

The Small Assassin, Ray Bradbury

The Small Assassin

JUST when the idea occurred to her that she was being murdered she could not tell. There had been little subtle signs, little suspicions for the past month; things as deep as sea tides in her, like looking at a perfectly calm stretch of cerulean water and liking it and wanting to bathe in it, and finding, just as the tide takes your body into it, that monsters dwell just under the surface, things unseen, bloated, many-armed, sharp-finned, malignant and inescapable.

A room floated around her in an effluvium of hysteria. Sharp instruments hovered and there were voices and people in sterile white masks.

My name, she thought. My name; what is it?

Alice Leiber. It came to her. David Leiber's wife. But it gave her no comfort. She was alone with these silent whispering white people and there was great pain and nausea and death-fear in her.

I am being murdered before their eyes. These doctors, these nurses don't realize what hidden thing has happened to me. David doesn't know. Nobody knows except me and — the killer, the small assassin, the little murderer.

I am dying and I can't tell them how. They'd laugh and call me one in delirium. They'll see the murderer and hold him and like him and they won't think him responsible for my death. Here I am, in front of God and man, dying, and there is no one to believe my story, everyone to doubt me, comfort me with lies, bury me in ignorance, mourn me and salvage my murderer.

Where is David? she wondered. In the outer room, smoking one cigarette after another, listening to the long tickings of the very slow clock?

Sweat exploded from all of her body at once, and with it a crying and agonizing. Now. Now! Try and kill me, she screamed. Try, try, but I won't die! I won't!

There was a hollow in her. A vacuity. Suddenly there was no pain. Exhaustion. Blackness. It was over. It was all over. Oh, God. She plummeted rapidly down and struck against a black nothingness which gave way to another nothing and another nothing and another and still another. . .

Footsteps. Gentle, approaching footsteps. The sound of people trying to be quiet.

Far away, a voice said, 'She's asleep. Don't disturb her.'

An odour of tweeds, a pipe, a certain shaving lotion. She knew David was standing over her. And beyond him the immaculate odour of Dr. Jeffers.

She did not open her eyes. 'I'm awake,' she said, quietly. It was a surprise, a relief to be able to speak, to not be dead.

'Alice,' someone said, and it was David beyond her closed eyes, his hands holding one of her tired ones.

Would you like to meet the murderer, David? she thought. That's who you're here to see now, aren't you? I hear your voice asking to see him, so there's nothing but for me to point him out to you.

David stood over her. She opened her eyes. The room came into focus. Moving a weak hand she pulled aside a coverlet.

The murderer looked up at David Leiber with a small red-faced, blue-eyed calm. Its eyes were deep and sparkling.

'Why!' cried David Leiber, smiling. 'Why, he's a fine baby!'

Dr. Jeffers was waiting for David Leiber the day he showed up at the hospital to take his wife and new child home. He motioned Leiber into a chair in his office, gave him a cigar, lit one for himself, sat on the edge of his desk, puffing solemnly for a long moment. Then he cleared his throat, looked David Leiber straight in the eye and said, 'Your wife doesn't like her child, Dave.'

'What!'

'It's been a hard thing for her. The whole thing. She'll need a lot of love in this next year. I didn't say much at the time, but she was hysterical in the delivery room. The strange things she said. I won't repeat them. All I'll say is that she feels alien to the child. Now, this may simply be a thing we can clear up with one or two questions.' He sucked on his cigar another moment, then said, 'Is this child a ‘wanted' child, Dave?'

'Why do you ask?'

'It's vital.'

'Yes. Yes, it is a ‘wanted' child. It was planned. We planned it together. Alice was so happy, a year ago, when — '

'Mmm — that makes it more difficult. Because if the child was unplanned, it would be a simple case of a mother who hates the idea of motherhood. That doesn't fit Alice.' Dr. Jeffers took his cigar from his lips, rubbed his hand across his jaw, tongued the inside of his cheek. 'It must be something else, then. Perhaps something buried in her childhood that's coming out now. Or it might be the simple temporary doubt and distrust of any mother who's gone through the unusual pain and near-death that Alice has.

If so, then a little time should heal that. I thought I'd tell you, though, Dave. It'll help you be easy and tolerant with her. If she says anything about — well — about wishing the child had been born dead, smooth it over, will you, son? And if things don't get along, the three of you drop in on me. I'm always glad to see old friends, eh? Here, take another cigar along for — ah — for the baby.'

It was a bright spring afternoon. Their car hummed along wide, tree-lined boulevards. Blue sky, flowers, a warm wind. Dave talked a lot, lit his cigar, talked some more. Alice answered directly, softly, relaxing a bit more as the trip progressed. But she held the baby not tightly enough or warmly enough or motherly enough to satisfy the queer ache in Dave's mind. She seemed to be merely carrying a porcelain figurine.

He tried joviality. 'What'll we name him?' he asked.

Alice Leiber watched green trees slide by. 'Let's not name him yet,' she said. 'I'd rather wait until we get an exceptional name for him. Don't blow smoke in his face.' Her sentences ran together with no distinction of tone between one or the other. The last statement held no motherly reproof, no interest, no irritation. She just mouthed it and it was said.

The husband, disquieted, dropped the cigar from the window. 'Sorry,' he said.

The baby rested in the crook of its mother's arm, shadows of sun and tree changing its face over and again. His blue eyes opened like fresh blue spring flowers. Moist noises came from the tiny, pink, elastic mouth.

Alice gave her baby a quick glance. Her husband felt her shiver against him.

'Cold?' he asked.

'A chill. Better raise the window, David.'

It was more than a chill. He rolled the window thoughtfully up.

Suppertime.

Candles flickered odd dances of light-shadow about the large, amply-furnished dining-room. There was good familiarity in eating together again for both of them; friendliness and relaxation in passing salt or sharing the last biscuit, or commenting on flavours.

David Leiber had brought the child from the nursery, propped him at a tiny, bewildered angle, supported by many pillows, in a newly purchased high-chair.

Alice watched her knife and fork move. 'He's not high-chair size,' she said.

'Fun having him here, anyway,' said Leiber, feeling fine. 'Everything's fun. At the office, too. Orders up to my nose. If I don't watch myself I'll make another fifteen thousand this year. Hey, look at Junior, will you? Drooling all down his chin!' He reached over to dab at the baby's chin with his napkin. From the corner of his eye he realized that Alice wasn't even watching. He finished the job.

'I guess it wasn't very interesting,' he said, back again at his food. A minor irritation rose in him, disregarding all self-argument. 'But one would think a mother'd take some interest in her own child, wouldn't one?'

Alice jerked her chin up. 'Don't speak that way. Not in front of him! Later, if you must.'

'Later?' he cried. 'In front of, in back of, what's the difference?' He quieted suddenly, swallowed, was sorry. 'All right. Okay. I know how it is.'

After dinner she let him carry the baby upstairs. She didn't tell him to; she let him.

Coming down, he found her standing by the radio, listening to music she wasn't hearing. Her eyes were closed, her whole attitude one of wondering, self-questioning. She started when he appeared.

Suddenly, she was at him, against him, soft, quick; the same. Nothing different. Her lips found him, kept him. He was stunned by her. He laughed, unexpectedly, and deeply. Something cold in him thawed and melted; like fear of winter melting at spring, his fear went now. Now that the baby was gone, upstairs, out of the room, she began to breathe again, live again. She was free. And this in itself made a subtle worry in him, but he let it go, enjoyed her being against him. She was whispering, rapidly, endlessly.

'Thank you, thank you, darling. For being yourself, always. Yourself, you, and nobody and nothing else! Dependable, so very dependable!'

He had to laugh. 'My father told me, ‘son, provide for your family!''

Wearily, she rested her dark, shining hair against his neck. 'You've overdone it. Sometimes I wish we were just the way we were when we were first married. No responsibilities, nothing but ourselves. No — no babies.'

She took him too eagerly by the hand, a flushed strangeness in her white face, unnaturally intense. It seemed there were many things for her to say and couldn't, so she said the next best thing, a fair substitute.

'A third element's come in. Before, it was just you and I. We protected each other, and now we protect the baby, but get no protection from it. Do you understand? Lying in the hospital I had time to think a lot of things. The world is evil — '

'Is it?' he said.

'Yes. It is. But laws protect us from it. And when there aren't laws, then love does the protecting. You're protected from my hurting you, by my love. You're vulnerable to me, of all people, but love shields you. I feel no fear of you, because love cushions all your irritations, unnatural instincts, hatreds and immaturities. But — what about the baby? It's too young to know love, or a law of love, or anything, until we teach it.'

'We'll teach it, then.'

'And in the meantime be vulnerable to it!'

'Vulnerable? To a baby?' He held her away from him and laughed gently at her.

'Does a baby know the difference between rights and wrongs?' she asked.

'No. But it'll learn.'

'But a baby is so new, so amoral, so conscience-free,' she argued. She stopped. Her arms dropped from him and she turned swiftly. 'That noise? What was it?'

Leiber looked around the room. 'I didn't hear — '

She stared at the library door. 'In there,' she said, slowly.

Leiber crossed the room and opened the door and switched the library lights on and off. 'Not a thing,' he said, and came back to her. 'You're worn. To bed with you; right now.'

Turning out the lights together, they walked quietly up the soundless hall stairs, not speaking. At the top she apologized. 'My wild talk, darling. Forgive me. I'm just exhausted.'

He understood, and said so.

She paused, undecided, by the nursery door. Then she fingered the brass knob sharply, walked in. He watched her approach the crib much too carefully, look down, and stiffen as if she'd been struck in the face. 'David!'

Leiber stepped forward, reached the crib, and looked down.

The baby's face was bright red and very moist. The little pink mouth gestured. Bright blue eyes stared as if being strangled outward. Small red hands weaved in the air.

'Oh, he's just been crying,' said Leiber.

'Has he?' Alice Leiber grasped the crib-railing to hold herself erect. 'I didn't hear him crying.'

'The door was closed.'

'Is that why he breathes so hard, why his face is red?'

'Sure. Poor little guy. Crying all alone in the dark. He can sleep in our room tonight, just in case he cries.'

'You'll spoil him,' his wife said.

Leiber felt her eyes follow as he rolled the crib into their bedroom. He undressed silently, sat on the edge of the bed. Suddenly he lifted his head, swore under his breath, snapped his fingers. 'Damn it. Forgot to tell you. Have to fly to Chicago Friday.'

'Oh, David.' She seemed a little lost girl. 'So soon?'

'I've put this trip off for two months, and now it's so critical I just have to make it.'

'I'm afraid to be alone.'

'We'll have the new cook here by Friday. She'll be here all the time. All you have to do is call. I'll only be away a little while.'

'But I'm afraid. I don't know of what. You wouldn't believe me if I told you. I guess I'm crazy.'

He was in bed now. She darkened the room; he heard her walk around the bed, throw back crisp sheets, slide in. He smelled the warm woman smell of her next to him. He said, 'If you want me to wait a few extra days, perhaps I could — '

'No,' she said, unconvinced. 'You go. I know it's important. It's just that I keep thinking about what I told you. Laws and love and protection. Love protects you from me. But, the baby — ' She took a breath. 'What protects you from him, David?'

Before he could answer, before he could tell her how silly it was, speaking of infants, she switched on the bed light, abruptly.

'Look,' she said, pointing.

The baby lay wide awake in its crib, staring straight at him, with deep, sharp, blue eyes. The eyes closed.

The lights went out again. She trembled against him.

'It's not nice, being afraid of the thing you birthed.' Her whisper lowered, became harsh, fierce, swift. 'He tried to kill me! He lies there, listens to us talking, waiting for you to go away so he can try to kill me again! I swear it!'

Sobs broke from her he could not stop by holding her. 'Please,' he kept saying, soothing her. 'Stop it, stop it. Please.'

She cried in the dark for a long time. Very late she relaxed, shakingly, against him. Her breathing came soft, warm, regular, her body twitched its worn reflexes and she slept.

He drowsed.

And just before his eyes lidded wearily down, sinking into the deep sleep tides, he heard a strange little sound of awareness and awakeness in the room.

The sound of moist, small, pinkly elastic lips.

The baby.

And then — sleep.

In the morning, the sun blazed. Alice smiled.

David Leiber dangled his watch over the crib. 'See, baby? Something bright. Something pretty. Sure. Sure. Something bright. Something pretty.'

Alice smiled. She told him to go ahead, fly to Chicago, she'd try to be a brave girl, no need to worry. She'd take care of baby. Oh, yes, she'd take care of him, all right. This last she said with a peculiar emphasis, which David Leiber ignored.

The airplane went east with Leiber. There was a lot of sky, a lot of sun and clouds and then Chicago came running over the horizon. Leiber was dropped into the rush of ordering, planning, banqueting, making the rounds, telephoning, arguing in conference, downing coffee in scalding gulps betweentimes. But he wrote letters each day and sent telegrams that said brief, nice, direct things to Alice and baby.

On the evening of his sixth day away from home he received the long-distance phone call. Los Angeles.

'Alice?'

'No, Dave. This is Jeffers, speaking.'

'Doctor!'

'Hold on to yourself, son. Alice is sick. You'd better get the next plane home. It's pneumonia. I'll do everything I can, boy. If only it wasn't so soon after the baby. She needs strength.'

Leiber dropped the phone into its cradle. He got up, with no feet under him, and no hands and no body. The hotel room blurred and fell apart.

'Alice,' he said, blindly, starting for the door.

The airplane went west and California came up, and out of the twisting circular metal of propellers came a vibratingly sudden materialization of Alice lying in bed, Dr. Jeffers standing in the sunlight at a window, and the reality of Leiber feeling his feet walking slowly, becoming more real and more real, until, when he reached her bed, everything was whole, intact, a reality.

Nobody spoke. Alice smiled, faintly. Jeffers talked, but only a little of it got through to David.

'Your wife's too good a mother, son. She worried more about your baby than about herself. . .'

A muscle in Alice's cheek flattened out, taut, then.

Alice began to talk. She talked like a mother should, now. Or did she — Wasn't there a trace of anger, fear, repulsion in her voice? Dr. Jeffers didn't notice it, but he wasn't looking for it.

'The baby wouldn't sleep,' said Alice. 'I thought he was sick. He just lay in his crib, staring. Late at night, he'd cry. Loud. He cried all night and all night. I couldn't quiet him. I couldn't sleep.'

Dr. Jeffers nodded. 'Tired herself right into pneumonia. But she's full of sulfa drug now, and she's on the safe side.'

Leiber felt ill. 'The baby, what about him?'

'Chipper as ever; healthy as a cock.'

'Thanks, doctor.'

The doctor took leave, walked down the stairs, opened the front door faintly, and was gone. Leiber listened to him go.

'David!'

He turned to her whisper.

'It was the baby, again,' she said. 'I try to lie to myself — convince myself I'm a fool. But the baby knew I was weak from the hospital. So he cried all night. And when he wasn't crying he'd be too quiet. If I switched the light on he'd be there, staring at me.'

Leiber jerked inside. He remembered seeing the baby, awake in the dark, himself. Awake very late at night when babies should sleep. He pushed it aside. It was crazy.

Alice went on. 'I was going to kill the baby. Yes, I was. When you'd been gone only an hour on your trip I went to his room and put my hands about his neck, and I stood there, for a long time, thinking, afraid. Then I put the covers up over his face and turned him over on his face and pressed him down and left him that way and ran out of the room.'

He tried to stop her.

'No, let me finish,' she said, hoarsely, looking at the wall. 'When I left his room I thought, it's simple. Babies die every day of smothering. No one'll ever know. But when I came back to see him dead, David, he was alive! Yes, alive, turned over on his back, alive and smiling and breathing. And I couldn't touch him again after that.

I left him there and I didn't come back, not to feed him or look at him or do anything. Perhaps the cook tended to him. I don't know. All I know is that his crying kept me awake and I thought all through the night, and walked around the rooms and now I'm sick.' She was almost finished now. 'The baby lies there and thinks of ways to kill me. Simple ways. Because he knows that I know so much about him. I have no love for him, there is no protection between us, there never will be again.'

She was through. She collapsed inwards on herself and finally slept. David Leiber stood for a long while over her, not able to move. His brain was frozen in his head, not a cell of it stirred.

The next morning there was only one thing to do. He did it. He walked into Dr. Jeffers's office and told him the whole thing, and listened to Jeffers's tolerant replies:

'Let's take this thing slowly, son. It's quite natural for mothers to hate their children, sometimes. We have a label for it — ambivalence. The ability to hate, while loving. Lovers hate each other, frequently. Children detest their mothers — '

Leiber interrupted. 'I never hated my mother.'

'You won't admit it, naturally. People hate admitting hatred for loved ones.'

'So Alice hates her baby.'

'The best way to put it is that she has an obsession. She's gone a step further than plain, ordinary ambivalence. A Caesarian operation brought the child into the world, and almost took Alice out of it.

She blames the child for her near-death and her pneumonia. She's projecting her troubles, blaming them on the handiest object she can use as a source of blame. We all do it. We stumble into a chair and curse the furniture, not our own clumsiness. We miss a golf-stroke and damn the turf or our club, or the make of ball. If our business fails we blame the gods, the weather, our luck.

All I can tell you is what I told you before. Love her. Finest medicine in the world. Find little ways of showing your affection, give her security. Find ways of showing her how harmless and innocent the child is. Make her feel that the baby was worth the risk. After a while, she'll settle down, forget about death, and begin to love the child. If she doesn't come around in the next month or so, ask me and I'll recommend a good psychiatrist. Go on along now, and take that look off your face.'

When summer came, things seemed to settle and become easy. Leiber worked, immersed himself in office detail, but never forgot to be thoughtful of his wife. She, in turn, took long walks, gained strength, played an occasional light game of badminton. She rarely burst out emotionally any more. She seemed to have rid herself of her fears.

Except on one certain midnight when a sudden summer wind swept around the house, warm and swift, shaking the trees like so many shining tambourines. Alice wakened, trembling, and slid over into her husband's arms, and let him console her, and ask her what was wrong.

She said, 'Something's here in the room, watching us.'

He switched on the light. 'Dreaming again,' he said. 'You're better, though. Haven't been scared for a long time.'

She sighed as he clicked off the light again, and suddenly she slept. He held her, considering what a sweet, weird creature she was, for about half an hour.

He heard the bedroom door sway open a few inches.

There was nobody at the door. No reason for it to come open. The wind had died.

He waited. It seemed like an hour he lay silently, in the dark.

Then, far away, wailing like some small meteor dying in the vast inky gulf of space, the baby began to cry in his nursery.

It was a small, lonely sound in the middle of the stars and the dark and the breathing of this woman in his arms and the wind beginning to sweep through the trees again.

Leiber counted to fifty. The crying continued.

Finally, carefully disengaging Alice's grip, he slipped from bed, put on his slippers, robe, and tiptoed out of the room.

He'd go downstairs, he thought tiredly, and fix some warm milk, bring it up, and —

The blackness dropped out from under him. His foot slipped and plunged. Slipped on something soft. Plunged into nothingness.

He thrust his hands out, caught frantically at the railing. His body stopped falling. He held. He cursed.

The 'something soft' that had caused his feet to slip, rustled and thumped down a few steps and stopped. His head rang. His heart hammered at the base of his throat, thick and shot with pain.

Why do careless people leave things strewn about a house? He groped carefully with his fingers for the object that had almost spilled him headlong down the stairs.

His hand froze, startled. His breath went in. His heart held one or two beats.

The thing he held in his hand was a toy. A large cumbersome, patchwork doll he had bought as a joke, for —

For the baby.

Alice drove him to work the next day.

She slowed the car half way down-town; pulled to the curb and stopped it. Then she turned on the seat and looked at her husband.

'I want to go away on a vacation. I don't know if you can make it now, darling, but, if not, please let me go alone. We can get someone to take care of the baby, I'm sure. But I just have to get away. I thought I was growing out of this — this feeling. But I haven't. I can't stand being in the room with him. He looks up at me as if he hates me, too. I can't put my finger on it; all I know is I want to get away before something happens.'

He got out on his side of the car, came around, motioned to her to move over, got in. 'The only thing you're going to do is see a good psychiatrist. And if he suggests a vacation, well, okay. But this can't go on; my stomach's in knots all the time.' He started the car. 'I'll drive the rest of the way.'

Her head was down, she was trying to keep back tears. She looked up when they reached his office-building. 'All right. Make the appointment. I'll go talk to anyone you want, David.'

He kissed her. 'Now, you're talking sense, lady. Think you can drive home okay?'

'Of course, silly.'

'See you at supper, then. Drive carefully.'

'Don't I always? ‘Bye.'

He stood on the curb, watching her drive off, the wind taking hold of her long dark, shining hair. Upstairs, a minute later, he phoned Jeffers, got an appointment arranged with a reliable neuropsychiatrist. That was that.

The day's work went uneasily. Things seemed to tangle and he kept seeing Alice all the time, mixed into everything he looked at. So much of her fear had come over into him. She actually had him convinced that the child was somewhat unnatural.

He dictated long, uninspired letters. He checked some shipments downstairs. Assistants had to be questioned, and kept going. At the end of the day he was all exhaustion, and nothing else. His head throbbed. He was very willing to go home.

On the way down in the elevator he wondered, what if I told Alice about that toy — that patchwork doll — I stumbled over on the stairs last night? Lord, wouldn't that send her off into hysterics! No, I won't ever tell her about that. After all, it was just one of those accidents.

Daylight lingered in the sky as he drove home in a taxi. In front of his Brentwood place he paid the driver and walked slowly up the cement walk, enjoying the light that was still in the sky and the trees.

The white colonial front to the house looked unnaturally silent and uninhabited, and then, quietly, he remembered that this was Thursday, and the few hired help they were able to obtain from time to time were all gone for the day. It was cook's day off, too, and he and Alice would have to scriven for themselves or eat on the Strip somewhere.

He took a deep breath of air. A bird sang behind the house. Traffic moved on the boulevard a block away. He turned the key in the door. The knob turned under his fingers, oiled, silent.

The door opened. He stepped in, put his hat on the chair with his briefcase, started to shrug out of his coat, when he looked up.

Late sunlight streamed down the stairwell from the window at the top of the house. Where the sunlight landed it took on the bright colour of the patchwork doll sprawled in a grotesque angle at the bottom of the stairs.

But he paid no attention to the patchwork doll.

He could only look, and not move, and look again at Alice.

Alice lay in a broken, grotesque, pallid gesturing and angling of her thin body. She was lying at the bottom of the stairs, like a crumpled doll who doesn't want to play any more, ever.

Alice was dead.

The house remained quiet, except for the sound of his heart.

She was dead.

He held her head in his hands, he felt her fingers. He held her body. But she wouldn't live. She wouldn't even try to live. He said her name, out loud, many times, and he tried, once again, by holding her to him, to give her back some of the warmth she had lost, but that didn't help.

He stood up. He must have made a phone call. He didn't remember. He found himself, suddenly, upstairs. He opened the nursery door and walked inside and stared blankly at the crib. His stomach was sick. He couldn't see very well.

The baby's eyes were closed, but his face was red, moist with perspiration, as if he'd been crying long and hard.

'She's dead,' said Leiber to the baby. 'She's dead.'

Then he started laughing low and soft and continuous for a long time until Dr. Jeffers walked in out of the night-time and slapped him again and again across his cheeks.

'Snap out of it! Pull yourself together, son!'

'She fell down the stairs, doctor. She tripped on a patchwork doll and fell. I almost slipped on it the other night, myself. And now — '

The doctor shook him.

'Doc, doc, doc,' said Leiber, hazily. 'Funny thing. Funny. I — I finally thought of a name for the baby.'

The doctor said nothing.

Leiber put his head back in his trembling hands and spoke the words. 'I'm going to have him christened next Sunday. Know what name I'm giving him? I'm — I'm going to call him — Lucifer!'

It was eleven at night. A lot of strange people had come and gone through the house, taking the essential flame with them — Alice.

David Leiber sat across from the doctor in the library.

'Alice wasn't crazy,' he said, slowly. 'She had good reason to fear the baby.'

Jeffers exhaled. 'Now you're following in her pattern. She blamed the child for her sickness, now you blame it for her death. She stumbled on a toy, remember that. You can't blame the child.'

'You mean Lucifer?'

'Stop calling him Lucifer!'

Leiber shook his head. 'Alice heard things at night. Things moving in the halls. As if someone spied on us. You want to know what those noises were, doctor? I'll tell you. They were made by the baby! Yes, my son! Four months old, creeping around the dark halls at night, listening to us talk. Listening to every word!' He held to the sides of the chair. 'And if I turned the lights on, a baby is a small object. It can conveniently hide behind furniture, a door, against a wall — below eye-level.'

'I want you to stop this!' demanded Jeffers.

'Let me say what I think or I'll go crazy. When I went to Chicago, who was it kept Alice awake, tiring her, weakening her into pneumonia? The baby! And when Alice didn't die, then he tried killing me. It was simple; leave a toy doll on the stairs, then cry in the night until your father rouses up, tired of listening to you cry, and goes downstairs to fetch you warm milk, and stumbles. A crude trick, but effective. It didn't get me. But it killed Alice quite dead.'

David Leiber stopped long enough to light a cigarette. 'I should have caught on. I'd turn on the lights in the middle of the night, many nights, and the baby'd be lying there, eyes wide. Most babies sleep constantly, all the time. Not this one. He stayed awake — thinking.'

'Babies don't think,' countered Jeffers.

'He stayed awake doing whatever he could do with his brain, then. What in hell do we know about a baby's brain? He had every reason to hate Alice; she suspected him for what he was — certainly not a normal child. Something — different.

What do you know of babies, doctor? The general knowledge, yes. You know, of course, how babies kill their mothers at birth. Why? In resentment at being forced into a lousy world like this one!'

Leiber leaned towards the doctor, tiredly. 'It all ties up. Suppose that a few babies out of all the millions born are instantaneously able to move, see, hear, think, like many animals and insects can. Many insects are self-sufficient when born. In a few days most mammals and birds are adjusted. Little man-children take years to speak, faltering around on rubbery legs.

'But, suppose one child in a million is — strange? Born perfectly aware, able to think, instinctively. Wouldn't it be a perfect set-up, a perfect blind for anything the baby might want to do? He could pretend to be ordinary, weak, crying, ignorant.

With just a little expenditure of energy he could crawl about a darkened house, listening. And how easy to place obstacles at the top of stairs. How easy to cry all night and tire a mother into pneumonia. How easy, right at birth, to be so close to the mother that a few deft manœuvres might cause peritonitis!'

'For God's sake!' Jeffers was on his feet. 'That's a repulsive thing to say!'

'It's a repulsive thing I'm speaking of. How many mothers have died at the birth of their children? How many have suckled strange little improbabilities who cause death one way or another? Strange, red little creatures with brains that function in a scarlet darkness we can't even guess at.

Elemental little brains, aswarm with racial memory and hatred and raw cruelty, with no more thought than self-preservation. And self-preservation in this case consisted of eliminating a mother who realized what a horror she had birthed. I ask you, doctor, what is there in the world more selfish than a baby? Nothing! Nothing is so self-centred, unsocial, selfish, nothing!'

Jeffers scowled and shook his head, helplessly, and shrugged.

Leiber dropped his cigarette down, weakly. 'I'm not claiming any great strength for the child. Just enough to crawl around a little, a few months ahead of schedule. Just enough to listen all the time. Just enough to cry late at night. That's enough, more than enough.'

Jeffers tried ridicule. 'Call it murder, then. And murder must have a motivation. Name a motivation for the child.'

Leiber was ready with the answer. 'What is more at peace, more dreamfully happy, content, at ease, at rest, fed, comforted, unbothered than an unborn child? Nothing. It floats in a sleepy dark effluvium of timeless wonder and warm nourishment and silence.

All is an enclosed dream. Then, suddenly, it is asked to give up its berth, is forced to vacate, propelled out into a noisy, uncaring, selfish, swift and merciless world where it is asked to shift for itself, to hunt, to feed from the hunting, to seek after a vanishing love that once was its unquestionable right, to meet confusion instead of inner silence and conservative slumber! And the newborn resents it! Resents it with all the soft, small fibres of its miniature body.

Resents the raw cold air, the huge spaces, the sudden departure from familiar things. And in the tiny filament of brain the only thing that the child knows is selfishness and hatred because the spell has been rudely shattered. And who is responsible for this disenchantment, this rude breakage of the spell? The mother. And so the new child has someone to hate, and hate with all the tiny fabric of its mind. The mother has cast it out, rejected it. And the father is no better, kill him, too! He's responsible in his way!'

Jeffers interrupted. 'If what you say is true, then every woman in the world would have to look on her newborn as something to dread, something to wonder about, to shudder at.'

'And why not? Hasn't the child a perfect alibi? He has a thousand years of accepted medical belief to protect him. By all natural accounts he is helpless, not responsible. The child is born hating. And things grow worse, instead of better. At first the baby gets a certain amount of attention and mothering. But then as time passes, things change. When very new, a baby has great power.

Power to make parents do silly things when it cries or sneezes, jump when it makes a noise. As the years pass, the baby feels even that little power slipping rapidly, forever away from it, never to return. Why shouldn't it grasp for all the power it can have, why shouldn't it jockey for position while it has all the advantages? In later years it would be too late to express its hatred. Now would be the time to strike.

And later, this child, secretly aware, becoming more aware each and every day, would learn new things — about position, money, security. The child would see that through money it might eventually provide itself with a self-built womb of comforts, warmth and aloneness.

And naturally, then, it might pay to destroy the father whose insurance policies for twenty thousand dollars are made out to the wife and baby. Again, I admit the baby isn't old enough for that motivation yet. Money is something beyond it. But hatred is not. The money angle might come later, not now. But it would come from the same desire, the desire to return to warm comfort and let-aloneness.'

Leiber's voice was very soft, very low.

'My little boy baby, lying in his crib nights, his face moist and red and out of breath. From crying? No. From climbing tediously, achingly slow, out of his crib, from crawling long distances through darkened hallways. My little boy baby. I want to kill him.'

The doctor handed him a water glass and some pills. 'You're not killing anyone. You're going to sleep for twenty-four hours. Sleep'll change your mind. Take this.'

Leiber drank down the pills and let himself be led upstairs to his bedroom, crying, and felt himself being put to bed.

The doctor said good night and left the house.

Leiber, alone, drifted towards sleep.

He heard a noise. 'What's — what's that?' he demanded, feebly.

Something moved in the hall.

David Leiber slept.

The next morning, Dr. Jeffers drove up to the Leiber house. It was a good morning, and he was here to tell Leiber to get out into the country for a rest. Leiber would still be asleep upstairs. Jeffers had given him enough sedative to knock him out for at least fifteen hours.

He rang the doorbell. No answer. The servants hadn't returned, it was too early. Jeffers tried the front door, found it open, stepped in. He put his medical kit on the nearest chair.

Something white moved out of view at the top of the stairs. Just a suggestion of a movement. Jeffers hardly noticed it.

The odour of gas was in the house.

Jeffers ran up the stairs, crashed into Leiber's bedroom.

Leiber lay on the bed, not moving, and the room billowed with gas, which hissed from a released jet at the base of the wall near the door. Jeffers twisted it off, then forced up all the windows, and ran back to Leiber's body.

The body was cold. It had been dead quite a few hours.

Coughing violently, the doctor hurried from the room, eyes watering. Leiber hadn't turned the gas on himself. He couldn't have. Those sedatives had knocked him out, he wouldn't have wakened until noon. It wasn't suicide. Or was there the faintest possibility?

Jeffers stood in the hall for five minutes. Then he walked to the door of the nursery. It was shut. He opened it. He walked inside and over to the crib.

The crib was empty.

He stood swaying over the crib for half a minute, then he said something to nobody in particular.

'The nursery door blew shut. You couldn't get back into your crib where it was safe. You didn't plan on the door blowing shut. A little thing like a slammed door can ruin the best of plans.

I'll find you somewhere in the house, hiding, pretending to be something you are not.' The doctor looked dazed. He put his hand to his head and smiled palely. 'Now I'm talking like Alice and David talked. But, I can't take any chances. I'm not sure of anything, but I can't take any chances.'

He walked downstairs, opened his medical bag upon the chair, took something out of it and held it in his hands.

Something rustled down the hall. Something very small and very quiet. Jeffers turned rapidly.

'I had to operate to bring you into this world. Now I guess I can operate to take you out of it. . .'

He took half a dozen, quick, sure steps forward into the hall. He raised his hand into the sunlight.

'See, baby! Something bright — something pretty!'

A scalpel.

The end