rushing in bristling tides of sword and plume and trumpet.

Eeeeeeeeeeeee! The rushing.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! The roaring.

Nowwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww! The whirling.

Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm –

Ten thousand men hurled across the small hidden stage. Ten thousand men floated on the shellacked inner ball of his eye. Ten thousand javelins hissed between the small bone hulls of his head. Ten thousand jewelled guns exploded. Ten thousand voices chanted in his ears. Now his body was riven and extended, shaken and rolled, he was screaming, writhing, the plates of his skull threatened to burst asunder.

The gabbling, the shrilling, as across bone plains of mind and continent of inner marrow, through gullies of vein, down hills of artery, over rivers of melancholy, came armies and armies, one army, two armies, swords flashed in the sun, bearing down upon each other, fifty thousand minds snatching, scrabbling, cutting at him, demanding, using. In a moment, the hard collision, one army on another, the rush, the blood, the sound, the fury, the death, the insanity!

Like cymbals, the armies struck!

He leaped up, raving. He ran across the desert. He ran and ran and did not stop running.

He sat down and cried. He sobbed until his lungs ached. He cried very hard and long. Tears ran down his cheeks. ‘God, God, help me, oh God, help me!’ he said.

All was normal again.

It was four o’clock in the afternoon. The rocks were baked by the sun. He managed, after a time, to cook himself a few hot biscuits, which he ate with strawberry jam.

‘At least I know what I’m up against,’ he told himself. ‘Oh, Lord, what a world! What an innocent-looking world, and what a monster it really is. It’s good no one ever explored it before. Or did they?’ He shook his aching head. Pity them, whoever crashed here before, if any ever did. Warm sun, hard rocks, not a sign of hostility.

Until you shut your eyes and relaxed your mind.

And the night and the voices and the insanity and the death padded in on soft feet.

‘I’m all right now, though,’ he said, proudly. ‘Look at that.’ He displayed his hand. By a supreme effort of will, it was no longer shaking. ‘I’ll show you who in hell’s ruler here,’ he announced to the innocent sky. ‘I am!’ He tapped his chest.

To think that thought could live that long! A million years, perhaps, all these throughts of death and disorder and conquest, lingering in the innocent but poisonous air of the planet, waiting for a real man to give them a channel through which they might issue again in all their senseless virulence.

Now that he was feeling better, it was all silly. All I have to do, he thought, is stay awake six nights. They won’t bother me that way. When I’m awake, I’m dominant. I’m stronger than those crazy monarchs and their silly tribes of sword-flingers and shield-bearers and horn-blowers. I’ll stay awake.

But can you? he wondered. Six whole nights? Awake?

There’s coffee and medicine and books and cards.

But I’m tired now, so tired, he thought. Can I hold out?

Well, if not – there’s always the gun.

Where will these silly monarchs be if you put a bullet through their stage? All the world’s a stage. No. You, Leonard Sale, are the small stage. And they the players. And what if you put a bullet through the wings, tearing down scenes, destroying curtains, ruining lines! Destroy the stage, the players, all if they aren’t careful!

First of all, he must radio through to Marsport, again. If there was any way they could rush the rescue ship sooner, then maybe he could hang on. Anyway, he must warn them what sort of planet this was, this so innocent-seeming spot of nightmare and fever vision –

He tapped on the radio key for a minute. His mouth tightened. The radio was dead.

It had sent through the proper rescue message, received a reply, and then extinguished itself.

The proper touch of irony, he thought. There was only one thing to do. Draw a plan.

This he did. He got a yellow pencil and delineated his six-day plan of escape.

Tonight, he wrote, read six more chapters of War and Peace. At four in the morning have hot black coffee. At four-fifteen take cards from pack and play ten games of solitaire. This should take until six-thirty when – more coffee. At seven o’clock, listen to early morning programmes from Earth, if the receiving equipment on the radio works at all. Does it?

He tried the radio receiver. It was dead.

Well, he wrote, from seven o’clock until eight, sing all the songs you remember, make your own entertainment. From eight until nine think about Helen King. Remember Helen. On second thought, think about Helen right now.

He marked that out with his pencil.

The rest of the days were set down in minute detail.

He checked the medical kit. There were several packets of tablets that would keep you awake. One tablet an hour every hour for six days. He felt quite confident.

‘Here’s mud in your evil eye, Iorr, Tylle!’

He swallowed one of the stay-awake tablets with a scalding mouth of black coffee.

Well, with one thing and another it was Tolstoy or Balzac, gin-rummy, coffee, tablets, walking, more Tolstoy, more Balzac, more gin-rummy, more solitaire. The first day passed, as did the second and the third.

On the fourth day he lay quietly in the shade of a rock, counting to a thousand by fives, then by tens, to keep his mind occupied and awake. His eyes were so tired he had to bathe them frequently in cool water. He couldn’t read, he was bothered with splitting headaches.

He was so exhausted he couldn’t move. He was numb with medicine. He resembled a waxen dummy stuffed with things to preserve him in a state of horrified wakefulness. His eyes were glass, his tongue a rusted pike, his fingers felt as if they were gloved in needles and fur.

He followed the hand of his watch. One second less to wait, he thought. Two seconds, three seconds, four, five, ten, thirty seconds. A whole minute. Now an hour less time to wait. Oh, ship, hurry on thy appointed round!

He began to laugh softly.

What would happen if he just gave up, drifted off into sleep?

Sleep, ah, sleep; perchance to dream. All the world a stage … What if he gave up the unequal struggle, lapsed down?

Eeeeeeeeeeee, the high, shrill warning sound of battle metal.

He shivered. His tongue moved in his dry, burry mouth.

Iorr and Tylle would battle out their ancient battle.

Leonard Sale would become quite insane.

And whichever won the battle would take this ruin of an insane man, the shaking, laughing wild body, and wander it across the face of this world for ten, twenty years, occupying it, striding in it, pompous, holding court, making grand gestures, ordering heads severed, calling on inward, unseen dancing girls. Leonard Sale, what remained of him, would be led off to some hidden cave, there to be infested with wars and worms of wars for twenty insane years, occupied and prostituted by old and outlandish thoughts.

When the rescue ship arrived it would find nothing. Sale would be hidden somewhere by a triumphant army in his head. Hidden in some cleft of rock, placed there like a nest for Iorr to lie upon in evil occupation.

The thought of it almost broke him in half.

Twenty years of insanity. Twenty years of torture, doing what you don’t want to do. Twenty years of wars raging and being split apart, twenty years of nausea and trembling.

His head sank down between his knees. His eyes snapped and cracked and made soft noises. His eardrum popped tiredly.

Sleep, sleep, sang soft sea voices.

I’ll – I’ll make a proposition with you, listen, thought Leonard Sale. You, Iorr, you, too, Tylle! Iorr, you can occupy me on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Tylle, you can take me over on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Saturday. Thursday is maid’s night out. Okay?

Eeeeeeeeeee, sang the sea tides, seething in his brain.

Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, sang the distant voices softly, soft.

What’ll you say, is it a bargain, Iorr, Tylle?

No, said a voice.

No, said another.

Greedy, both of you, greedy! complained Sale. A pox on both your houses!

He slept.

He was Iorr, jewelled rings on his hands. He arose beside his rocket and held out his fingers, commanding blind armies. He was Iorr, ancient ruler of jewelled warriors.

He was Tylle, lover of women, killer of dogs!

With some hidden bit of awareness, his hand crept to the holster at his hip. The sleeping hand withdrew the gun there. The hand lifted, the gun pointed.

The armies of Tylle and Iorr gave battle.

The gun exploded.

The bullet tore across Sale’s forehead, awakening him.

He stayed awake for another six hours, getting over his latest seige. He knew it to be hopeless now. He washed and bandaged the wound he had given himself. He wished he had aimed straighter and it was all over. He watched the sky. Two more days. Two more. Come on, ship, come on. He was heavy with sleeplessness.

No use. At the end of six hours he was raving badly. He took the gun up and put it down and took it up again, put it against his head, tightened his hand on the trigger, changed his mind, looked at the sky again.

Night settled. He tried to read, threw the book away. He tore it up and burned it, just to have something to do.

So tired. In another hour, he decided. If nothing happens, I’ll kill myself. This is for certain now. I’ll do it, this time.

He got the gun ready and laid it on the ground next to himself.

He was very calm now, though tired. It would be over and done. He would be dead.

He watched the minute hand of his watch. One minute, five minutes, twenty-five minutes.

The flame appeared on the sky.

It was so unbelievable he started to cry.

‘A rocket,’ he said, standing up. ‘A rocket!’ he cried, rubbing his eyes. He ran forward.

The flame brightened, grew, came down.

He waved frantically, running forward, leaving his gun, his supplies, everything behind. ‘You see that, Iorr, Tylle! You savages, you monsters, I beat you! I won ! They’re coming to rescue me now! I’ve won, damn you!’

He laughed harshly at the rocks and the sky and the backs of his hands.

The rocket landed. Leonard Sale stood swaying, waiting for the door to lid open.

‘Good-bye, Iorr, good-bye, Tylle!’ he shouted in triumph, grinning, eyes hot.

Eeeeeee, sang a diminishing roar in time.

Ahhhhhhhh, voices faded.

The rocket flipped wide its airlock. Two men jumped out.

‘Sale?’ they called. ‘We’re Ship ACDN13. Intercepted your SOS and decided to pick you up ourselves. The Marsport ship won’t get through until day after tomorrow. We want a spot of rest ourselves. Thought it’d be good to spend the night here, pick you up, and go on.’

‘No,’ said Sale, face melting with terror. ‘No spend night –’

He couldn’t talk. He fell to the ground.

‘Quick!’ said a voice, in the bleary vortex over him. ‘Give him a shot of food liquid, another of sedative. He needs sustenance and rest.’

‘No rest!’ screamed Sale.

‘Delirious,’ said one man, softly.

‘No sleep!’ screamed Sale.

‘There, there,’ said the man gently. A needle poked into Sale’s arm.

Sale thrashed. ‘No sleep, go!’ he mouthed horribly. ‘Oh, go!’

‘Delirious,’ said one man. ‘Shock.’

‘No sedatives!’ screamed Sale.

The sedative flowed into him.

Eeeeeeeee, sang the ancient winds.

Ahhhhhhhhhh, sang the ancient seas.

‘No sedative, no sleep, please, don’t, don’t, don’t!’ screamed Sale, trying to get up. ‘You – don’t understand!’

‘Take it easy, old man, you’re safe among us now, nothing to worry about,’ said the rescuer above him.

Leonard Sale slept. The two men stood over him.

As they watched, Sale’s features changed violently. He groaned and cried and snarled in his sleep. His face was riven with emotion. It was the face of a saint, a sinner, a fiend, a monster, a darkness, a light, one, many, an army, a vacuum, all all!

He writhed in his sleep.

Eeeeeeeee! the sound burst from his mouth. Ahhhhhhhhhh! he screamed.

‘What’s wrong with him?’ asked one of the two rescuers.

‘I don’t know. More sedatives?’

‘More sedatives. Nerves. He needs more sleep.’

They stuck the needle in his arm. Sale writhed and spat and moaned.

Then, suddenly, he was dead.

He lay there, the two men over him. ‘What a shame,’ said one of them. ‘Can you figure that?’

‘Shock. Poor guy. What a pity.’ They covered his face. ‘Did you ever see a face like that?’

‘Loneliness. Shock.’

‘Yes. Lord, what an expression! I hope never to see a face like that again.’

‘What a shame, waiting for us, and we arrive, and he dies anyway.’

They glanced around. ‘What shall we do? Shall we spend the night?’

‘Yes. It’s good to be out of the ship.’

‘We’ll bury him first, of course.’

‘Naturally.’

‘And spend the night in the open, with good air, right? Good to be in the open again. After two weeks in that damned ship.’

‘Right. I’ll find a spot for him. You start supper, eh?’

‘Done.’

‘Should be good sleeping tonight.’

‘Fine, fine.’

They made a grave and said a word over it. They drank their evening coffee silently. They looked at the lovely sky and the bright and beautiful stars.

‘What a night,’ they said, lying down.

‘Pleasant dreams,’ said one, rolling over.

And the other replied, ‘Pleasant dreams.’

They slept.

The Time of Going Away

THE thought was three days and three nights growing. During the days he carried it like a ripening peach in his head. During the nights he let it take flesh and sustenance, hung out on the silent air, coloured by country moon and country stars. He walked around and around the thought in the silence before dawn. On the fourth morning he reached up an invisible hand, picked it, and swallowed it whole.

He arose as swiftly as possible and burned all his old letters, packed a few clothes in a very small case, and put on his midnight suit and a tie the shiny colour of ravens’ feathers, as if he were in mourning. He sensed his wife in the door behind him watching his little play with the eyes of a critic who may leap onstage any moment and stop the show. When he brushed past her, he murmured, ‘Excuse me.’

‘Excuse me!’ she cried. ‘Is that all you say? Creeping around here, planning a trip!’

‘I didn’t plan it; it happened,’ he said. ‘Three days ago I got this premonition. I knew I was going to die.’

‘Stop that kind of talk,’ she said. ‘It makes me nervous.’

The horizon was mirrored softly in his eyes. ‘I hear my blood running slow. Listening to my bones is like standing in an attic hearing the beams shift and the dust settle.’

‘You’re only seventy-five,’ said his wife. ‘You stand on your own two legs, see, hear, eat, and sleep good, don’t you? What’s all this talk?’

‘It’s the natural tongue of existence speaking to me,’ said the old man. ‘Civilization’s got us too far away from our natural selves. Now you take the pagan islanders –’

‘I won’t!’

‘Everyone knows the pagan islanders get a feel for when it’s time to die. They walk around shaking hands with friends and give away all their earthly goods –’

‘Don’t their wives have a say?’

‘They give some of their earthly goods to their wives.’

‘I should think so!’

‘And some to their friends –’

‘I’ll argue that!’

‘And some to their friends. Then they paddle their canoes off into the sunset and never return.’

His wife looked high up along him as if he were timber ripe for cutting. ‘Desertion!’ she said.

‘No, no, Mildred; death, pure and simple. The Time of Going Away, they call it.’

‘Did anyone ever charter a canoe and follow to see what those fools were up to?’

‘Of course not,’ said the old man, mildly irritated. ‘That would spoil everything.’

‘You mean they had other wives and pretty friends off on another island?’

‘No, no, it’s just a man needs aloneness, serenity, when his juices turn cold.’

‘If you could prove those fools really died, I’d shut up.’ His wife squinted one eye. ‘Anyone ever find their bones on those far islands?’

‘The fact is that they just sail into the sunset like animals who sense the Great Time at hand. Beyond that, I don’t wish to know.’

‘Well, I know,’ said the old woman. ‘You been reading more articles in the National Geographic about the Elephant Bone-yard.’

‘Graveyard, not Boneyard!’ he shouted.

‘Graveyard, Boneyard. I thought I burned those magazines; you got some hid?’

‘Look here, Mildred,’ he said severely, seizing the suitcase again. ‘My mind points north; nothing you say can head me south. I’m tuned to the infinite secret wellspring of the primitive soul.’

‘You’re tuned to whatever you read last in that bog-trotters’ gazette!’ She pointed a finger at him. ‘You think I got no memory?’

His shoulders fell. ‘Let’s not go through the list again, please.’

‘What about the Hairy Mammoth episode?’ she asked. ‘When they found that frozen elephant in the Russian tundra thirty years back? You and Sam Hertz, that old fool, with your fine idea of running off to Siberia to corner the world market in canned edible hairy mammoth?

You think I don’t still hear you saying, “Imagine the prices members of the National Geographic Society will pay to have the tender meat of the Siberian hairy mammoth, ten thousand years old, ten thousand years extinct, right in their homes!” You think; my scars have healed from that?’

‘I see them clearly,’ he said.

‘You think I’ve forgotten the time you went out to find the Lost Tribe of the Osseos, or whatever, in Wisconsin some place where you could dogtrot to town Saturday nights and tank up, and fell in that quarry and broke your leg and laid there three nights?’

‘Your recall,’ he said, ‘is total.’

‘Then what’s this about pagan natives and the Time of Going Away? I’ll tell you what it is – it’s the Time of Staying at Home! It’s the time when fruit don’t fall off the trees into your hand, you got to walk to the store for it. And why do we walk to the store for it?

Someone in this house, I’ll name no names, took the car apart like a clock some years back and left it strewn all down the yard. I’ve raised auto parts in my garden ten years come Thursday.

Ten more years and all that’s left of our car is little heaps of rust. Look out that window! It’s leaf-raking-and-burning time. It’s chopping-trees-and-sawing-wood-for-the-fire time. It’s clean-out-stoves-and-hang-storm-doors-and-windows time. It’s shingle-the-roof time, that’s what it is, and if you think you’re out to escape it, think again!’

He placed his hand to his chest. ‘It pains me you have so little trust in my natural sensitivity to oncoming Doom.’

‘It pains me that National Geographies fall in the hands of crazy old men. I see you read those pages then fall into those dreams I always have to sweep up after. Those Geographic and Popular Mechanics publishers should be forced to see all the half-finished rowboats, helicopters, and one-man batwing gliders in our attic, garage, and cellar. Not only see, but cart them home!’

‘Chatter on,’ he said. ‘I stand before you, a white stone sinking in the tides of Oblivion. For God’s sake, woman, can’t I drag myself off to die in peace?’

‘Plenty of time for Oblivion when I find you stone cold across the kindling pile.’

‘Jesting Pilate!’ he said. ‘Is recognition of one’s own mortality nothing but vanity?’

‘You’re chewing it like a plug of tobacco.’

‘Enough!’ he said. ‘My earthly goods are stacked on the back porch. Give them to the Salvation Army.’

‘The Geographies too?’

‘Yes, damn it, the Geographies ! Now stand aside!’

‘If you’re going to die, you won’t need that suitcase full of clothing,’ she said.

‘Hands off, woman! It may take some few hours. Am I to be stripped of my last creature comforts? This should be a tender scene of parting. Instead – bitter recriminations, sarcasm, doubt strewn to every wind.’

‘All right,’ she said.’ Go spend a cold night in the woods.’

‘I’m not necessarily going to the woods.’

‘Where else is there for a man in Illinois to go to die?’

‘Well,’ he said, and paused. ‘Well, there’s always the open highway.’

‘And be run down, of course; I’d forgotten that.’

‘No, no!’ He squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again. ‘The empty side-roads leading nowhere, everywhere, through night forests, wilderness, to distant lakes ’

‘Now, you’re not going to go rent a canoe, are you, and paddle off? Remember the time you tipped over and almost drowned at Fireman’s Pier?’

‘Who said anything about canoes?’

‘You did! Pagan islanders, you said, paddling off into the great unknown.’

‘That’s the South Seas! Here a man has to strike off on foot to find his natural source, seek his natural end. I might walk north along the Lake Michigan shore, the dunes, the wind, the big breakers there.’

‘Willie, Willie,’ she said softly, shaking her head. ‘Oh, Willie, Willie, what will I do with you?’

He lowered his voice. ‘Just let me have my head,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she said, quietly. ‘Yes.’ And tears came to her eyes.

‘Now, now,’ he said.

‘Oh, Willie …’ She looked a long while at him. ‘Do you really think with all your heart you’re not going to live?’

He saw himself reflected, small but perfect, in her eye, and looked away uneasily. ‘I thought all night about the universal tide that brings man in and takes him out. Now it’s morning and good-bye.’

‘Good-bye?’ She looked as if she’d never heard the word before.

His voice was unsteady. ‘Of course, if you absolutely insist I stay, Mildred –’

‘No!’ She braced herself and blew her nose. ‘You feel what you feel; I can’t fight that!’

‘You sure?’ he said.

‘You’re the one that’s sure, Willie,’ she said. ‘Get on along now. Take your heavy coat; the nights are cold.’

‘But –’ he said.

She ran and brought his coat and kissed his cheek and drew back quickly before he could enclose her in his bear hug. He stood there working his mouth, gazing at the big armchair by the fire. She threw open the front door. ‘You got food?’

‘I won’t need …’ He paused. ‘I got a boiled-ham sandwich and some pickles in my case. Just one, That’s all I figured I’d…’

And then he was out the door and down the steps and along the path towards the woods. He turned and was going to say something but thought better of it, waved, and went on.

‘Now, Will,’ she called. ‘Don’t overdo. Don’t make too much distance the first hour! You get tired, sit down! You get hungry, eat! And …’

But here she had to stop and turn away and get out her handkerchief.

A moment later, she looked up the path and it looked as though nobody had passed there in the last ten thousand years. It was so empty she had to go in and shut the door.

Night-time, nine o’clock, nine-fifteen, stars out, moon round, house lights strawberry-coloured through the curtains, the chimney blowing long comet tails of fireworks, sighing warm. Down the chimney, sounds of pots and pans and cutlery, fire on the hearth, like a great orange cat. In the kitchen, the big iron cook-stove full of jumping flames, pans boiling, bubbling, frying, vapours, and steams in the air. From time to time the old woman turned and her eyes listened and her mouth listened, wide, to the world outside this house, this fire, and this food.

Nine-thirty and, from a great distance away from the house, a solid whacking, chunking sound.

The old woman straightened up and laid down a spoon.

Outside, the dull solid blows came again and again in the moonlight. The sound went on for three or four minutes, during which she hardly moved except to tighten her mouth or her fists with each solid chunking blow. When the sounds stopped, she threw herself at the stove, the table, stirring, pouring, lifting, carrying, setting down.

She finished just as new sounds came from the dark land outside the windows. Footsteps came slowly up the path, heavy shoes weighed the front porch.

She went to the door and waited for a knock.

None came.

She waited a full minute.

Outside on the porch a great bulk stirred and shifted from side to side uneasily.

Finally she sighed and called sharply at the door. ‘Will, is that you breathing out there?’

No answer. Only a kind of sheepish silence behind the door.

She snatched the door wide.

The old man stood there, an incredible stack of cordwood in his arms. His voice came from behind the stack.

‘Saw smoke in the chimney; figured you might need wood,’ he said.

She stood aside. He came in and placed the wood carefully by the hearth, not looking at her.

She looked out on the porch and picked up the suitcase and brought it in and shut the door.

She saw him sitting at the dinner table.

She stirred the soup on the stove to a great boiling whirl.

‘Roast beef in the oven?’ he asked quietly.

She opened the oven door. The steam breathed across the room to wrap him up. He closed his eyes, seated there, bathed.

‘What’s that other smell, the burning?’ he asked a moment later.

She waited, back turned, and finally said, ‘National Geographies.’

He nodded slowly, saying nothing.

Then the food was on the table, warm and tremorous, and there was a moment of silence after she sat down and looked at him. She shook her head. She looked at him. Then she shook her head again silently.

‘Do you want to ask the blessing?’ she said.

‘You,’ he said.

They sat there in the warm room by the bright fire and bowed their heads and closed their eyes. She smiled and began.

‘Thank you, Lord …’

The Gift

TOMORROW would be Christmas and even while the three of them rode to the rocket port, the mother and father were worried. It was the boy’s first flight into space, his very first time in a rocket, and they wanted everything to be perfect.

So when, at the customs table, they were forced to leave behind his gift which exceeded the weight limit by no more than a few ounces and the little tree with the lovely white candles, they felt themselves deprived of the season and their love.

The boy was waiting for them in the Terminal room. Walking towards him, after their unsuccessful clash with the Interplanetary officials, the mother and father whispered to each other.

‘What shall we do?’

‘Nothing, nothing. What can we do?’

‘Silly rules!’

‘And he so wanted the tree!’

The siren gave a great howl and people pressed forward into the Mars Rocket. The mother and father walked at the very last, their small pale son between them, silent.

‘I’ll think of something,’ said the father.

‘What …?’ asked the boy.

And the rocket took off and they were flung headlong into dark space.

The rocket moved and left fire behind and left Earth behind on which the date was 24 December 2052, heading out into a place where there was no time at all, no month, no year, no hour. They slept away the rest of the first ‘day’. Near midnight, by their Earth-time New York watches, the boy awoke and said, ‘I want to go look out the porthole.’

There was only one port, a ‘window’ of immensely thick glass, of some size, up on the next deck.

‘Not quite yet,’ said the father. ‘I’ll take you up later.’

‘I want to see where we are and where we’re going.’

‘I want you to wait, for a reason,’ said the father.

He had been lying awake, turning this way and that, thinking of the abandoned gift, the problem of the season, the lost tree and the white candles. And at last, sitting up, no more than five minutes ago, he believed he had found a plan. He need only carry it out and this journey would be fine and joyous indeed.

‘Son,’ he said, ‘in exactly one half-hour it will be Christmas.’

‘Oh,’ said the mother, dismayed that he had mentioned it. Somehow she had rather hoped the boy would forget.

The boy’s face grew feverish and his lips trembled. ‘I know, I know. Will I get a present, will I? Will I have a tree? You promised –’

‘Yes, yes, all that, and more,’ said the father.

The mother started. ‘But –’

‘I mean it,’ said the father. ‘I really mean it. All and more, much more. Excuse me, now. I’ll be back.”

He left them for about twenty minutes. When he came back he was smiling. ‘Almost time.’

‘Can I hold your watch?’ asked the boy, and the watch was handed over and he held it ticking in his fingers as the rest of the hour drifted by in fire and silence and unfelt motion.

‘It’s Christmas now ! Christmas! Where’s my present?’

‘Here we go,’ said the father, and took his boy by the shoulder and led him from the room, down the hall, up a ramp-way, his wife following.

‘I don’t understand,’ she kept saying.

‘You will. Here we are,’ said the father.

They had stopped at the closed door of a large cabin. The father tapped three times and then twice, in a code. The door opened and the light in the cabin went out and there was a whisper of voices.

‘Go on in, son,’ said the father.

‘It’s dark.’

‘I’ll hold your hand. Come on, mama.’

They stepped into the room and the door shut, and the room was very dark indeed. And before them loomed a great glass eye, the porthole, a window four feet high and six feet wide, from which they could look out into space.

The boy gasped.

Behind him, the father and the mother gasped with him, and then in the dark room some people began to sing.

‘Merry Christmas, son,’ said the father.

And the voices in the room sang the old, the familiar carols, and the boy moved forward slowly until his face was pressed against the cool glass of the port. And he stood there for a long long time, just looking and looking out into space and the deep night at the burning and the burning of ten billion billion white and lovely candles….

The Little Mice

‘THEY’RE very odd,’ I said. ‘The little Mexican couple.’

‘How do you mean?’ asked my wife.

"Never a sound,’ I said. ‘Listen.’

Ours was a house deep back in among tenements, to which another half-house had been added. When my wife and I purchased the house, we rented the additional quarter which lay walled up against one side of our parlour. Now, listening at this particular wall, we heard our hearts beat.

‘I know they’re home,’ I whispered. ‘But in the three years they’ve lived here I’ve never heard a dropped pan, a spoken word, or the sound of a light switch. Good God, what are they doing in there?’

‘I’d never thought,’ said my wife. ‘It is peculiar.’

‘Only one light on, that same dim little blue 25-watt bulb they burn in the parlour. If you walk by and peer in their front door, there he is, sitting in his armchair, not saying a word, his hands in his lap. There she is, sitting in the other armchair, looking at him, saying nothing. They don’t move.’

‘At first glance I always think they’re not home,’ said my wife. ‘Their parlour’s so dark. But if you stare long enough, your eyes get used to it and you can make them out, sitting there.’

‘Some day,’ I said, ‘I’m going to run in, turn on their lights, and yell! My God, if I can’t stand their silence, how can they? They can talk, can’t they?’

‘When he pays the rent each month, he says hello.’

‘What else?’

‘Good-bye.’

I shook my head. ‘When we meet in the alley he smiles and runs.’

My wife and I sat down for an evening of reading, the radio, and talk. ‘Do they have a radio?’

‘No radio, television, telephone. Not a book, magazine, or paper in their house.’

‘Ridiculous!’

‘Don’t get so excited.’

‘I know, but you can’t sit in a dark room two or three years and not speak, not listen to a radio, not read or even eat, can you? I’ve never smelled a steak, or an egg frying. Damn it, I don’t believe I’ve ever heard them go to bed!’

‘They’re doing it to mystify us, dear.’

‘They’re succeeding!’

I went for a walk around the block. It was a nice summer evening. Returning I glanced idly in their front door. The dark silence was there, and the heavy shapes, sitting, and the little blue light burning. I stood a long time, finishing my cigarette. It was only in turning to go that I saw him in the doorway, looking out with his bland, plump face. He didn’t move. He just stood there, watching me.

‘Evening,’ I said.

Silence. After a moment, he turned, moving away into the dark room.

In the morning, the little Mexican left the house at seven o’clock alone, hurrying down the alley, observing the same silence he kept in his rooms. She followed at eight o’clock, walking carefully, all lumpy under her dark coat, a black hat balanced on her frizzy, beauty parlour hair. They had gone to work this way, remote and silent, for years.

‘Where do they work?’ I asked, at breakfast.

‘He’s a blast furnaceman at U.S. Steel here. She sews in a dress loft somewhere.’

‘That’s hard work.’

I typed a few pages of my novel, read, idled, typed some more. At five in the afternoon I saw the little Mexican woman come home, unlock her door, hurry inside, hook the screen, and lock the door tight.

He arrived at six sharp, in a rush. Once on their back porch, however, he became infinitely patient. Quietly, raking his hand over the screen, lightly, like a fat mouse scrabbling, he waited. At last she let him in. I did not see their mouths move.

Not a sound during supper time. No frying. No rattle of dishes. Nothing.

I saw the small blue lamp go on.

‘That’s how he is,’ said my wife, ‘when he pays the rent. Raps so quietly I don’t hear. I just happen to glance out of the window and there he is. God knows how long he’s waited, standing, sort of “nibbling” at the door.’

Two nights later, on a beautiful July evening the little Mexican man came out on the back porch and looked at me, working in the garden and said, ‘You’re crazy!’ He turned to my wife. ‘You’re crazy, too!’ He waved his plump hand, quietly. ‘I don’t like you. Too much noise. I don’t like you. You’re crazy.’

He went back into his little house.

August, September, October, November. The ‘mice’, as we now referred to them, lay quietly in their dark nest. Once, my wife gave him some old magazines with his rent receipt. He accepted these politely, with a smile and a bow, but no word. An hour later she saw him put the magazines in the yard incinerator and strike a match.

The next day he paid the rent three months in advance, no doubt figuring that he would only have to see us up close once every twelve weeks. When I saw him on the street, he crossed quickly to the other side to greet an imaginary friend. She, similarly, ran by me, smiling wildly, bewildered, nodding.

I never got nearer than twenty yards to her. If there was plumbing to be fixed in their house, they went silently forth on their own, not telling us, and brought back a plumber who worked, it seemed, with a flashlight.

‘God damnedest thing,’ he told me when I saw him in the alley. ‘Damn fool place there hasn’t got any light bulbs in the sockets. When I asked where they all were, damn it, they just smiled at me!’

I lay at night thinking about the little mice. Where were they from? Mexico, yes. What part? A farm, a small village, somewhere by a river? Certainly no city or town. But a place where there were stars and the normal lights and darknesses, the goings and comings of the moon and the sun they had known the better part of their lives.

Yet here they were, far far away from home, in an impossible city, he sweating out the hell of blast furnaces all day, she bent to jittering needles in a sewing loft. They came home then to this block, through a loud city, avoided clanging street-cars and saloons that screamed like red parrots along their way. Through a million shriekings they ran back to their parlour, their blue light, their comfortable chairs, and their silence.

I often thought of this. Late at night I felt if I put out my hand, in the dark of my own bedroom, I might feel adobe, and hear a cricket, and a river running by under the moon, and someone singing, softly, to a faint guitar.

Late one December evening the next door tenement burned. Flames roared at the sky, bricks fell in avalanches, and sparks littered the roof where the quiet mice lived.

I pounded their door.

‘Fire!’ I cried. ‘Fire!’

They sat motionless, in their blue-lighted room.

I pounded violently. ‘You hear? Fire!’

The fire engines arrived. They gushed water into the tenement. More bricks fell. Four of them smashed holes in the little house. I climbed to the roof, extinguished the small fires there and scrambled down, my face dirty and my hands cut. The door to the little house opened. The quiet little Mexican and his wife stood in the doorway, solid and unmoved.

‘Let me in!’ I cried. ‘There’s a hole in your roof; some sparks may have fallen in your bedroom!’

I pulled the door wide, pushed past them.

‘No!’ the little man grunted.

‘Ah!’ the little woman ran in a circle like a broken toy.

I was inside with a flashlight. The little man seized my arm.

I smelled his breath.

And then my flashlight shot through the rooms of their house. Light sparkled on a hundred wine bottles standing in the hall, two hundred bottles shelved in the kitchen, six dozen along the parlour wall-boards, more of the same on bedroom bureaus and in closets.

I do not know if I was more impressed with the hole in the bedroom ceiling or the endless glitter of so many bottles. I lost count. It was like an invasion of gigantic shining beetles, struck dead, deposited, and left by some ancient disease.

In the bedroom, I felt the little man and woman behind me in the doorway. I heard their loud breathing and I could feel their eyes. I raised the beam of my flashlight away from the glittering bottles, I focused it, carefully, and for the rest of my visit, on the hole in the yellow ceiling.

The little woman began to cry. She cried softly. Nobody moved.

The next morning they left.

Before we even knew they were going, they were half down the alley at six a.m. carrying their luggage, which was light enough to be entirely empty. I tried to stop them. I talked to them. They were old friends, I said. Nothing had changed, I said.

They had nothing to do with the fire, I said, or the roof. They were innocent bystanders, I insisted ! I would fix the roof myself, no charge, no charge to them! But they did not look at me. They looked at the house and at the open end of the alley, ahead of them, while I talked. Then, when I stopped they nodded to the alley as if agreeing that it was time to go, and walked off, and then began to run, it seemed, away from me, towards the street where there were street-cars and buses and automobiles and many loud avenues stretching in a maze. They hurried proudly, though, heads up, not looking back.

It was only by accident I ever met them again. At Christmastime, one evening, I saw the little man running quietly along the twilight street ahead of me. On a personal whim, I followed. When he turned, I turned.

At last, five blocks away from our old neighbourhood, he scratched quietly at the door of a little white house. I saw the door open, shut, and lock him in. As night settled over the tenement city, a small light burned like blue mist in the tiny living-room as I passed.

I thought I saw, but probably imagined, two silhouettes there, he on his side of the room in his own particular chair, and she on her side of the room, sitting, sitting in the dark, and one or two bottles beginning to collect on the floor behind the chairs, and not a sound, not a sound between them. Only the silence.

I did not go up and knock. I strolled by. I walked on along the avenue, listening to the parrot Cafés scream. I bought a newspaper, a magazine, and a quarter-edition book. Then I went home to where all the lights were lit and there was warm food upon the table.

The Sunset Harp

TOM, knee-deep in the waves, a piece of driftwood in his hand, listened.

The house, up towards the Coast Highway in the late afternoon, was silent. The sounds of closets being rummaged, suitcase locks snapping, vases being smashed, and of a final door crashing shut, all had faded away.

Chico, standing on the pale sand, flourished his wire-strainer to shake out a harvest of lost coins. After a moment, without glancing at Tom, he said, ‘Let her go.’

So it was every year. For a week or a month, their house would have music swelling from the windows, there would be new geraniums potted on the porch-rail, new paint on the doors and steps.

The clothes on the wire-line changed from harlequin pants to sheath-dresses to handmade Mexican frocks like white waves breaking behind the house. Inside, the paintings on the walls shifted from imitation Matisse to pseudo-Italian Renaissance. Sometimes, looking up, he would see a woman drying her hair like a bright yellow flag on the wind. Sometimes the flag was black or red. Sometimes the woman was tall, sometimes short, against the sky. But there was never more than one woman at a time. And, at last, a day like today came.…

Tom placed his driftwood on the growing pile near where Chico sifted the billion footprints left by people long vanished from their holidays.

‘Chico. What are we doing here?’

‘Living the life of Reilly, boy!’

‘I don’t feel like Reilly, Chico.’

‘Work at it, boy!’

Tom saw the house a month from now, the flower-pots blowing dust, the walls hung with empty squares, only sand carpeting the floors. The rooms would echo like shells in the wind. And all night every night bedded in separate rooms he and Chico would hear a tide falling away and away down a long shore, leaving no trace.

Tom nodded, imperceptibly. Once a year he himself brought a nice girl here, knowing she was right at last and that in no time they would be married. But his women always stole silently away before dawn, feeling they had been mistaken for someone else, not being able to play the part.

Chico’s friends left like vacuum-cleaners, with a terrific drag, roar, rush, leaving no lint unturned, no clam unprized of its pearl, taking their purses with them like toy-dogs which Chico had petted as he opened their jaws to count their teeth.

‘That’s four women so far this year.’

‘Okay, referee.’ Chico grinned. ‘Show me the way to the showers.’

‘Chico –’ Tom bit his lower lip, then went on. ‘I been thinking. Why don’t we split up?’

Chico just looked at him.

‘I mean,’ said Tom, quickly, ‘maybe we’d have better luck, alone.’

‘Well, I’ll be goddamned,’ said Chico, slowly, gripping the strainer in his big fists before him. ‘Look here, boy, don’t you know the facts? You and me, we’ll be here come the year 2,000.

A couple of crazy dumb old gooney-birds drying their bones in the sun. Nothing’s ever going to happen to us now, Tom, it’s too late. Get that through your head and shut up.’

Tom swallowed and looked steadily at the other man. ‘I’m thinking of leaving – next week.’

‘Shut up, shut up, and get to work!’

Chico gave the sand an angry showering rake that tilled him forty-three cents in dimes, pennies, and nickels. He stared blindly at the coins shimmering down the wires like a pinball game all afire.

Tom did not move, holding his breath.

They both seemed to be waiting for something.

The something happened.

‘Hey … hey … hey …’

From a long way off down the coast a voice called.

The two men turned slowly.

‘Hey … hey … oh, hey …!’

A boy was running, yelling, waving, along the shore two hundred yards away. There was something in his voice that made Tom feel suddenly cold. He held on to his own arms, waiting.

‘Hey!’

The boy pulled up, gasping, pointing back along the shore.

‘A woman, a funny woman, by the North Rock!’

‘A woman!’ The words exploded from Chico’s mouth and he began to laugh. ‘Oh, no, no!’

‘What you mean, a “funny” woman?’ asked Tom.

‘I don’t know,’ cried the boy, his eyes wide. ‘You got to come see! Awful funny!’

‘You mean “drowned”?’

‘Maybe! She came out of the water, she’s lying on the shore, you got to see, yourself … funny …’ The boy’s voice died. He gazed off north again. ‘She’s got a fish’s tail.’

Chico laughed. ‘Not before supper, please.’

‘Please!’ cried the boy, dancing now. ‘No lie! Oh, hurry!’

He ran off, sensed he was not followed, and looked back in dismay.

Tom felt his lips move. ‘Boy wouldn’t run this far for a joke, would he, Chico?’

‘People have run farther for less.’

Tom started walking. ‘All right, son.’

‘Thanks, mister, oh thanks!’

The boy ran. Twenty yards up the coast, Tom looked back. Behind him, Chico squinted, shrugged, dusted his hands wearily, and followed.

They moved north along the twilight beach, their skin weathered in tiny lizard folds about their burnt pale-water eyes, looking younger for their hair cut close to the skull so you could not see the grey. There was a fair wind and the ocean rose and fell with prolonged concussions.

‘What,’ said Tom, ‘what if we get to North Rock and it’s true? The ocean has washed some thing up?’

But before Chico could answer Tom was gone, his mind racing down coasts Uttered with horseshoe crabs, sand-dollars, starfish, kelp, and stone. From all the times he’d talked on what lives in the sea, the names returned with the breathing fall of waves.

Argonauts, they whispered, codlings, pollacks, hound-fish, tautog, tench, sea-elephant, they whispered, gillings, flounders, and beluga, the white whale and grampus, the sea-dog … always you thought how these must look from their deep-sounding names.

Perhaps you would never in your life see them rise from the salt meadows beyond the safe limits of the shore, but they were there, and their names, with a thousand others, made pictures. And you looked and wished you were a frigate-bird that might fly nine thousand miles around to return some year with the full size of the ocean in your head.

‘Oh, quick!’ The boy had run back to peer in Tom’s face. ‘It might be gone!’

‘Keep your shirt on, boy,’ said Chico.

They came around the North Rock. A second boy stood there, looking down.

Perhaps from the corner of his eye, Tom saw something on the sand that made him hesitate to look straight at it, but fix instead on the face of the boy standing there. The boy was pale and he seemed not to breathe. On occasion he remembered to take a breath, his eyes focused, but the more they saw there on the sand the more they took time off from focusing and turned blank and looked stunned. When the ocean came in over his tennis shoes, he did not move or notice.

Tom glanced away from the boy to the sand.

And Tom’s face, in the next moment, became the face of the boy. His hands assumed the same curl at his sides and his mouth moved to open and stay half-open and his eyes, which were light in colour, seemed to bleach still more with so much looking.

The setting sun was ten minutes above the sea.

‘A big wave came in and went out,’ said the first boy, ‘and here she was.’

They looked at the woman lying there.

Her hair was very long and it lay on the beach like the threads of an immense harp. The water stroked along the threads and floated them up and let them down, each time in a different fan and silhouette. The hair must have been five or six feet long and now it was strewn on the hard wet sand and it was the colour of limes.

Her face …

The men bent half down in wonder.

Her face was white sand sculpture, with a few water drops shimmering on it like summer rain upon a cream-coloured rose. Her face was that moon which when seen by day is pale and unbelievable in the blue sky. It was milk-marble veined with faint violet in the temples. The eyelids, closed down upon the eyes, were powdered with a faint water-colour, as if the eyes beneath gazed through the fragile tissue of the lids and saw them standing there above her looking down and looking down.

The mouth was a pale flushed sea-rose, full and closed upon itself. And her neck was slender and white and her breasts were small and white, now covered, uncovered, covered, uncovered in the flow of water, the ebb of water, the flow, the ebb, the flow. And the breasts were flushed at their tips, and her body was startlingly white, almost an illumination, a white-green lightning against the sand. And as the water shifted her, her skin glinted like the surface of a pearl.

The lower half of her body changed itself from white to very pale blue, from very pale blue to pale green, from pale green to emerald green, to moss and lime green, to scintillas and sequins all dark green, all flowing away in a fount, a curve, a rush of light and dark, to end in a lacy fan, a spread of foam and jewel on the sand.

The two halves of this creature were so joined as to reveal no point of fusion where pearl woman, woman of a whiteness made of cream-water and clear sky merged with that half which belonged to the amphibious slide and rush of current that came up on the shore and shelved down the shore, tugging its half towards its proper home.

The woman was the sea, the sea was woman. There was no flaw, or seam, no wrinkle or stitch; the illusion, if illusion it was, held perfectly together and the blood from one moved into and through and mingled with what must have been the ice-waters of the other.

‘I wanted to run get help.’ The first boy seemed not to want to raise his voice. ‘But Skip said she was dead and there’s no help for that. Is she?’

‘She was never alive,’ said Chico. ‘Sure,’ he went on, feeling their eyes on him suddenly. ‘It’s something left over from a movie-studio. Liquid rubber skinned over a steel frame. A prop, a dummy.’

‘Oh, no, it’s real!’

‘We’ll find a label somewhere,’ said Chico. ‘Here.’

‘Don’t!’ cried the first boy.

‘Hell.’ Chico touched the body to turn it, and stopped. He knelt there, his face changing.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Tom.

Chico took his hand away and looked at it. ‘I was wrong.’ His voice faded.

Tom took the woman’s wrist. ‘There’s a pulse.’

‘You’re feeling your own heartbeat.’

‘I just don’t know … maybe … maybe …’

The woman was there and her upper body was all moon pearl and tidal cream and her lower body all slithering ancient green-black coins that slid upon themselves in the shift of wind and water.

‘There’s a trick somewhere!’ cried Chico, suddenly.

‘No. No!’ Just as suddenly Tom burst in laughter. ‘No trick! My God, my God, I feel great! I haven’t felt so great since I was a kid!’

They walked slowly around her. A wave touched her white hand so the fingers faintly softly waved. The gesture was that of someone asking for another and another wave to come in and lift the fingers and then the wrist and then the arm and then the head and finally the body and take all of them together back down out to sea.

Tom.’ Chico’s mouth opened and closed. ‘Why don’t you go get our truck?’

Tom didn’t move.

‘You hear me?’ said Chico.

‘Yes, but –’

‘But what? We could sell this somewhere, I don’t know – the university, that aquarium at Seal Beach or … well, hell, why couldn’t we just set up a place? Look.’ He shook Tom’s arm. ‘Drive to the pier. Buy us three hundred pounds of chipped ice. When you take anything out of the water you need ice, don’t you?’

‘I never thought.’

‘Think about it! Get moving!’

‘I don’t know, Chico.’

‘What do you mean? She’s real, isn’t she?’ He turned to the boys. ‘You say she’s real, don’t you? Well, then, what are we waiting for?’

‘Chico,’ said Tom. ‘You better go get the ice yourself.’

‘Someone’s got to stay and make sure she don’t go back out with the tide!’

‘Chico,’ said Tom. ‘I don’t know how to explain. I don’t want to get that ice for you.’

‘I’ll go myself, then. Look, boys, build the sand up here to keep the waves back. I’ll give you five bucks apiece. Hop to it!’

The sides of the boys’ faces were bronze-pink from the sun which was touching the horizon now. Their eyes were a bronze colour looking at Chico.

‘My God!’ said Chico. ‘This is better than finding ambergris!’ He ran to the top of the nearest dune, called, ‘Get to work!’ and was gone.

Now Tom and the two boys were left with the lonely woman by the North Rock and the sun was one-fourth of the way below the western horizon. The sand and the woman were pink-gold.

‘Just a little line,’ whispered the second boy. He drew his fingernail along under his own chin, gently. He nodded to the woman. Tom bent again to see the faint line under either side of her firm white chin, the small, almost invisible line where the gills were or had been and were now almost sealed shut, invisible.

He looked at the face and the great strands of hair spread out in a lyre on the shore.

‘She’s beautiful,’ he said.

The boys nodded without knowing it.

Behind them, a gull leaped up quickly from the dunes. The boys gasped and turned to stare.

Tom felt himself trembling. He saw the boys were trembling too. A car horn hooted. Their eyes blinked, suddenly afraid. They looked up towards the highway.

A wave poured about the body, framing it in a clear white pool of water.

Tom nodded the boys to one side.

The wave moved the body an inch in and two inches out towards the sea.

The next wave came and moved the body two inches in and six inches out towards the sea.

‘But –’ said the first boy.

Tom shook his head.

The third wave lifted the body two feet down towards the sea. The wave after that drifted the body another foot down the shingles and the next three moved it six feet down.

The first boy cried out and ran after it.

Tom reached him and held his arm. The boy looked helpless and afraid and sad.

For a moment there were no more waves. Tom looked at the woman, thinking, she’s true, she’s real, she’s mine … but … she’s dead. Or will be if she stays here.

‘We can’t let her go,’ said the first boy. ‘We can’t, we just can’t!’

The other boy stepped between the woman and the sea. ‘What would we do with her?’ he wanted to know, looking at Tom, ‘if we kept her?’

The first boy tried to think. ‘We could – we could – ‘He stopped and shook his head. ‘Oh, my Gosh.’

The second boy stepped out of the way and left a path from the woman to the sea.

The next wave was a big one. It came in and went out and the sand was empty. The whiteness was gone and the black diamonds and the great threads of the harp.

They stood by the edge of the sea, looking out, the man and the two boys, until they heard the truck driving up on the dunes behind them.

The last of the sun was gone.

They heard footsteps running down the dunes and someone yelling.

They drove back down the darkening beach in the light truck with the big-treaded tyres, in silence. The two boys sat in the rear on the bags of chipped ice. After a long while, Chico began to swear steadily, half to himself, spitting out of the window.

‘Three hundred pounds of ice. Three hundred pounds of ice! What do I do with it now? And I’m soaked to the skin, soaked! You didn’t even move when I jumped in and swam out to look around! Idiot, idiot! You haven’t changed! Like every other time, like always, you do nothing, nothing, just stand there, stand there, do nothing, nothing, just stare!’

‘And what did you do, I ask, what?’ said Tom, in a tired voice, looking ahead. ‘The same as you always did, just the same, no different, no different at all. You should’ve seen yourself.’

They dropped the boys off at their beach-house. The youngest spoke in a voice you could hardly hear against the wind. ‘Gosh, nobody’ll ever believe …’

The two men drove down the coast and parked.

Chico sat for two or three minutes waiting for his fist to relax on his lap, and then he snorted.

‘Hell. I guess things turn out for the best.’ He took a deep breath. ‘It just came to me. Funny. Twenty, thirty years from now, middle of the night, our phone’ll ring. It’ll be one of those two boys, grown-up, calling long-distance from a bar somewhere.

Middle of the night, them calling to ask one question. It’s true, isn’t it? they’ll say. It did happen, didn’t it? Back in 1958, it really happened to us? And we’ll sit there on the edge of the bed, middle of the night, saying, Sure, boy, sure, it really happened to us in 1958. And they’ll say, Thanks, and we’ll say, Don’t mention it, any old time. And we’ll all say good night. And maybe they won’t call again for a couple of years.’

The two men sat on their front-porch steps in the dark.

‘Tom?’

‘What?’

Chico waited a moment.

‘Tom, next week – you’re not moving out.’

Tom thought about it, a cigarette dead in his fingers. And he knew he would never go away now. For tomorrow and the day after and the day after the day after that, he knew he would walk down and go swimming there in all the green lace and the white fires and the dark caverns in the hollows under the waves. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

‘That’s right, Chico. I’m staying here.’

Now the silver looking-glasses advanced in a crumpling line all along the coast from a thousand miles north to a thousand miles south. The mirrors did not reflect so much as one building or one tree or one highway or one car or even one man himself.

The mirrors reflected only the quiet moon and then shattered into a billion bits of glass that spread out in a glaze on the shore. Then the sea was dark awhile, preparing another line of mirrors to rear up and surprise the two men who sat there for a long time, never once blinking their eyes, waiting.

A Scent of Sarsaparilla

MR WILLIAM FINCH stood quietly in the dark and blowing attic all morning and afternoon for three days. For three days in late November, he stood alone, feeling the soft white flakes of Time falling out of the infinite cold steel sky, silently, softly, feathering the roof and powdering the eaves.

He stood, eyes shut. The attic, wallowed in seas of wind in the long sunless days, creaked every bone and shook down ancient dusts from its beams and warped timbers and lathings. It was a mass of sighs and torments that ached all about him where he stood sniffing its elegant dry perfumes and feeling of its ancient heritages. Ah. Ah.

Listening, downstairs, his wife Cora could not hear him walk or shift or twitch. She imagined she could only hear him breathe, slowly out and in, like a dusty bellows, alone up there in the attic, high in the windy house.

‘Ridiculous,’ she muttered.

When he hurried down for lunch the third afternoon, he smiled at the bleak walls, the chipped plates, the scratched silverware, and even at his wife!

‘What’s all the excitement?’ she demanded.

‘Good spirits is all. Wonderful spirits!’ he laughed. He seemed almost hysterical with joy. He was seething in a great warm ferment which, obviously, he had trouble concealing. His wife frowned.

‘What’s that smell?’

‘Smell, smell, smell?’ He jerked his greying head back and forth.

‘Sarsaparilla.’ She sniffed suspiciously. ‘That’s what it is!’

‘Oh, it couldn’t be!’ His hysterical happiness stopped as quickly as if she’d switched him off. He seemed stunned, ill at ease, and suddenly very careful.

‘Where did you go this morning?’ she asked.

‘You know I was cleaning the attic.’

‘Mooning over a lot of trash. I didn’t hear a sound. Thought maybe you weren’t in the attic at all. What’s that?’ She pointed.

‘Well, now how did those get there?’ he asked the world.

He peered down at the pair of black spring-metal bicycle clips that bound his thin pants to his bony ankles.

‘Found them in the attic,’ he answered himself. ‘Remember when we got out on the gravel road in the early morning on our tandem bike, Cora, forty years ago, everything fresh and new?’

‘If you don’t finish that attic today, I’ll come up and toss everything out myself.’

‘Oh, no,’ he cried. ‘I have everything the way I want it!’

She looked at him coldly.

‘Cora,’ he said, eating his lunch, relaxing, beginning to enthuse again, ‘you know what attics are? They’re Time Machines, in which old, dim-witted men like me can travel back forty years to a time when it was summer all year round and children raided ice-wagons. Remember how it tasted? You held the ice in your handkerchief. It was like sucking the flavour of linen and snow at the same time.’

Cora fidgeted.

It’s not impossible, he thought, half closing his eyes, trying to see it and build it. Consider an attic. Its very atmosphere is Time. It deals in other years, the cocoons and chrysalises of another age. All the bureau drawers are little coffins where a thousand yesterdays lie in state.

Oh, the attic’s a dark, friendly place, full of Time, and if you stand in the very centre of it, straight and tall, squinting your eyes, and thinking and thinking, and smelling the Past, and putting out your hands to feel of Long Ago, why, it…

He stopped, realizing he had spoken some of this aloud. Cora was eating rapidly.

‘Well, wouldn’t it be interesting,’ he asked the parting in her hair, ‘if Time Travel could occur? And what more logical, proper place for it to happen than in an attic like ours, eh?’

‘It’s not always summer back in the old days,’ she said. ‘It’s just your crazy memory. You remember all the good things and forget the bad. It wasn’t always summer.’

‘Figuratively speaking, Cora, it was.’

‘Wasn’t’

‘What I mean is this,’ he said, whispering excitedly, bending forward to see the image he was tracing on the blank dining-room wall. ‘If you rode your unicycle carefully between the years, balancing, hands out, careful, careful, if you rode from year to year, spent a week in 1909, a day in 1900, a month or a fortnight somewhere else, 1905, 1898, you could stay with summer the rest of your life.’

‘Unicycle?’

‘You know, one of those tall chromium one-wheeled bikes, single-seater, the performers ride in vaudeville shows, juggling. Balance, true balance, it takes, not to fall off, to keep the bright objects flying in the air, beautiful, up and up, a light, a flash, a sparkle, a bomb of brilliant colours, red, yellow, blue, green, white, gold; all the Junes and Julys and Augusts that ever were, in the air, about you, at once, hardly touching your hands, flying, suspended, and you, smiling, among them. Balance, Cora, balance.’

‘Blah,’ she said, ‘blah, blah.’ And added, ‘blah!’

He climbed the long cold stairs to the attic, shivering.

There were nights in winter when he woke with porcelain in his bones, with cool chimes blowing in his ears, with frost piercing his nerves in a raw illumination like white cold fireworks exploding and showering down in flaming snows upon a silent land deep in his subconscious. He was cold, cold, cold, and it would take a score of endless summers, with their green torches and bronze suns to thaw him free of his wintry sheath.

He was a great tasteless chunk of brittle ice, a snowman put to bed each night, full of confetti dreams, tumbles of crystal and flurry. And there lay winter outside for ever, a great leaden winepress smashing down its colourless lid of sky, squashing them all like so many grapes, mashing colour and sense and being from everyone, save the children who fled on skis and toboggans down mirrored hills which reflected the crushing iron shield that hung lower above town each day and every eternal night.

Mr Finch lifted the attic trapdoor. But here, here. A dust of summer sprang up about him. The attic dust simmered with heat left over from other seasons. Quietly, he shut the trapdoor down.

He began to smile.

The attic was quiet as a thundercloud before a storm. On occasion, Cora Finch heard her husband murmuring, murmuring, high up there.

At five in the afternoon, singing My Isle of Golden Dreams, Mr Finch flipped a crisp new straw hat in the kitchen door. ‘Boo!’

‘Did you sleep all afternoon?’ snapped his wife. ‘I called up at you four times and no answer.’

‘Sleep?’ He considered this and laughed, then put his hand quickly over his mouth. ‘Well, I guess I did.’

Suddenly she saw him. ‘My God!’ she cried, ‘where’d you get that coat?’

He wore a red candy-striped coat, a high white, choking collar, and ice-cream pants. You could smell the straw hat like a handful of fresh hay fanned in the air.

‘Found ’em in an old trunk.’

She sniffed. ‘Don’t smell of mothballs. Look brand-new.’

‘Oh, no!’ he said hastily. He looked stiff and uncomfortable as she eyed his costume.

‘This isn’t a summer stock company,’ she said.

‘Can’t a fellow have a little fun?’

‘That’s all you’ve ever had,’ she slammed the oven door. ‘While I’ve stayed home and knitted, Lord knows, you’ve been down at the store helping ladies’ elbows in and out doors.’

He refused to be bothered. ‘Cora.’ He looked deep into the crackling straw hat. ‘Wouldn’t it be nice to take a Sunday walk the way we used to do, with your silk parasol and your long dress whishing along, and sit on those wire-legged chairs at the soda parlour and smell the drug store the way they used to smell?

Why don’t drug stores smell that way any more? And order two sarsaparillas for us, Cora, and then ride out in our 1910 Ford to Hannahan’s Pier for a box-supper and listen to the brass band. How about it?’

‘Supper’s ready. Take that dreadful uniform off.’

‘If you could make a wish and take a ride on those oak-laned country roads like they had before cars started rushing, would you do it?’ he insisted, watching her.

‘Those old roads were dirty. We came home looking like Africans. Anyway,’ she picked up a sugar-jar and shook it, ‘this morning I had forty dollars here. Now it’s gone! Don’t tell me you ordered those clothes from a costume house. They’re brand-new, they didn’t come from any trunk!’

‘I’m –’ he said.

She raved for half an hour, but he could not bring himself to say anything. The November wind shook the house and as she talked, the snows of winter began to fall again in the cold steel sky.

‘Answer me!’ she cried. ‘Are you crazy, spending our money that way, on clothes you can’t wear?’

‘The attic,’ he started to say.

She walked off and sat in the living-room.

The snow was falling fast now and it was a cold dark November evening. She heard him climb up the step ladder, slowly, into the attic, into that dusty place of other years, into that black place of costumes and props and Time, into a world separate from this world below.

He closed the trap door down. The flashlight, snapped on, was company enough. Yes, here was all of Time compressed in a Japanese paper flower. At the touch of memory, everything would unfold into the clear water of the mind, in beautiful blooms, in spring breezes, larger than life. Each of the bureau drawers, slid forth, might contain aunts and cousins and grand-mamas, ermined in dust. Yes, Time was here. You could feel it breathing, an atmospheric instead of a mechanical clock.

Now the house below was as remote as another day in the past. He half-shut his eyes and looked and looked on every side of the waiting attic.

Here, in prismed chandelier, were rainbows and mornings and noons as bright as new rivers flowing endlessly back through time. His flashlight caught and flickered them alive, the rainbows leapt up to curve the shadows back with colours, with colours like plums and raspberries and concord grapes, with colours like cut lemons and the sky where the clouds drew off after storming and the blue was there.

And the dust of the attic was incense burning and all of time burning, and all you need do was peer into the flames. It was indeed a great machine of Time, this attic, he knew, he felt, he was sure, and if you touched prisms here, doorknobs there, plucked tassels, chimed crystals, swirled dust, punched trunk-hasps, and gusted the vox-humana of the old hearth-bellows until it puffed the soot of a thousand ancient fires into your eyes, if, indeed, you played this instrument, this warm machine of parts, if you fondled all of its bits and pieces, its levers and changers and movers, then, then, then!

He thrust out his hands to orchestrate, to conduct, to flourish. There was music in his head, in his mouth shut tight, and he played the great machine, the thunderously silent organ, bass, tenor, soprano, low, high, and at last, at last, a chord that shuddered him so that he had to shut his eyes.

About nine o’clock that night she heard him calling, ‘Cora!’ She went upstairs. His head peered down at her from above, smiling at her. He waved his hat. ‘Good-bye, Cora.’

‘What do you mean?’ she cried.

‘I’ve thought it over for three days and I’m saying good-bye.’

‘Come down out of there, you fool!’

‘I drew five hundred dollars from the bank yesterday. I’ve been thinking about this. And then when it happened, well … Cora …’ He shoved his eager hand down. ‘For the last time, will you come along with me?’

‘In the attic? Hand down that step-ladder, William Finch. I’ll climb up there and run you out of that filthy place!’

‘I’m going to Hannahan’s Pier for a bowl of Clam Chowder,’ he said. ‘And I’m requesting the brass band to play Moonlight Bay. Oh, come on, Cora….’ He motioned his extended hand.

She simply stared at his gentle, questioning face.

‘Good-bye,’ he said.

He waved gently, gently. Then his face was gone, the straw hat was gone.

‘William!’ she screamed.

The attic was dark and silent.

Shrieking, she ran and got a chair and used it to groan her way up into the musty darkness. She flourished a flashlight. ‘William! William!’

The dark spaces were empty. A winter wind shook the house.

Then she saw the far west attic window, ajar.

She fumbled over to it. She hesitated, held her breath. Then, slowly, she opened it. The ladder was placed outside the window, leading down on to a porch roof.

She pulled back from the window.

Outside the opened frame the apple trees were lush green, it was twilight of a summer day in July. Faintly, she heard explosions, firecrackers going off. She heard laughter and distant voices. Rockets burst in the warm air, softly, red, white, and blue, fading.

She slammed the window and stood reeling. ‘William!’

Wintry November light glowed up through the trap in the attic floor behind her. Bent to it, she saw the snow whispering against the cold clear panes down in that November world where she would spend the next thirty years.

She did not go near the window again. She sat alone in the black attic, smelling the one smell that did not seem to fade. It lingered like a gentle sigh of satisfaction, on the air. She took a deep, long breath.

The old, the familiar, the unforgettable scent of drug-store sarsaparilla.

And the Rock Cried Out

THE raw carcasses, hung in the sunlight, rushed at them, vibrated with heat and red colour in the green jungle air, and were gone. The stench of rotting flesh gushed through the car windows, and Leonora Webb quickly pressed the button that whispered her door window up.

‘Good Lord,’ she said, ‘those open-air butcher’s shops.’

The smell was still in the car, a smell of war and horror.

‘Did you see the flies?’ she asked.

‘When you buy any kind of meat in those markets,’ John Webb said, ‘you slap the beef with your hand. The flies lift from the meat so you can get a look at it.’

He turned the car around a lush bend in the green rain-jungle road.

‘Do you think they’ll let us into Juatala when we get there?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Watch out!’

He saw the bright things in the road too late, tried to swerve, but hit them. There was a terrible sighing from the right front tyre, the car heaved about and sank to a stop. He opened his side of the car and stepped out. The jungle was hot and silent and the highway empty, very empty and quiet at noon.

He walked to the front of the car and bent, all the while checking his revolver in its underarm holster.

Leonora’s window gleamed down. ‘Is the tyre hurt much?’

‘Ruined, utterly ruined!’ He picked up the bright thing that had stabbed and slashed the tyre.

‘Pieces of a broken machete,’ he said, ‘placed in adobe holders pointing towards our car wheels. We’re lucky it didn’t get all our tyres.’

‘But why?’

‘You know as well as I.’ He nodded to the newspaper beside her, at the date, the headlines:

4 OCTOBER 1963: UNITED STATES, EUROPE SILENT!

The radios of the U.S.A. and Europe are dead. There is a great silence. The War has spent itself.

It is believed that most of the population of the United States is dead. It is believed that most of Europe, Russia, and Siberia are equally decimated. The day of the white people of the earth is over and finished.

‘It all came so fast,’ said Webb. ‘One week we’re on another tour, a grand vacation from home. The next week – this.’

They both looked away from the black headlines to the jungle.

The jungle looked back at them with a vastness, a breathing moss-and-leaf silence, with a billion diamond and emerald insect eyes.

‘Be careful, Jack.’

He pressed two buttons. An automatic lift under the front wheels hissed and hung the car in the air. He jammed a key nervously into the right wheel plate. The tyre, frame and all, with a sucking pop, bounced from the wheel. It was a matter of seconds to lock the spare in place and roll the shattered tyre back to the luggage compartment. He had his gun out while he did all this.

‘Don’t stand in the open, please, Jack.’

‘So it’s starting already.’ He felt his hair burning hot on his skull. ‘News travels fast.’

‘For God’s sake,’ said Leonora. ‘They can hear you!’

He stared at the jungle.

‘I know you’re in there!’

‘Jack!’

He aimed at the silent jungle. ‘I see you!’ He fired four, five times, quickly, wildly.

The jungle ate the bullets with hardly a quiver, a brief slit sound like torn silk where the bullets bored and vanished into a million acres of green leaves, trees, silence, and moist earth. The brief echo of the shots died. Only the car muttered its exhaust behind Webb. He walked around the car, got in, and shut the door and locked it.

He reloaded the gun, sitting in die front seat. Then they drove away from the place.

They drove steadily.

‘Did you see anyone?’

‘No. You?’

She shook her head.

‘You’re going too fast.’

He slowed only in time. As they rounded a curve another clump of the bright flashing objects filled the right side of the road. He swerved to the left and passed.

‘Sons-of-bitches!’

‘They’re not sons-of-bitches, they’re just people who never had a car like this or anything at all.’

Something ticked across the window pane.

There was a streak of colourless liquid on the glass.

Leonora glanced up. ‘Is it going to rain?’

‘No, an insect hit the pane.’

Another tick.

‘Are you sure that was an insect?’

Tick, tick, tick.

‘Shut the window!’ he said, speeding up.

Something fell in her lap.

She looked down at it. He reached over to touch the thing.

‘Quick!’

She pressed the button. The window snapped up.

Then she examined her lap again.

The tiny blowgun dart glistened there.

‘Don’t get any of the liquid on you,’ he said. ‘Wrap it in your handkerchief – we’ll throw it away later.’

He had the car up to sixty miles an hour.

‘If we hit another road block, we’re done.’

‘This is a local thing,’ he said. ‘We’ll drive out of it.’

The panes were ticking all the time. A shower of things blew at the window and fell away in their speed.

‘Why,’ said Leonora Webb, ‘they don’t even know us!’

‘I only wish they did.’ He gripped the wheel. ‘It’s hard to kill people you know. But not hard to kill strangers.’

‘I don’t want to die,’ she said simply, sitting there.

He put his hand inside his coat. ‘If anything happens to me, my gun is here. Use it, for God’s sake, and don’t waste time.’

She moved over close to him and they drove seventy-five miles an hour down a straight stretch in the jungle road, saying nothing.

With the windows up the heat was oven-thick in the car.

‘It’s so silly,’ she said, at last. ‘Putting the knives in the road. Trying to hit us with the blowguns. How could they know that the next car along would be driven by white people?’

‘Don’t ask them to be that logical,’ he said.

‘A car is a car. It’s big, it’s rich. The money in one car would last them a lifetime. And anyway, if you road-block a car, chances are you’ll get either an American tourist or a rich Spaniard, comparatively speaking, whose ancestors should have behaved better. And if you happen to road-block another Indian, hell, all you do is go out and help him change tyres’

‘What time is it?’ she asked.

For the thousandth time he glanced at his empty wrist. Without expression or surprise, he fished in his coat pocket for the glistening gold watch with the silent sweep hand. A year ago he had seen a native stare at this watch and stare at it and stare at it with almost a hunger. Then the native had examined him, not scowling, not hating, not sad or happy; nothing except puzzled.

He had taken the watch off that day and never worn it since.

‘Noon,’ he said.

Noon.

The border lay ahead. They saw it and both cried out at once. They pulled up, smiling, not knowing they smiled….

John Webb leaned out of the window, started gesturing to the guard at the border station, caught himself, and got out of his car. He walked ahead to the station where three young men, very short, in lumpy uniforms, stood talking. They did not look up at Webb, who stopped before them. They continued conversing in Spanish, ignoring him.

‘I beg your pardon,’ said John Webb at last. ‘Can we pass over the border into Juatala?’

One of the men turned for a moment. ‘Sorry, señor.’

The three men talked again.

‘You don’t understand,’ said Webb, touching the first man’s elbow. ‘We’ve got to get through.’

The man shook his head. ‘Passports are no longer good. Why should you want to leave our country, anyway?’

‘It was announced on the radio. All Americans to leave the country, immediately.’

‘Ah, sí sí,’ all three soldiers nodded and leered at each other with shining eyes.

‘Or be fined or imprisoned, or both,’ said Webb.

‘We could let you over the border, but Juatala would give you twenty-four hours to leave also. If you don’t believe me, listen!’ The guard turned and called across the border, ‘Aye, there! Aye!’

In the hot sun, forty yards distant, a pacing man turned, his rifle in his arms.

‘Aye there, Paco, you want these two people?’

‘No, gracias – gracias, no,’ replied the man, smiling.

‘You see?’ said the guard, turning to John Webb.

All of the soldiers laughed together.

‘I have money,’ said Webb.

The men stopped laughing.

The first guard stepped up to John Webb and his face was now not relaxed or easy; it was like brown stone.

"Yes,’ he said. ‘They always have money. I know. They come here and they think money will do everything. But what is money? It is only a promise, señor. This I know from books. And when somebody no longer likes your promise, what then?’

‘I will give you anything you ask.’

‘Will you?’ The guard turned to his friends. ‘He will give me anything I ask.’ To Webb: ‘It was a joke. We were always a joke to you, weren’t we?’

‘No.’

‘Mañana, you laughed at us; mañana, you laughed at our siestas and our mañanas, didn’t you?’

‘Not me. Someone else.’

‘Yes, you.’

‘I’ve never been to this particular station before.’

‘I know you, anyway. Run here, do this, do that. Oh, here’s a peso, buy yourself a house. Run over there, do this, do that.’

‘It wasn’t me.’

‘He looked like you, anyway.’

They stood in the sun with their shadows dark under them, and the perspiration colouring their armpits. The soldier moved closer to John Webb. ‘I don’t have to do anything for you any more.’

‘You never had to before. I never asked it.’

‘You’re trembling, señor.’

‘I’m all right. It’s the sun.’

‘How much money have you got?’ asked the guard.

‘A thousand pesos to let us through, and a thousand for the other man over there.’

The guard turned again. ‘Will a thousand pesos be enough?’

‘No,’ said the other guard. ‘Tell him to report us!’

‘Yes,’ said the guard, back to Webb again. ‘Report me. Get me fired. I was fired once, years ago, by you.’

‘It was someone else.’

‘Take my name. It is Carlos Rodriguez Ysotl. Go on now.’

‘I see.’

‘No, you don’t see,’ said Carlos Rodriguez Ysotl. ‘Now give me two thousand pesos.’

John Webb took out his wallet and handed over the money. Carlos Rodriguez Ysotl licked his thumb and counted the money slowly under the blue glazed sky of his country as noon deepened and sweat arose from hidden sources and people breathed and panted above their shadows.

‘Two thousand pesos.’ He folded it and put it in his pocket quietly. ‘Now turn your car around and head for another border.’

‘Hold on now, damn it!’

The guard looked at him. ‘Turn your car.’

They stood a long time that way, with the sun blazing on the rifle in the guard’s hands, not speaking. And then John Webb turned and walked slowly, one hand to his face, back to the car and slid into the front seat.

‘What’re we going to do?’ said Leonora.

‘Rot. Or try to reach Porto Bello.’

‘But we need gas and our spare fixed. And going back over those highways … This time they might drop logs, and –’

‘I know, I know.’ He rubbed his eyes and sat for a moment with his head in his hands. ‘We’re alone, my God, we’re alone. Remember how safe we used to feel? How safe? We registered in all the big towns with the American Consuls. Remember how the joke went? “Everywhere you go you can hear the rustle of the eagle’s wings!” Or was it the sound of paper money? I forget. Jesus, Jesus, the world got empty awfully quick. Who do I call on now?’

She waited a moment and then said, ‘I guess just me. That’s not much.’

He put his arm around her. ‘You’ve been swell. No hysterics, nothing.’

‘Tonight maybe I’ll be screaming, when we’re in bed, if we ever find a bed again. It’s been a million miles since breakfast.’

He kissed her, twice, on her dry mouth. Then he sat slowly back. ‘First thing is to try to find gas. If we can get that, we’re ready to head for Porto Bello.’

The three soldiers were talking and joking as they drove away.

After they had been driving a minute, he began to laugh quietly.

‘What were you thinking?’ asked his wife.

‘I remember an old spiritual. It goes like this:

‘I went to the Rock to hide my face

And the Rock cried out, “No Hiding Place,

There’s no Hiding Place down here.”’

‘I remember that,’ she said.

‘It’s an appropriate song right now,’ he said. ‘I’d sing the whole thing for you if I could remember it all. And if I felt like singing.’

He put his foot harder to the accelerator.

They stopped at a gas station and after a minute, when the attendant did not appear, John Webb honked the horn. Then, appalled, he snapped his hand away from the horn-ring, looking at it as if it were the hand of a leper.

‘I shouldn’t have done that.’

The attendant appeared in the shadowy doorway of the gas station. Two other men appeared behind him.

The three men came out and walked around the car, looking at it, touching it, feeling it.

Their faces were like burnt copper in the daylight. They touched the resilient tyres, they sniffed the rich new smell of the metal and upholstery.

‘Señor,’ said the gas attendant at last.

‘We’d like to buy some gas, please.’

‘We are all out of gas, señor.’

‘But your tank reads full. I see the gas in the glass container up there.’

‘We are all out of gas,’ said the man.

‘I’ll give you ten pesos a gallon!’

‘Gracias, no.’

‘We haven’t enough gas to get anywhere from here.’ Webb checked the gauge. ‘Not even a quarter gallon left. We’d better leave the car here and go into town and see what we can do there.’

‘I’ll watch the car for you, señor,’ said the station attendant. ‘If you leave the keys.’

‘We can’t do that!’ said Leonora. ‘Can we?’

‘I don’t see what choice we have. We can stall it on the road and leave it to anyone who comes along, or leave it with this man.’

‘That’s better,’ said the man.

They climbed out of the car and stood looking at it.

‘It was a beautiful car,’ said John Webb.

‘Very beautiful,’ said the man, his hand out for the keys. ‘I will take good care of it, señor.’

‘But, Jack –’

She opened the back door and started to take out the luggage. Over her shoulder, he saw the bright travel stickers, the storm of colour that had descended upon and covered the worn leather now after years of travel, after years of the best hotels in two dozen countries.

She tugged at the valises, perspiring, and he stopped her hands and they stood gasping there for a moment, in the open door of the car, looking at these fine rich suitcases, inside which were the beautiful tweeds and woollens and silks of their lives and living, the forty-dollar-an-ounce perfumes and the cool dark furs and the silvery golf shafts. Twenty years were packed into each of the cases; twenty years and four dozen parts they had played in Rio, in Paris, in Rome, and Shanghai, but the part they played most frequently and best of all was the rich and buoyant, amazingly happy Webbs, the smiling people, the ones who could make that rarely balanced Martini known as the Sahara.

‘We can’t carry it all into town,’ he said. ‘We’ll come back for it later.’

‘But …’

He silenced her by turning her away and starting her off down the road.

‘But we can’t leave it there, we can’t leave all our luggage and we can’t leave our car! Oh look here now, I’ll roll up the windows and lock myself in the car, while you go for the gas, why not?’ she said.

He stopped and glanced back at the three men standing by the car which blazed in the yellow sun. Their eyes were shining and looking at the woman.

‘There’s your answer,’ he said. ‘Come on.’

‘But you just don’t walk off and leave a four-thousand-dollar automobile!’ she cried.

He moved her along, holding her elbow firmly and with quiet decision. ‘A car is to travel in. When it’s not travelling, it’s useless. Right now, we’ve got to travel; that’s everything. The car isn’t worth a dime without gas in it. A pair of good strong legs is worth a hundred cars, if you use the legs. We’ve just begun to toss things overboard. We’ll keep dropping ballast until there’s nothing left to heave but our hides.’

He let her go. She was walking steadily now, and she fell into step with him. ‘It’s so strange. So strange. I haven’t walked like this in years.’ She watched the motion of her feet beneath her, she watched the road pass by, she watched the jungle moving to either side, she watched her husband striding quickly along, until she seemed hypnotized by the steady rhythm. ‘But I guess you can learn anything over again,’ she said, at last.

The sun moved in the sky and they moved for a long while on the hot road. When he was quite ready, the husband began to think aloud. ‘You know, in a way, I think it’s good to be down to essentials. Now instead of worrying over a dozen damned things, it’s just two items – you and me.’

‘Watch it, here comes a car – we’d better …’

They half turned, yelled, and jumped. They fell away from the highway and lay watching the automobile hurtle past at seventy miles an hour. Voices sang, men laughed, men shouted, waving. The car sped away into the dust and vanished around a curve, blaring its double horns again and again.

He helped her up and they stood in the quiet road.

‘Did you see it?’

They watched the dust settle slowly.

‘I hope they remember to change the oil and check the battery, at least. I hope they think to put water in the radiator,’ she said, and paused. ‘They were singing, weren’t they?’

He nodded. They stood blinking at the great dust cloud filtering down like yellow pollen upon their heads and arms. He saw a few bright splashes flick from her eyelids when she blinked.

‘Don’t,’ he said. ‘After all, it was only a machine.’

‘I loved it.’

‘We’re always loving everything too much.’

Walking, they passed a shattered wine bottle which steamed freshly as they stepped over it.

They were not far from the town walking single file, the wife ahead, the husband following, looking at their feet as they walked, when a sound of tin and steam and bubbling water made them turn and look at the road behind them.

An old man in a 1929 Ford drove along the road at a moderate speed. The car’s fenders were gone, and the sun had flaked and burnt the paint badly, but he rode in the seat with a great deal of quiet dignity, his face a thoughtful darkness under a dirty Panama hat, and when he saw the two people he drew the car up, steaming, the engine joggling under the hood and opened the squealing door as he said, ‘This is no day for walking.’

‘Thank you,’ they said.

‘It is nothing.’ The old man wore an ancient yellowed white summer suit, with a rather greasy tie knotted loosely at his wrinkled throat. He helped the lady into the rear seat with a gracious bow of his head. ‘Let us men sit up front,’ he suggested, and the husband sat up front and the car moved off in trembling vapours.

‘Well. My name is García.’

There were introductions and noddings.

‘Your car broke down? You are on your way for help?’ said Señor García.

‘Yes.’

‘Then let me drive you and a mechanic back out,’ offered the old man.

They thanked him and kindly turned the offer aside and he made it once again, but upon finding that his interest and concern caused them embarrassment, he very politely turned to another subject.

He touched a small stack of folded newspapers on his lap.

‘Do you read the papers? Of course, you do. But do you read them as I read them? I rather doubt that you have come upon my system. No, it was not exactly myself that came upon it; the system was forced upon me.

But now I know what a clever thing it has turned out to be. I always get the newspapers a week late. All of us, those who are interested, get the papers a week late, from the Capital. And this circumstance makes for a man being a clear-thinking man. You are very careful with your thinking when you pick up a week-old paper.’

The husband and wife asked him to continue.

‘Well,’ said the old man, ‘I remember once, when I lived in the Capital for a month and bought the paper fresh each day, I went wild with love, anger, irritation, frustration; all of the passions boiled in me.

I was young. I exploded at everything I saw. But then I saw what I was doing, I was believing what I read. Have you noticed? You believe a paper printed on the very day you buy it? This has happened but only an hour ago, you think! It must be true.’

He shook his head. ‘So I learned to stand back away and let the paper age and mellow. Back here, in Colonia, I saw the headlines diminish to nothing. The week-old paper – why you can spit on it if you wish. It is like a woman you once loved, but you now see, a few days later, she is not quite what you thought. She has rather a plain face. She is no deeper than a cup of water.’

He steered the car gently, his hands upon the wheel as upon the heads of his good children, with care and affection. ‘So here I am, returning to my home to read my weekly papers, to peek sideways at them, to toy with them.’ He spread one on his knee, glancing down to it on occasion as he drove.

‘How white this paper is, like the mind of a child that is an idiot, poor thing, all blank. You can put anything into an empty place like that. Here, do you see? This paper speaks and says that the light-skinned people of the world are dead. Now that is a very silly thing to say.

At this very moment, there are probably millions upon millions of white men and women eating their noon meals or their suppers. The earth trembles, a town collapses, people run from the town, screaming, All is lost!’ In the next village, the population wonders what all of the shouting is about, since they have had a most splendid night’s repose. Ah, ah, what a sly world it is.

People do not see how sly it is. It is either night or day to them. Rumour flies. This very afternoon all of the little villages upon this highway, behind us and ahead of us, are in carnival. The white man is dead, the rumours say, and yet here I come into the town with two very lively ones. I hope you don’t mind my speaking this way? If I do not talk to you I would then be talking to this engine up in the front, which makes a great noise speaking back.’

They were at the edge of town.

‘Please,’ said John Webb, ‘it wouldn’t be wise for you to be seen with us today. We’ll get out here.’

The old man stopped his car reluctantly and said, ‘You are most kind and thoughtful of me.’ He turned to look at the lovely wife.

‘When I was a young man I was very full of wildness and ideas. I read all of the books from France by a man named Jules Verne. I see you know his name. But at night I many times thought I must be an inventor. That is all gone by; I never did what I thought I might do.

But I remember clearly that one of the machines I wished to put together was a machine that would help every man, for an hour, to be like any other man. The machine was full of colours and smells and it had film in it, like a theatre, and the machine was like a coffin. You lay in it.

And you touched a button. And for an hour you could be one of those Eskimos in the cold wind up there, or you could be an Arab gentleman on a horse. Everything a New York man felt, you could feel. Everything a man from Sweden smelled, you could smell. Everything a man from China tasted, your tongue knew. The machine was like another man-do you see what I was after? And by touching many of the buttons, each time you got into my machine, you could be a white man or a yellow man or a Negrito. You could be a child or a woman, even, if you wished to be very funny.’

The husband and wife climbed from the car.

‘Did you ever try to invent that machine?’

‘It was so very long ago. I had forgotten until today. And today I was thinking, we could make use of it, we are in need of it. What a shame I never tried to put it all together. Some day some other man will do it.’

‘Some day,’ said John Webb.

‘It has been a pleasure talking with you,’ said the old man. ‘God go with you.’

‘Adiós, señor García,’ they said.

The car drove slowly away, steaming. They stood watching it go, for a full minute. Then, without speaking, the husband reached over and took his wife’s hand.

They entered the small town of Colonia on foot. They walked past the little shops, the butcher shop, the photographer’s. People stopped and looked at them as they went by and did not stop looking at them as long as they were in sight. Every few seconds, as he walked, Webb put up his hand to touch the holster hidden under his coat, secretly, tentatively, like someone feeling for a tiny boil that is growing and growing every hour and every hour …

The patio of the Hotel Esposa was cool as a grotto under a blue waterfall. In it birds sang, caged, and footsteps echoed like small rifle shots, clear and smooth.

‘Remember? We stopped here years ago,’ said Webb, helping his wife up the steps. They stood in the cool grotto, glad of the blue shade.

‘señor Esposa,’ said John Webb, when a fat man came forward from the desk, squinting at them. ‘Do you remember me – John Webb? Five years ago – we played cards one night.’

‘Of course, of course.’ señor Esposa bowed to the wife and shook hands briefly. There was an uncomfortable silence.

Webb cleared his throat. ‘We’ve had a bit of trouble, señor. Could we have a room for tonight only?’

‘Your money is always good here.’

‘You mean you’ll actually give us a room? We’ll be glad to pay in advance. Lord, we need the rest. But, more than that, we need gas.’

Leonora picked at her husband’s arm. ‘Remember? We haven’t a car any more.’

‘Oh. Yes.’ He fell silent for a moment and then sighed. ‘Well. Never mind the gas. Is there a bus out of here for the Capital soon?’

‘All will be attended to, in time,’ said the Manager nervously. ‘This way.’

As they were climbing the stairs they heard a noise. Looking out they saw their car riding around and around the plaza, eight times, loaded with men who were shouting and singing and hanging on to the front fenders, laughing. Children and dogs ran after the car.

‘I would like to own a car like that,’ said Señor Esposa.

He poured a little cool wine for the three of them, standing in the room on the third floor of the Esposa Hotel.

‘To “change”,’ said Señor Esposa.

‘I’ll drink to that.’

They drank. señor Esposa licked his lips and wiped them on his coat sleeve. ‘We are always surprised and saddened to see the world change. It is insane, they have run out on us, you say. It is unbelievable. And now, well – You are safe for the night. Shower and have a good supper. I won’t be able to keep you more than one night, to repay you for your kindness to me five years ago.’

‘And tomorrow?’

‘Tomorrow? Do not take any bus to the Capital, please. There are riots in the streets there. A few people from the North have been killed. It is nothing. It will pass in a few days. But you must be careful until those few days pass and the blood cools.

There are many wicked people taking advantage of this day, señor. For forty-eight hours anyway, under the guise of a great resurgence of nationalism, these people will try to gain power. Selfishness and patriotism, señor; today I cannot tell one from the other. So – you must hide. That is a problem. The town will know you are here in another few hours. This might be dangerous to my hotel. I cannot say.’

‘We understand. It’s good of you to help this much.’

‘If you need any thing, call me.’ Señor Esposa drank the rest of die wine in his glass. ‘Finish the bottle,’ he said.

The fireworks began at nine that evening. First one skyrocket then another soared into the dark sky and burst out upon the winds, building architectures of flame. Each skyrocket, at the top of its ride, cracked open and let out a formation of streamers in red and white flame that made something like the dome of a beautiful cathedral.

Leonora and John Webb stood by the open window in their unlit room, watching and listening. As the hour latened, more people streamed into town from every road and path and began to roam, arm in arm, around the plaza, singing, barking like dogs, crowing like roosters, and then falling down on the tile sidewalks, sitting there, laughing, their heads thrown back, while the skyrockets burst explosive colours on the tilted faces. A brass band began to thump and wheeze.

‘So here we are,’ said John Webb, ‘after a few hundred years of living high. So this is what’s left of our white supremacy – you and I in a dark room in a hotel three hundred miles inside a celebrating country.’

‘You’ve got to see their side of it.’

‘Oh, I’ve seen it ever since I was that high. In a way, I’m glad they’re happy. God knows they’ve waited long enough to be. But I wonder how long that happiness will last. Now that the scapegoat is gone, who will they blame for oppression, who will be handy and as obvious and as guilty as you and I and the man who lived in this room before us?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘We were so convenient. The man who rented this room last month, he was convenient, he stood out. He made loud jokes about the natives’ siestas. He refused to learn even a smattering of Spanish. Let them learn English, by God, and speak like men, he said. And he drank too much and whored too much with this country’s women.’ He broke off and moved back from the window. He stared at the room.

The furniture, he thought. Where he put his dirty shoes upon the sofa, where he burnt holes in the carpet with cigarettes; the wet spot on the wall near the bed, God knows what or how he did that.

The chairs scarred and kicked. It wasn’t his hotel or his room; it was borrowed, it meant nothing. So this son-of-a-bitch went around the country for the past one hundred years, a travelling commercial, a Chamber of Commerce, and now here we are, enough like him to be his brother and sister, and there they are down there on the night of the Butler’s Ball.

They don’t know, or if they know they won’t think of it, that tomorrow they’ll be just as poor, just as oppressed as ever, that the whole machine will have shifted only into another gear.

Now the band had stopped playing below; a man had leaped up, shouting, on the bandstand. There was a flash of machetes in the air and the brown gleam of half-naked bodies.

The man on the bandstand faced the hotel and looked up at the dark room where John and Leonora Webb now stood back out of the intermittent flares.

The man shouted.

‘What does he say?’ asked Leonora.

John Webb translated: ‘“It is now a free world,” he says.’

The man yelled.

John Webb translated again. ‘He says, “We are free!”’

The man lifted himself on his toes and made a motion of breaking manacles. ‘He says, “No one owns us, no one in all the world.”’

The crowd roared and the band began to play, and while it was playing, the man on the bandstand stood glaring up at the room window, with all of the hatred of the universe in his eyes.

During the night there were fights and pummellings and voices lifted, arguments and shots fired. John Webb lay awake and heard the voice of Señor Esposa below, reasoning, talking quietly, firmly. And then the fading away of the tumult, the last rockets in the sky, the last breakings of bottles on the cobbles.

At five in the morning the air was warming into a new day. There was the softest of taps on the bedroom door.

‘It is me, it is Esposa,’ said a voice.

John Webb hesitated, half-dressed, numb on his feet from lack of sleep, then opened the door.

‘What a night, what a night!’ said Señor Esposa, coming in, shaking his head, laughing gently. ‘Did you hear that noise? Yes? They tried to come up here to your room. I prevented this.’

‘Thank you,’ said Leonora, still in bed, turned to the wall.

‘They were all old friends. I made an agreement with them, anyway. They were drunk enough and happy enough so they agreed to wait. I am to make a proposition to you two.’ Suddenly he seemed embarrassed. He moved to the window. ‘Everyone is sleeping late. A few are up. A few men. See them there on the far side of the plaza?’

John Webb looked out at the plaza. He saw the brown men talking quietly there about the weather, the world, the sun, this town, and perhaps the wine.

‘Señor, have you ever been hungry in your life?’

‘For a day, once.’

‘Only for a day. Have you always had a house to live in and a car to drive?’

‘Until yesterday.’

‘Were you ever without a job?’

‘Never.’

‘Did all of your brothers and sisters live to be twenty-one years old?’

‘All of them.’

‘Even I,’ said señor Esposa, ‘even I hate you a little bit now. For I have been without a home. I have been hungry. I have three brothers and one sister buried in that graveyard on the hill beyond the town, all dead of tuberculosis before they were nine years old.’

señor Esposa glanced at the men in the plaza. ‘Now, I am no longer hungry or poor, I have a car, I am alive. But I am one in a thousand. What can you say to them out there today?’

‘I’ll try to think of something.’

‘Long ago I stopped trying. señor, we have always been a minority, we white people. I am Spanish, but I was born here. They tolerate me.’

‘We have never let ourselves think about our being a minority/ said Webb, ‘and now it’s hard to get used to the fact.’

‘You have behaved beautifully.’

‘Is that a virtue?’

‘In the bull-ring, yes, in war, yes, in anything like this, most assuredly yes. You do not complain, you do not make excuses. You do not run and make a spectacle of yourself. I think you are both very brave.’

The hotel manager sat down, slowly, helplessly.

‘I’ve come to offer you the chance to settle down,’ he said.

‘We wanted to move on, if possible.’

The Manager shrugged. ‘Your car is stolen, I can do nothing to get it back. You cannot leave town. Remain then and accept my offer of a position in my hotel.’

‘You don’t think there is any way for us to travel?’

‘It might be twenty days, señor, or twenty years. You cannot exist without money, food, lodging. Consider my hotel and the work I can give you.’

The Manager arose and walked unhappily to the door and stood by the chair, touching Webb’s coat which was draped over it.

‘What’s the job?’ asked Webb.

‘In the kitchen,’ said the Manager, and looked away.

John Webb sat on the bed and said nothing. His wife did not move.

Señor Esposa said. ‘It is the best I can do. What more can you ask of me? Last night, those others down in the plaza wanted both of you. Did you see the machetes? I bargained with them. You were lucky. I told them you would be employed in my hotel for the next twenty years, that you were my employees and deserve my protection!’

‘You said that !’

‘Señor, señor, be thankful! Consider! Where will you go? The jungle? You will be dead in two hours from the snakes. Then can you walk five hundred miles to a capital which will not welcome you? No – you must face the reality.’ señor Esposa opened the door. ‘I offer you an honest job and you will be paid the standard wages of two pesos a day, plus meals. Would you rather be with me, or out in the plaza at noon with our friends? Consider.’

The door was shut. señor Esposa was gone.

Webb stood looking at the door for a long while.

Then he walked to the chair and fumbled with the holster under the draped white shirt. The holster was empty. He held it in his hands and blinked at its emptiness and looked again at the door through which Señor Esposa had just passed. He went over and sat down on the bed beside his wife. He stretched out beside her and took her in his arms and kissed her, and they lay there, watching the room get brighter with the new day.

At eleven o’clock in the morning, with the great doors on the windows of their room flung back, they began to dress. There were soap, towels, shaving equipment, even perfume in the bathroom, provided by Mr Esposa.

John Webb shaved and dressed carefully.

At eleven-thirty he turned on the small radio near their bed. You could usually get New York or Cleveland, or Houston on such a radio. But the air was silent. John Webb turned the radio off.

‘There’s nothing to go back to – nothing to go back for-nothing.’

His wife sat on a chair near the door, looking at the wall.

‘We could stay here and work,’ he said.

She stirred at last. ‘No. We couldn’t do that, not really. Could we?’

‘No, I guess not.’

‘There’s no way we could do that. We’re being consistent, anyway; spoiled, but consistent.’

He thought a moment. ‘We could make for the jungle.’

‘I don’t think we can move from the hotel without being seen. We don’t want to try to escape and be caught. It would be far worse that way.’

He nodded.

They both sat a moment.

‘It might not be too bad, working here,’ he said.

‘What would we be living for? Everyone’s dead – your father, mine, your mother, mine, your brothers, mine, all our friends, everything gone, everything we understood.’

He nodded.

‘Or if we took the job, one day soon one of the men would touch me and you’d go after him, you know you would. Or someone would do something to you, and I’d do something.’

He nodded again.

They sat for fifteen minutes, talking quietly. Then, at last, he picked up the telephone and ticked the cradle with his finger.

‘Bueno,’ said a voice on the other end.

‘señor Esposa?’

‘Si.’

‘Señor Esposa,’ he paused and licked his lips, ‘tell your friends we will be leaving the hotel at noon.’

The phone did not immediately reply. Then with a sigh, señor Esposa said, ‘As you wish. You are sure – ?’

The phone was silent for a full minute. Then it was picked up again and the Manager said quietly, ‘My friends say they will be waiting for you on the far side of the plaza.’

‘We will meet them there,’ said John Webb.

‘And señor –’

‘Yes.’

‘Do not hate me, do not hate us.’

‘I don’t hate anybody.’

‘It is a bad world, señor. None of us know how we got here or what we are doing. These men don’t know what they are mad at, except they are mad. Forgive them and do not hate them.’

‘I don’t hate them or you.’

‘Thank you, thank you.’ Perhaps the man on the far end of the telephone wire was crying. There was no way to tell. There were great lapses in his talking, in his breathing. After a while he said, ‘We don’t know why we do anything. Men hit each other for no reason except they are unhappy. Remember that. I am your friend. I would help you if I could. But I cannot. It would be me against the town. Good-bye, señor.’ He hung up.

John Webb sat in the chair with his hands on the silent phone. It was a moment before he glanced up. It was a moment before his eyes focused on an object immediately before him. When he saw it clearly, he still did not move, but sat regarding it, until a look of immensely tired irony appeared on his mouth. ‘Look here,’ he said at last.

Leonora followed his motion, his pointing.

They both sat looking at his cigarette which, neglected on the rim of the table while he telephoned, had burnt down so that now it had charred a black hole in the clean surface of the wood.

It was noon, with the sun directly over them, pinning their shadows under them as they started down the steps of the Hotel Esposa. Behind them, the birds fluted in their bamboo cages, and water ran in a little fountain bath. They were as neat as they could get, their faces and hands washed, their nails clean, their shoes polished.

Across the plaza two hundred yards away stood a small group of men, in the shade of a store front overhang. Some of the men were natives from the jungle area, with machetes gleaming at their sides. They were all facing the plaza.

John Webb looked at them for a long while. That isn’t everyone, he thought, that isn’t the whole country. That’s only the surface. That’s only the thin skin over the flesh. It’s not the body at all. Just the shell of an egg.

Remember the crowds back home, the mobs, the riots? Always the same, there or here. A few mad faces up front, and the quiet ones far back, not taking part, letting things go, not wanting to be in it. The majority not moving. And so the few, the handful, take over and move for them.

His eyes did not blink. If we could break through that shell, God knows it’s thin! he thought, if we could talk our way through that mob and get to the quiet people beyond…. Can I do it? Can I say the right things? Can I keep my voice down?

He fumbled in his pockets and brought out a rumpled cigarette package and some matches.

I can try, he thought. How would the old man in the Ford have done it? I’ll try to do it his way. When we get across the plaza, I’ll start talking, I’ll whisper if necessary. And if we move slowly through the mob, we might just possibly find our way to the other people and we’ll be on high ground and we’ll be safe.

Leonora moved beside him. She was so fresh, so well groomed in spite of everything, so new in all this oldness, so startling, that his mind flinched and jerked. He found himself staring at her as if she’d betrayed him by her salt-whiteness, her wonderfully brushed hair and her cleanly manicured nails and her bright-red mouth.

Standing on the bottom step, Webb lit a cigarette, took two or three long drags on it, tossed it down, stepped on it, kicked the flattened butt into the street, and said, ‘Here we go.’

They stepped down and started around the far side of the plaza, past the few shops that were still open. They walked quietly.

‘Perhaps they’ll be decent to us.’

‘We can hope so.’

They passed a photographic shop.

‘It’s another day. Anything can happen. I believe that. No – I don’t really believe it. I’m only talking. I’ve got to talk or I wouldn’t be able to walk,’ she said.

They passed a candy shop.

‘Keep talking, then.’

‘I’m afraid,’ she said. ‘This can’t be happening to us! Are we the last ones in the world?’

‘Maybe next to the last.’

They approached an open-air carnecería.

God! he thought. How the horizons narrowed, how they came in. A year ago there weren’t four directions, there were a million for us. Yesterday they got down to four; we could go to Juatala, Porto Bello, San Juan Clementas, or Brioconbria.

We were satisfied to have our car. Then when we couldn’t get gas, we were satisfied to have our clothes, then when they took our clothes, we were satisfied to have a place to sleep. Each pleasure they took away left us with one other creature comfort to hold on to. Did you see how we let go of one thing and clutched another so quickly? I guess that’s human. So they took away everything. There’s nothing left.

Except us. It all boils down to just you and me walking along here, and thinking too goddamn much for my own good. And what counts in the end is whether they can take you away from me or me away from you, Lee, and I don’t think they can do that. They’ve got everything else and I don’t blame them. But they can’t really do anything else to us now. When you strip all the clothes away and the doodads, you have two human beings who were either happy or unhappy together, and we have no complaints.

‘Walk slowly,’ said John Webb.

‘I am.’

‘Not too slowly, to look reluctant. Not too fast, to look as if you want to get it over with. Don’t give them the satisfaction, Lee, don’t give them a damn bit.’

‘I won’t.’

They walked. ‘Don’t even touch me,’ he said, quietly. ‘Don’t even hold my hand.’

‘Oh, please!’

‘No, not even that.’

He moved away a few inches and kept walking steadily. His eyes were straight ahead and their pace was regular.

‘I’m beginning to cry, Jack.’

‘Goddamn it!’ he said, measuredly, between his teeth, not looking aside. ‘Stop it! Do you want me to run? Is that what you want – do you want me to take you and run into the jungle, and let them hunt us, is that what you want, goddamn it, do you want me to fall down in the street here and grovel and scream; shut up, let’s do this right, don’t give them anything!’

They walked on.

‘All right,’ she said, hands tight, her head coming up. ‘I’m not crying now. I won’t cry.’

‘Good, damn it, that’s good.’

And still, strangely, they were not past the carnecería. The vision of red horror was on their left as they paced steadily forward on the hot tile sidewalk. The things that hung from hooks looked like brutalities and sins, like bad consciences, evil dreams, like gored flags and slaughtered promises. The redness, oh, the hanging, evil-smelling wetness and redness, the hooked and hung-high carcasses, unfamiliar, unfamiliar.

As he passed the shop, something made John Webb strike out a hand. He slapped it smartly against a strung-up side of beef. A mantle of blue buzzing flies lifted angrily and swirled in a bright cone over the meat.

Leonora said, looking ahead, walking, ‘They’re all strangers! I don’t know any of them. I wish I knew even one of them. I wish even one of them knew me!’

They walked on past the carnecería. The side of beef, red and irritable-looking, swung in the hot sunlight after they passed.

The flies came down in a feeding cloak to cover the meat, once it had stopped swinging.

The Strawberry Window

IN his dream he was shutting the front door with its strawberry windows and lemon windows and windows like white clouds and windows like clear water in a country stream. Two dozen panes squared round the one big pane, coloured of fruit wines and gelatins and cool water-ices. He remembered his father holding him up as a child. ‘Look!’ And through the green glass the world was emerald, moss, and summer mint. ‘Look!’ The lilac pane made Concord grapes of all the passers by.

And at last the strawberry glass perpetually bathed the town in roseate warmth, carpeted the world in pink sunrise, and made the cut lawn seem imported from some Persian rug bazaar. The strawberry window, best of all, cured people of their paleness, warmed the cold rain, and set the blowing, shifting February snows afire.

‘Ah!’

He awoke.

He heard his boys talking before he was fully out of his dream and he lay in the dark now, listening to the sad sound their talk made, like the wind blowing the white sea-bottoms in the blue bills; and then he remembered.

We’re on Mars, he thought.

‘What?’ His wife cried out in her sleep.

He hadn’t realized he had spoken; he lay as still as he possibly could. But now, with a strange kind of numb reality he saw his wife rise to haunt the room, her pale face staring through the small, high windows of their quonset hut at the clear but unfamiliar stars.

‘Carrie,’ he whispered.

She did not hear.

‘Carrie,’ he whispered. ‘There’s something I want to tell you. For a month now I’ve been wanting to say … tomorrow … tomorrow morning, there’s going to be …’

But his wife sat all to herself in the blue starlight and would not look at him.

He closed his eyes tight.

If only the sun stayed up, he thought, if only there was no night. For during the day, he nailed the settlement town together, the boys were in school, and Carrie had cleaning, gardening, cooking to do.

But when the sun was gone and their hands were empty of flowers or hammers and nails and arithmetics, their memories, like night birds, came home in the dark. You heard them rustle the black roof like the first rain of a new season of endless rains. You woke to the cool pattering, which was not rain, but only the slow dipping down, the flicking, brushing, touching, the whispered flight and glide of remembering towards dawn.

His wife moved, a slight turn of her head.

‘Will,’ she said at last, ‘I want to go home.’

‘Carrie!’

‘This isn’t home,’ she said.

He saw that her eyes were wet and brimming. ‘Carrie, hold on awhile.’

‘I’ve got no fingernails from holding on now!’

As if she still moved in her sleep, she opened her bureau drawers and took out layers of handkerchiefs, shirts, underclothing and put it all on top of the bureau, not seeing it, letting her fingers touch and bring it out and put it down. The routine was long familiar now. She would talk and put things out and stand quietly awhile, and then later put all the things away and come, dry-faced, back to bed and dreams. He was afraid that some night she would empty every drawer, and reach for the few ancient suitcases against the wall.

‘Will …’ Her voice was not bitter, but soft, featureless, and as uncoloured as the moonlight that showed what she was doing. ‘So many nights for six months I’ve talked this way; I’m ashamed. You work hard building houses in town. A man who works so hard shouldn’t have to listen to a wife gone sad on him. But there’s nothing to do but talk it out. It’s the little things I miss most of all. I don’t know – silly things.

Our front porch swing. The wicker rocking-chair, summer nights. Looking at the people walk or ride by those evenings, back in Ohio. Our black upright piano, out of tune. My Swedish cut glass. Our parlour furniture – oh, it was like a herd of elephants, I know, and all of it old. And the Chinese hanging crystals that hit when the wind blew. And talking to neighbours there on the front porch, July nights. All those crazy, silly things … they’re not important. But it seems those are things that come to mind around three in the morning. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be,’ he said. ‘Mars is a far place. It smells funny, looks funny, and feels funny. I think to myself nights, too. We came from a nice town.’

‘It was green,’ she said. ‘In the spring and summer. And yellow and red in the fall. And ours was a nice house; my, it was old, eighty-ninety years or so. Used to hear the house talking at night, whispering away. All the dry wood, the banisters, the front porch, the sills. Wherever you touched, it talked to you. Every room a different way. And when you had the whole house talking, it was a family around you in the dark, putting you to sleep. No other house, the kind they build nowadays, can be the same.

A lot of people have got to go through and live in a house to make it mellow down all over. This place here, now, this hut, it doesn’t know I’m in it, doesn’t care if I live or die. It makes a noise like tin, and tin’s cold.

It’s got no pores for the years to sink in. It’s got no cellar for you to put things away for next year and the year after that. It’s got no attic where you keep things from last year and all the other years before you were born; and without an attic, you’ve got no past.

If we only had a little bit up here that was familiar, Will, then we could make room for all that’s strange. But when everything, every single thing is strange, then it takes forever to make things familiar.’

He nodded in the dark. ‘There’s nothing: you say that I haven’t thought.’

She was looking at the moonlight where it lay upon the suitcases against the wall. He saw her move her hand down towards them.

‘Carrie!’

‘What?’

He swung his legs out of bed. ‘Carrie, I’ve done a crazy dam-fool thing. All these months I heard you dreaming away, scared, and the boys at night and the wind, and Mars out there, the sea-bottoms and all, and …’ He stopped and swallowed. ‘You got to understand what I did and why I did it. All the money we had in the bank a month ago, all the money we saved for ten years, I spent.’

‘Will!’

‘I threw it away, Carrie, I swear, I threw it away on nothing. It was going to be a surprise. But now, tonight, there you are, and there are those damned suitcases on the floor and …’

‘Will,’ she said, turning around. ‘You mean we’ve gone through all this, on Mars, putting away extra money every week, only to have you burn it up in a few hours?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I’m a crazy fool. Look, it’s not long till morning. We’ll get up early. I’ll take you down to see what I’ve done. I don’t want to tell you, I want you to see. And if it’s no go, then, well, there’s always those suitcases and the rocket to Earth four times a week.’

She did not move. ‘Will, Will,’ she murmured.

‘Don’t say any more,’ he said.

‘Will, Will …’ She shook her head slowly, unbelievingly. He turned away and lay back down on his own side of the bed, and she sat on the other side, and for a moment did not lie down, but only sat looking at the bureau where her handkerchiefs and jewellery and clothing lay ready in neat stacks where she had left them. Outside a wind the colour of moonlight stirred up the sleeping dust and powdered the air.

At last she lay back, but said nothing more and was a cold weight in the bed, staring down the long tunnel of night towards the faintest sign of morning.

They got up in the very first light and moved in the small quonset hut without a sound. It was a pantomime prolonged almost to the time when someone might scream at the silence, as the mother and father and the boys washed and dressed and ate a quiet breakfast of toast and fruit-juice and coffee, with no one looking directly at anyone and everyone watching someone in the reflective surfaces of toaster, glassware, or cutlery, where all their faces were melted out of shape and made terribly alien in the early hour.

Then, at last, they opened the quonset door and let in the air that blew across the cold blue-white Martian seas, where only the sand tides dissolved and shifted and made ghost patterns, and they stepped out under a raw and staring cold sky and began their walk towards a town, which seemed no more than a motion-picture set far on ahead of them on a vast, empty stage.

‘What part of town are we going to?’ asked Carrie.

‘The rocket depot,’ he said. ‘But before we get there, I’ve a lot to say.’

The boys slowed down and moved behind their parents, listening. The father gazed ahead, and not once in all the time he was talking did he look at his wife or sons to see how they were taking all that he said.

‘I believe in Mars,’ he began, quietly. I guess I believe some day it’ll belong to us. We’ll nail it down. We’ll settle in. We won’t turn tail and run. It came to me one day a year ago, right after we first arrived. Why did we come?

I asked myself. Because, I said, because. It’s the same thing with the salmon every year. The salmon don’t know why they go where they go, but they go, anyway.

Up rivers they don’t remember, up streams, jumping waterfalls, but finally making it to where they propagate and die, and the whole thing starts again. Call it racial memory, instinct, call it nothing, but there it is. And here we are.’

They walked in the silent morning with the great sky watching them and the strange blue and steam-white sands sifting about their feet on the new highway.

‘So here we are. And from Mars where? Jupiter, Neptune, Pluto, and on out? Right. And on out. Why? Some day the sun will blow up like a leaky furnace. Boom – there goes Earth. But maybe Mars won’t be hurt; or if Mars is hurt maybe Pluto won’t be, or if Pluto’s hurt, then where’ll we be, our sons’ sons, that is?’

He gazed steadily up into that flawless shell of plum-coloured sky.

‘Why, we’ll be on some world with a number maybe; planet 6 of star system 97, planet 2 of system 99! So damn far off from here you need a nightmare to take it in! We’ll be gone, do you see, gone off away and safe! And I thought to myself, ah, ah. So that’s the reason we came to Mars, so that’s the reason men shoot off their rockets.’

‘Will –’

‘Let me finish. Not to make money, no. Not to see the sights, no. Those are the lies men tell, the fancy reasons they give themselves. Get rich, get famous, they say. Have fun, jump around, they say. But all the while, inside, something else is ticking along the way it ticks in salmon or whales, the way it ticks, by God, in the smallest microbe you want to name.

And that little clock that ticks in everything living, you know what it says? It says get away, spread out, move along, keep swimming. Run to so many worlds and build so many towns that nothing can ever kill man.

You see, Carrie? It’s not just us come to Mars, it’s the race, the whole darn human race, depending on how we make out in our lifetime. This thing is so big I want to laugh, I’m so scared stiff of it.’

He felt the boys walking steadily behind him and he felt Carrie beside him and he wanted to see her face and how she was taking all this, but he didn’t look there, either.

‘All this is no different than me and Dad walking the fields when I was a boy, casting seed by hand when our seeder broke down and we’d no money to fix it. It had to be done somehow, for the later crops. My God, Carrie, my God, you remember those Sunday-supplement articles, THE EARTH WILL FREEZE IN A MILLION YEARS! I bawled once, as a boy, reading articles like that. My mother asked why. I’m bawling for all those poor people up ahead, I said. Don’t worry about them, mother said. But, Carrie, that’s my whole point; we are worrying about them.

Or we wouldn’t be here. It matters if Man with a capital M keeps going. There’s nothing better than Man with a capital M in my books. I’m prejudiced, of course, because I’m one of the breed.

But if there’s any way to get hold of that immortality men are always talking about, this is the way – spread out – seed the universe. Then you got a harvest against crop failures anywhere down the line.

No matter if Earth has famines or the rust comes in. You got the new wheat lifting on Pluto or where-in-hell-ever man gets to in the next thousand years. I’m crazy with the idea, Carrie, crazy.

When I finally hit on it I got so excited I wanted to grab people, you, the boys, and tell them. But hell, I knew that wasn’t necessary. I knew a day or night would come when you’d hear that ticking in yourselves, too, and then you’d see, and no one’d have to say anything again about all this. It’s big talk, Carrie, I know, and big thoughts for a man short of five feet five, but by all that’s holy, it’s true.’

They moved through the deserted streets of the town and listened to the echoes of their walking feet.

‘And this morning?’ said Carrie.

‘I’m coming to this morning,’ he said. ‘Part of me wants to go home, too. But the other part says if we go, everything’s lost. So I thought, what bothers us most? Some of the things we once had. Some of the boys’ things, your things, mine.

And I thought, if it takes an old thing to get a new thing started, by God, I’ll use the old thing. I remember from history books that a thousand years ago they put charcoals in a hollowed-out cow-horn, blew on them during the day, so they carried their fire on marches from place to place, to start a fire every night from the sparks left over from morning. Always a new fire, but always something of the old in it.

So I weighed and balanced it off. Is the Old worth all our money? I asked. No! It’s only the things we did with the Old that have any worth. Well, then, is the New worth all our money? I asked. Do you feel like investing in the day after the middle of next week? Yes! I said. If I can fight this thing that makes us want to go back to Earth, I’d dip my money in kerosene and strike a match!’

Carrie and the two boys did not move. They stood on the street, looking at him as if he were a storm that had passed over and around, almost blowing them from the ground, a storm that was now dying away.

‘The freight rocket came in this morning,’ he said, quietly. ‘Our delivery’s on it. Let’s go and pick it up.’

They walked slowly up the three steps into the rocket depot and across the echoing floor towards the freight room that was just sliding back its doors, opening for the day.

‘Tell us again about the salmon,’ said one of the boys.

In the middle of the warm morning they drove out of town in a rented truck filled with great crates and boxes and parcels and packages, long ones, tall ones, short ones, flat ones, all numbered and neatly addressed to one William Prentiss, New Toledo, Mars.

‘Will,’ said Carrie, over and over again. ‘Will.’

They stopped the truck by the quonset hut and the boys jumped down and helped their mother out. For a moment Will sat behind the wheel, and then slowly got out himself, to walk around and look into the back of the truck at the crates.

And by noon all but one of the boxes were opened and their contents placed on the sea-bottom where the family stood among them.

‘Carrie …’

And he led her up the old porch steps that now stood uncrated on the edge of town.

‘Listen to ’em, Carrie.’

The steps squeaked and whispered underfoot.

‘What do they say, tell me what they say?’

She stood on the ancient wooden steps, holding to herself, and could not tell him.

He waved his hand. ‘Front porch here, living-room there, dining-room, kitchen, three bedrooms. Part we’ll build new, part we’ll bring. Of course all we got here now is the front porch, some parlour furniture and the old bed.’

‘All that money, Will!’

He turned, smiling. ‘You’re not mad, now, look at me! You’re not mad. We’ll bring it all up, next month, next year. The cut-glass vases, that Armenian carpet your mother gave us in 1961! Just let the sun explode!’

They looked at the other crates, numbered and lettered: Front-porch swing, front-porch wicker rocker, hanging Chinese crystals …

‘I’ll blow them myself to make them ring.’

They set the front door on the top of the stairs, with its little panes of coloured glass, and Carrie looked through the strawberry window.

‘What do you see?’

But he knew what she saw, for he gazed through the coloured glass, too. And there was Mars, with its cold sky warmed and its dead seas fired with colour, with its hills like mounds of strawberry ice, and its sand like burning charcoals sifted by wind.

The strawberry window, the strawberry window, breathed soft rose colours on the land and filled the mind and the eye with the light of a never-ending dawn. Bent there, looking through, he heard himself say:

‘The town’ll be out this way in a year. This’ll be a shade street, you’ll have your porch, and you’ll have friends. You won’t need all this much, then. But starting right here, with this little bit that’s familiar, watch it spread, watch Mars change so you’ll know it as if you’d known it all your life.’

He ran down the steps to the last and as-yet unopened canvas-covered crate. With his pocket knife he cut a hole in the canvas. ‘Guess!’ he said.

‘My kitchen stove? My furnace?’

‘Not in a million years.’ He smiled very gently. ‘Sing me a song,’ he said.

‘Will, you’re clean off your head.’

‘Sing me a song worth all the money we had in the bank and now don’t have, but who gives a blast in hell,’ he said.

‘I don’t know anything but "Genevieve, Sweet Genevieve"!’

‘Sing that,’ he said.

But she could not open her mouth and start the song. He saw her lips move and try, but there was no sound.

He ripped the canvas wider and shoved his hand into the crate and touched around for a quiet moment, and started to sing the words himself until he moved his hand a last time and then a single clear piano chord sprang out on the morning air.

‘There,’ he said. ‘Let’s take it right on to the end. Everyone! Here’s the harmony.’

The end