

THE SPACE COWBOY

by

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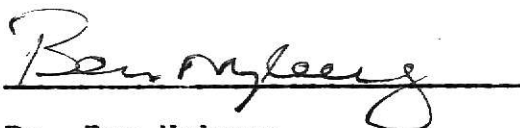
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INTRODUCTION

The Space Cowboy has gone through many changes in shape during the last four years before it has taken on its present form. Many of the changes have come about as attempts to answer questions raised by the design of an earlier draft of the story. In almost all cases, change was accompanied by expansion. The growth from a short story to a novel was accomplished more by expansion for explanation rather than complete revision of what was there. Usually, something was added to account for a particular problem.

What was at first a twelve page short story grew into an eighty page long story, then into a two hundred seventy page novel, and finally settled back to two hundred ten pages, as it now stands. What it now presents is a relatively structured and fairly complete event that may still go through future changes but nothing as radical as it has seen. The purpose of this introduction is to chronicle the growth of the novel, explaining reasons for revisions and additions as responses to critical questions that arose from the structure of the story at any given time in the process.

At first, in July 1971, I had written a short story, called "Clapping Water", that received favorable comments from "Esquire" and "The Little Review", but was not accepted for publication. The story related the events of a character

very much like George, who was a first person narrator visiting the town of Dorian and arriving at the Hazak mine where he inexplicably confounded the townspeople and became a hero. The events, now considerably altered, are portrayed in pages 178 through 188 of The Space Cowboy. The magazines had given no indication of what had pleased them or what had finally caused them to reject the story. After a year or two, and a good deal of critical comment from friends, it became more clear.

The ending was, it seems, an unsatisfactory, over-simplified conclusion to the fantastic events leading up to it. But what seemed to hold, at least for myself and a few others, was the sense of a special atmosphere created by the strange events and the tone of the story.

It occurred to me that I had done a couple of other earlier pieces (sometime in 1969) that had the same sense of atmosphere. They were "Shiela Rain" and "The First Butterfly" and, on rereading them, I found them to be terrible pieces of hashed-up stream-of-consciousness, but in them I found the seeds of events that related to "Clapping Water" and a possibility for a complimentary tone. The events of "Shiela Rain" occur on pages 149 to 155 of The Space Cowboy, and "The First Butterfly" summarized, in only eight pages, the events of fifty pages beginning on page 189.

"Shiela Rain" held the incident of two men in search of something in the woods, departing for a time from the city, and discovering beauty in the form of a young woman, even

against their own desires. "The First Butterfly" introduced the character of George, a very impulsive young man attached to carrots, who decided to build a butterfly.

In January 1973, I sat down to try to put the three pieces into one long piece. The concepts of the Abbey, the Leatherworks and the teacher took on some form. But time did not allow continuing. And after that I spent a year thinking about it, and sometimes jotting down random notes. I could not see then how it would amount to anything, but it kept eating at me.

In January 1974, I decided to give George a wife, Mary, who, like himself, was a very elusive force, but whose actions very clearly answered the moments of his impulsiveness, she, in a sense, taking on the function of a transcendental goddess in relation to his more or less random physical behavior, giving it a shape and a purpose. Somehow the story, called "The First Butterfly, or In the Middle of the Peach", took on a thematic unity with the possibly successful operation of symbols and a clear single-minded purpose that was lacking in the previous attempts.

The story gave direction and purpose to the other three fragments, allowing George a motivation, even if a vague one, that might explain his responses to the events that happened to him. That discovery gave me the impetus to bring the four pieces together. A good deal of the spring of 1974 was spent doing that.

When finished, I had completed a seventy-six page piece called "The First Butterfly", that now, after again being rewritten and expanded, is essentially the material represented on pages 77 through 190 of The Space Cowboy. It was pleasing to have finally brought all the pieces together and to have added some definition to George and the Abbey, but some questions still remained, and grew larger with criticism by others.

The problems that still remained included such important things as the consistency of George's motivation, the reasoning behind the Abbey's behavior, and the question of Mary's disappearance. Many of George's actions remained unclear in terms of inner motivation, except perhaps in a very extended symbolic sense. The Abbey, although he had become a consistent character in terms of dialogue and action, did not seem to have a real purpose behind his actions, which were strange enough that they needed, I felt, to be defined with a special purpose. But the greatest problem, most disturbing to all readers, was the utter disappearance of Mary. Mary had become attractive to readers and had provided George with a significance in relation to her. But Mary simply disappeared early in the story without any explanation, never to reappear again, and George hardly worried about her disappearance after the initial emotional impact and after only one feeble attempt didn't bother to look for her, even though he clearly had a deep love for her. It was a major problem, and could only be resolved by stretching metaphysical meaning into objects of similar color and texture

(the moon, the flesh of an old lady, and the Hazak, among others), which through reappearance could be seen to take on the action of symbols. Clearly, as a realistic resolution, it did not satisfy many readers.

Other, perhaps less serious problems in "The First Butterfly" were noted by less than the unanimous array of critics. All of them, upon reflection, came to be for me problems that needed to be resolved.

Professor Nyberg, besides dealing with the larger elements of plot, noted particular details throughout the entire story and asked questions that sought to find reasons behind particular similarities and associations in events and objects that appeared in the story, often provoking a search for significance where none would have been intended. In one particular instance, he asked what significance a scrap of paper skittering across a porch could have. In another, he asked why a great number of weeds were growing in profusion. In still another case, he asked what significance a series of rounded large objects could have. Most of his questions were directed toward meaning or significance of an event or object in relation to the whole piece, reflecting a desire to reach toward a thematic unity, a critical pose that was extraordinarily useful and finally caused a number of changes in the final draft that lead to a more economical piece.

Professor Williams, besides concerning herself with the more obvious problems in character, dealt with the few dangling modifiers, and puzzled over the problem of general

coherence of the entire event of the story feeling that it needed a frame of reference to clarify just what the whole movement signified. In her mind, as it stood, the story was absurd in nature and did not make contact with reality. It needed a central focus, perhaps a narrator who could relate to the reader what the events meant to him. She suggested that the Abbey or another person might provide that focus.

Peter Scott, a close friend and English teacher in Ohio, paid more attention to the language of the story. Besides making the same obvious criticisms in plot and character as the others, he pointed out that the use of colloquialisms and idioms often reduced the pleasure and understandings that he felt the story could have. In many cases he signaled words such as "gonna", "just" and "maybe" that he felt detracted from the clarity and flavor of the statements. In other cases, he underlined phrases that he felt should either be dropped or rephrased.

Both Professor Williams and Peter Scott pointed out sections where the language soared into an attempt at prose poetry. Williams found the sections disturbing and confusing, yet Scott felt they were very fine passages, often the best of the work. The two critics, however, did agree that George's sickness did not spell emotional disturbance or trouble, but his puking and gastric distress only spelled sickness, and for Williams that became the overriding message of the story.

Altogether, the range in types of criticism that these three offered was considerable and taken as a whole very helpful.

Each approach was valuable. And it was especially helpful that all three agreed on the same major dissatisfactions.

But then the problem was how to go about revising the work. I had hoped in the summer of 1974 to work my way through a fairly complete final draft that was later to be called The Space Cowboy. I tried several solutions to the difficulties.

First, I tried adding a Preface onto the front of the story. The Preface supplied a first person narrator who had met George and would be able to provide insights into George's character and point-of-view. The attempt was to have been to explain through him the reason for Mary's disappearance and the reasons for George's peculiar responses.

But that did not solve a particular problem that had come to disturb me strongly. I felt the Abbey's motivations should become clear, a point that none of the critics had pointed out explicitly.

I decided that perhaps following Professor Williams' suggestion of letting the Abbey tell the events of the story would allow him to explain his own purposes, and wrote a fifty-page section narrated by the Abbey himself, who became Willard in real life and who spent a good deal of time relating his background, his desires and his reason for becoming the Abbey, a sort of ruler of a small mountain town. The Preface also became his narration, providing a place and a reason for telling the story.

But a serious problem arose. After working for nearly

a month I discovered that the Abbey could not be the narrator of George's section, since they were antagonists, and it was essential in their relationship that they not understand one another. At least the Abbey had explained his personal drive, although I didn't know what to do with it.

In the Abbey, I had found a way to articulate the reason for Mary's disappearance, the reason becoming his own personal drive; he wanted her and he took her. Also, the explanation by the Abbey clarified George's seemingly random behavior in the light of Mary's disappearance. The Abbey underhandedly distorts and confuses George, twisting his life into a chaos in the hope that George will lose control of his direction.

As a result of clarifying these motivations, I also discovered something explicit for George to overcome. He then had a particularized force to reckon with, and if he maneuvered things correctly and could get himself under control, he would then be able to retrieve Mary, and she would be able to return to the story, a return that would satisfy many critics.

In articulating the Abbey's point-of-view then, it greatly clarified and focused the problems of characterization and plot, and almost automatically allowed the completion of events in Parts Four and Five (pp. 190-216), giving the book a more traditional climax and denouement that seems to conclude the function of each character bringing the book to a more sensible close that should satisfy the earlier problems.

It was at this point that the name was changed to The Space Cowboy, because the main focus now was the characters themselves.

But still the Abbey's articulation of events increased the seemingly irreconcilable problem of point-of-view. Neither George, nor the Abbey, nor Mary could satisfactorily tell the story. And it seemed impossible that anyone else could do so either.

I decided on a third narrator, who could listen to the Abbey tell his story, and who could also shift sensibilities to sympathize and somehow understand George. Also, I began feeling a need to somehow bring the somewhat fantastic events of the story into reality. I wanted to force the impact of the story onto some plausible characters. All along the story had carried elements of fantasy. Now I wanted it to have a meaningful relationship to the real world. A third narrator could bring it in contact with the real world as well as have a more omniscient view of things.

I wrote a seventy-page frame that wrapped around what is now The Space Cowboy, provided an omniscient narrator, recast the Abbey's Preface as third person narration, and attempted to explain the philosophy of the story in relation to real and clearly contemporary characters. What was created was a sort of exterior plot that included the Abbey as a character forcing his way into the cabin of a group of vacationing young citizens of the modern world.

Finally the frame was scrapped. A real person could obviously not be an omniscient narrator, and Professors Conrow and Johnston, who read the longer version of The Space Cowboy (in seven sections) felt the narration problem re-

mained and that the frame was too heavily philosophized to be interesting as it stood.

As it is now completed, an omniscient unknown narrator tells the story. Parts One and Five concern themselves with the Abbey. Parts Two through Four focus on George. I worked to eliminate dangling modifiers, overwrought colloquialisms, unseemly phrasing, and unnecessary details that created a sense of significance where none was intended.

And the major problems in characterization and plot, at least tentatively, seem to have been solved. Each character's motivation should now be clarified, and each person's course of action throughout the novel should be understandable in terms of surrounding events and internal motivations. All questions are hopefully answered by the work itself, except those which are supposed to linger, those questions that reach beyond specific characters and become universal for human nature.

THE SPACE COWBOY

ONE

In the beginning, he developed a Master Plan.

About twenty years ago, after he had worked to make a living washing dishes, teaching school, frying hamburgers, carrying hod, and pumping gas, he felt as if he had been battered and smacked around by many people and many objects. He had been badgered by his bosses, yelled at by customers, threatened by a fourteen year old boy holding a switch blade to his stomach, knocked out by a telephone pole, and splattered with hot grease. As a result, he felt beaten, useless and dull. There were many good times, but they didn't seem to be associated with making a living, no matter what plan he used in order to survive.

All that was happening was people and money. All that anybody worried about narrowed down to how they were getting along with other people and if they had enough money to survive. The result was a lot of dashing about, rolling around, and finally, crashing into one another. It was the crashing into one another that brought the pain and the pleasure. And whether it was pain or pleasure depended a lot on who you were crashing into. It could have been

a friend, a relative, a lover, a boss, a stranger, an enemy, a criminal or almost anybody.

After a long time of suffering, or getting excited about these crashes, he began to add them up. One evening, he sat down and made charts of all the crashes he could remember, put them under the headings of Painful or Pleasant, and he saw that the number of crashes under each heading was always about the same. It appeared that the crashes were about fifty percent Pleasant and fifty percent Painful. And furthermore, it became clear that he had never been able to plan or design any crash in advance to make sure it was pleasant. The whole thing made no sense at all.

Finally, after totalling up four hundred and eighty-nine crashes, of which two hundred and forty-three were Pleasant and two hundred and forty-six were Painful, he decided to get out of the way of any more crashes. He was going to stop crashing. Still, he calculated that he had three Pleasant crashes owed to him. Chance would play it that way. But it was too bad. He could endure no more crashes. He was even going to let those three more Pleasant crashes hang suspended out there in space, or wherever they were.

So he stepped aside and went a long ways away from any crashes. With a good stock of provisions, he travelled up into the Rocky Mountains. After several days of

wandering among the pines and the rocks, he found a small cave with a gushing spring nearby. He had not seen anyone since he had begun the trek, so he felt the place was a likely safeguard against unwanted crashes.

It was there in the cave that he began to devise the Master Plan. But it took a while. For a long time, he had to let all the recollections of past things run their course. He sat at the mouth of the cave and stared out into the valley, as all the events of the past ran through his brain like small unedited film clippings, flipping through the reels of his gray matter. When they had run themselves ragged and the machinery had crumbled and rusted itself into disrepair, he then could begin to figure out how to deal with all that confusion back there in that great city full of crashing.

The aspens clacked around him, the pines swished and the brilliant red spears of Indian paintbrush shot their way above the grass of the meadows. The clear cold water of the spring splashed down through the rocks of the ravine. And the small white puffs of cloud drifted past the gray and jagged peaks that were slanted against the sky.

First he had to think of a destination, a place where he hoped to finally arrive. A place where all strains were satisfying and comfortable.

After mulling for a time, watching the sky and the

mountains, he thought that he wished to finally arrive at some place much like that weary and old, but comfortable place called Heaven. There must be a place where there is Peace and Serenity. Whether he got there now or later wasn't of much concern to him. Just so it happened eventually and stayed that way for a while.

The clouds wafted across the sky above him, shredding quietly outward and folding together again as they moved. Their soft billowing outward into mounds of gentle smoothness, rounded peaks and rolling hazy valleys does sometimes resemble the flesh of woman. To be in the clouds, resting in the hazy mounds, enjoying the company of a few good friends, listening to music roll across them in fine waves, arranging their organs inside so they seem shapeless and quiet, and stimulating their minds to make them buzz lightly sending quiet shivers down through the relaxed framework of their bodies. That seemed the way of it. There would be the chance for Joy, Peace and Serenity.

But the problem was: How to get there? It looked as if he would need to control a lot of things to do it. He could not simply vaporize himself, or mysticize himself into nothing. He didn't know how to do that, and he had never seen anyone do it either. That was all speculation. He knew nothing of spiritual beings or ghosts. Nothing mystical had ever happened to him. From what he could see and discern from the world around him, everything was all

objects and space, people and things spread out and stuck in their places in relation to one another. There could be no spiritual leap outward toward Heaven, at least without leaving all kinds of things behind, especially without leaving his body behind. And that would be intolerable. He liked his body.

Besides, looking hard, he could almost see Heaven right from where he was sitting. It had to be somewhere just beyond those gray peaks and gently folding clouds. All he would have to do is move himself across that space, gathering together all those things he wished to keep and take off. What he needed was something that would move him through space to get there. What he needed was something that would shoot across the valley through the air, off above the peaks and into the clouds. He needed an airplane or a rocket.

But not knowing exactly where Heaven was presented him with a problem. Finally, the only thing he had to go on was the old fifty-fifty rule about Crashes. He envisioned the plane ride off to Heaven as another kind of crash, but only as a much more conclusive one. It mattered much more than the previous four hundred and eighty-nine crashes. But he still saw it as a collision. So he figured he had a fifty percent chance of getting there. And a fifty percent chance of getting Nowhere, or maybe Hell, or whatever was at the opposite end from Heaven.

Still, that was enough.

A fifty percent chance of getting there sounded pretty good. Besides, he still had three Pleasant crashes coming up, allotted him by Fate, so maybe the balance would tilt in his favor. Anyway, taking the chance had to be better than the old system of hundreds of little crashes that only ended up cancelling each other out into an endless gray oatmeal of emotions. That seemed useless. And besides, he felt bruised.

The next problem was to figure out how to get an airplane or a rocket. If he was going to apply the fifty-fifty rule, the plane's flight pattern would have to be an unknown. It would have to depend entirely on chance. Everything would have to be up to Fate in this flight. And the only way to ensure that was to get a plane without controls. Then the good old fifty-fifty rule could work its way into the Plan.

But where does one find a plane without controls? The Civil Aeronautics Board would have never approved a plane like that for flight. And rockets were much harder to come by. Besides, as a matter of his personal choice, a rocket would have blasted across things much too violently. Everything would have turned into one roaring blur. He wanted to be able to see where he was going if he had no choice in the matter. The end is not the only thing. Getting there meant something too. A good old

propeller-driven plane would have allowed him to look around and enjoy the scenery as he travelled outward to wherever he was going.

One day, as he paced among the rocks and twisted trees near timberline looking out at the ranges of peaks and wondering over how he could get such a plane, he stumbled across a ragged, stiff and gray bush pushing itself up from between the rocks. It looked something like a sagebrush plant with its rugged squatness and crumbly gray bark, but its dusty lobe-shaped leaves were a washed-out gray rather than the pale blue-green of sagebrush. It caught his attention and held it. It was an unusual plant. Its strange neutrality of gray was set off by the various colorings of lichen growing on the surrounding rocks. There was the white of salt. The speckled black of pepper. And sprinklings of rusty paprika.

Its flaccid leaves with their gray cast resembled the folds and lumps of the human brain. The plant looked cerebral and intelligent in its own right as if it knew exactly what it was doing growing there in those chunks of rough granite.

The sun slanted across the rocks, pushing lumpy shadows along the sides of the mountain. On the rock behind the plant, some geometrically-shaped shadows gradually appeared. He hunched down in a squat to take a

closer look.

The pattern of the shadows on the rock appeared to be a sort of fat X. The lines of the X were large and were ragged on the outside edges. Each line was about the length of a finger. In the center of the X was a small oval standing up, about the size of a large eye. He had seen nothing like it before, even though it was such a plain symbol. It must have been some kind of Ute Indian design. It was too geometric to be accidental. The Utes were the only ones around here before the white people passed this way. And they may have attached some religious significance to this plant. If that was true, the plant would have been at least one hundred years old. And that was possible. Things take a long time to grow at timberline. There is a lot to fight against.

It was then that he noticed something strange happening inside his eyes and in the shell of his chest. A gray fuzzy ring began moving in on his periphal vision. At the far corners of his sight, light fingers of gray began encroaching. At first, he spun around thinking something was behind him. But the ring of fuzz moved with him. So he figured it was inside his head. At the same time, a washing of pleasure welled up from within his bowels. It was a feeling of contentment mixed with longing. It was as if the next move he made would shatter apart all the endless longings of his soul and replace everything

with a finalized contentment. One more simple step and things would fall in place easily and neatly, the pleasure spreading out into the solidness of his ribs. The gray fingers of fuzz grew outward, creeping further from the corners of his eyes, covering about a third of his vision. But he held it for a moment, letting the tingling grow out through his limbs, waiting before he made another move. It was very good. Just one more step.

Resting softly inside the folds of the leaves, some gray egg-shaped berries grew from the ends of the branches. With his fingers, he reached down and lifted one berry up from its nest in the leaves and took a whiff. Rapidly, the gray fuzz folded over his eyes, closing everything off. He dropped the berry and scrambled off over the rocks blindly.

For some time he sat still. The breezes washed across him. The air was full of the smell of pine. At one time, the breeze suddenly struck cold. The sun must have gone down behind the peaks. Lightning crashed around him, but no rain fell. Even though a great empty gray field covered everything in front of him, he felt content. He leaned back, relaxing. It didn't bother him too much that he couldn't see. He felt good. It was as if there were large silky pillows propped up around him, and on the inside, all was muted and softened by cotton.

Later, as dusk moved the sky from violet to lavender, the gray field began to evaporate, pulling itself back

from in front of him and receding into his head. Length and distance widened out ahead of him clear away to the peaks and sky.

He walked down to the cave and slept.

2

In the morning he scraped himself up from the rocks on the floor of the cave. He thought it would be good to sleep again on a mattress. Sleeping on rocks was almost as painful as the bruising from crashes. But he did begin to feel a desire to get back to civilization. He wanted to be able to press a button and watch his blender swirl into action. And he wanted to be able to sip on the fruity foam of a daquiri. But then there were still those crashes out there.

As he chewed on his breakfast of lunch meat and bread, he began to think that maybe he had a way to control things. Maybe the magic of the plant would give him the power to control the crashes. It had the right properties.

If anyone was about to crash into him, he could control the range of their vision. They would be less susceptible to exterior influence. With the power of the plant, if he could learn how much to apply, he could control how much he wanted them to see. And with their range of vision closed off, he could move their muscles the way he wanted them to move. And at the same time, he would be able to control their level of contentment. It was simply a matter of dosage. Increase dosage and the level of contentment was increased. At least that was how it seemed to happen to him. The more the gray fuzz

covered his eyes, the more strongly the contentment washed up on the inside.

And the longing! That was perfect. With the contentment filling their chests, he would have them under a kind of spell, and they would be waiting for a clue, a signal as to what was happening to them. And then the longing would pull them easily into any action he suggested. And the contentment would cause them to be less wary of any dangers. Their anxiety level would drop and they would flow smoothly into any plan of action thinking that the next step would release the flood of their lifelong longings. They would be fleshy putty in his hands.

At the same time, he thought, he would be doing them all a great service. He would be lowering their stress levels. By giving them a greater degree of contentment, he would be helping them to suffer less from tension, high blood pressure, and heart ailments. Many of them might even quit drinking and they would become models of efficiency in their work. So it was not all for him, his Master Plan and his desire for Pleasant Crashes. It would serve them well too. Besides, he wasn't going to terrorize anyone. Just modify their life styles a little bit. He had no massive Evil goals aching at his heart. He only wanted to make everyone's collisions a little more comfortable, including his own. And get himself to Heaven in the process.

In time, he must still find his way to Heaven. He knew, in reflective moments separated from the immediate joys of discovery, that eventually the work and effort taken in controlling Crashes would become tedious and unexciting. And then, he would yearn for Heaven more strongly, and would need to be able to go soaring off. So, he would plan for that. But now, with the berries, he could go more slowly and carefully about it.

Anyway, right then he grabbed a jar and ran up the hill. He figured that it was the berries that caused the reactions in his head and chest. So he was going to collect a number of them, separate them from the plant and see if they caused the same reaction.

He stopped. He realized he was just going to gray out when he began picking the berries. He needed something to protect himself from the plant so he wouldn't gray out. You see, he began to develop his own terminology up there. He began to call the effect of the plant 'graying out'.

He went back to the cave and looked among the rocks. He poked around inside his pack, but saw nothing of any use, except maybe some gloves. With them he could keep his hands clean of the stuff. But what about his eyes, or nose, or wherever the gray stuff came in? He looked into his sack of garbage. Pulling out a couple plastic produce bags, he studied them. Maybe, he thought, he could pull

them over his head while he picked berries and then he could run away from the plant to breathe at a safe distance. He tried one on and it fit perfectly, even though it was tight and had to stretch out a little to get around his skull.

He walked up the mountain with his gloves, the plastic bags and the jar. Once there, about twenty feet away from the plant, he stretched a plastic bag over his head, pulled on the gloves and went to work.

Occasionally, he dropped the gloves, backed away from the plant, pulled the bag from his head, and gasped. His chest heaved in and out reaching for air.

The method seemed to be working. Sometimes, a tiny rim of gray would appear at the edge of his vision, but it seemed harmless. He felt as if he had control over it. Some contentment and longing seeped into his chest, but it could have been from the excitement of his own future, as well as from the plant. There would have to have been a lot more gray in his eyes to feel that good. He knew that something would come of all this.

Once he had collected a good number of berries, almost filling the jar, he sealed it shut. He left a few berries, hoping that the plant could carry on. Then he went down the ravine toward the cave.

As he walked down, or rather climbed down over the huge boulders, he grasped the jar tightly in his hand

and looked out over the valley below.

The valley rolled away in ridges that ran lengthwise along the valley floor. The ridges made striations of color as light green ran into darker green at the change in ridges. Off beyond, the ridges buckled into towers of rocks and behind, the whole valley floor heaved into the sky with a range of peaks, scattered and torn at the edges. At the moment, he felt one with the strength and power of the peaks. He was majesty in distance and size with them. Soon he could move men as he wished and could rise above them in power. And he would stand before them, whole and one with radiance. Eventually, he could get them to move him beyond those peaks into even the majesty above, shooting off across the valleys and then springing upward with the towers of rock beyond.

Thunderclouds roared above the peaks in huge mushrooms. They rose from behind ballooning outward in gaseous explosions of steam. Great ribbons of clouds curled down and entwined into the thunderheads that billowed higher upward into the sky, rolling into and out of themselves. Below, the thunderous dark breast lowered, squatting itself down on the mountains. Fingers of cloud, solid and smooth, pushed out sideways in wide flat rays. And above, the brilliant white nodes continued to boil upward and outward.

Around the largest mountain, great jagged legs of lightning shot out of the thunderhead. Clouds stretched

across the sky above him, lowering the ceiling of the sky into dark gray, and closing the space of the valley off into itself.

Wisps of gray mist in curling faint arms twisted down the rocky canyons of the peaks mingling into the dirty summer snow. The forest of the valley roared with a wall of wind. The roar grew. Trees around him swayed and tossed their branches.

He moved again, faster, down to the cave. Cold gusts blasted against his face. And they felt heavy with moisture.

When he reached the cave, he sat on the floor and faced outward. The trees whipped and pulled at their roots. A great gray wall was moving across the valley consuming the ridges into its heavy cloak. Thunder rumbled. Then came the whistling sheets of rain and all was buried in the deep gray fog. The rain screamed into the rocks with such force that the water blew back from the rocks into the air swirling in mist.

He sat for days and watched the rain. Sometimes he ate. But mostly he tried to keep dry. The blankets became heavy with moisture. He steamed inside them, shivering. Underneath in between the rocks, slick mud oozed. And the mist kept curling into the mouth of the cave, soaking into him and clinging to the rocks.

The spring gushed from the rocks, almost sprouting

into the air like a plume with ragged edges of silver.

3

He began to fume. He wanted to get underway with his Master Plan, even though he had not formulated it yet. He wasn't able to leave. He couldn't walk through five days of rain.

He sat. Then he thought that perhaps he ought to experiment a bit with the berries. That's what he had intended to do in the first place.

He opened the jar, took a whiff and closed it. The gray leapt out in front of him. These berries were powerful. The gray stood out there in great chunks and was so dense it ground against itself like giant blocks of granite. And he felt awfully good. The contentment warmed out from his bowels in wide reverberations and shot blasts of hot blood into his limbs. He could hear the blankets hissing and steaming around him. The longing had almost been driven into extinction by the strength of contentment, but it was still there, enough to remind him of his desire to begin. Begin What? He couldn't remember. He just wanted to begin. It didn't matter what.

Was it the fog ahead of him? Or was it the giant umbrella of the gray fuzz? It was hard to tell the difference between the two. But since what he was seeing now did not have the edges of a cave around it, he assumed it to be the fuzz. But the next moment it didn't matter.

Contentment washed over all.

Later, he felt the longing grow as the gray eased and became lighter, and he had a desire to go from the cave, to spurt from those rocks and begin the massive cure, enjoy crashes and finally shoot himself off to Heaven. He was warm enough inside to walk through five days of rain. But he couldn't see. So he couldn't have walked at all. But he was perfectly content to just sit there as well, and listen to the rain splatter and the spring gush.

After the gray had vanished, and returned him to the darkness of the night, he realized that he had to figure a way of modifying the experience, and learn how to control and pre-plan for the desired effects. He wanted to be able to predict the level of contentment, the amount of gray and the degree of longing in advance.

While waiting for the rain to subside, he continued to experiment. And he continued to keep himself warm. Each time he sniffed less of the berries until he finally shaved a sliver off of one berry, held it a few inches under his nose and breathed regularly for ten seconds. That did what he was hoping for. He could look out at the valley and the blue sky with his vision only halfway hemmed-in by the gray fuzz. The contentment and longing spectrums were at a perfect balance. They met and held each other in a kind of suspension, each pulling solidly

at the opposite end of the rope between them.

Blue sky? He looked again to the sky. It was blue. Sometime during his experimentation, the sky must have loosened up. There was no more rain.

He gathered his camping equipment and the berries and packed them up, feeling all the way inside that it was time. The next step would do it. He stuffed his pack full, swung it to his back, and walked toward the city.

As he travelled through the pines slowly and with a smug confidence, he began developing his Master Plan. It grew through the days as he wandered.

He began to think it foolish to attack a big trembling American city with his Plan and his little jar of berries. That would be an awful lot of crashes to control. So he thought that a small isolated town would work much better. A tiny old Western mining town would seem to be the kind of place that would work very well. The people would be out of contact with things. So, less complexity. And less static interference. And they were usually considered to be freindly. Suspicious perhaps, but that could be overcome. And if they were isolated, he could control things to make sure there were no problems that could direct attention to the town from outsiders. Certainly they would be willing to work with all the mines collapsing the way they were and their economies ruined. They would be glad to build his airplane and its take-off

apparatus. They needed money. And they would have just enough technical expertise to build it with their experience in mineral engineering. At least in a crude sense. And that would be the finest way. Then the fifty-fifty rule about crashes could fit into it that much more neatly. The greater the crudeness, the greater the complexity of variables. And the greater the variables, the greater the laws of chance and Fate. And the closer to fifty-fifty we come.

He also thought it would be a good idea to make sure the town had a surrounding agricultural economy. That way, it could support itself, if necessary. It was to be as self-sufficient as possible. Then he could close them off entirely if need be.

So while crunching his feet on the pine needles and stepping over occasional fallen logs, he decided to go west and find himself a small isolated mining community in an agricultural valley.

But first, he had to do a little testing.

4

When he got home, the first thing he did was open a package of daquiri mix and pour it in the blender along with some water and rum. And a few chunks of ice. Then he punched the button and watched it all swirl into foam and slivers of ice. He poured himself a big glassful, walked into the shower and shot himself through with wiry blasts of hot water for almost an hour. Until it began turning cold.

Next, he decided to try graying out one of his friends to see how it would work on somebody else. If it was someone he knew, he could watch how they changed under the effect of the berries, how they deviated from their normal behavior. If things got out of hand, he could explain it if need be, or leave town very quickly. It wouldn't matter much, he reasoned, because if he ever saw them again it would be in Heaven, and there they wouldn't care about it much anymore.

So he went to see his old buddy, Bill, the crazy engineer and radio nut. Bill was always bent a little sideways anyway, everyone thinking that he was just a little too friendly. He would be something like the people of the town he planned to go to. A slightly twisted fellow with some knowledge about technical things. He often gave out a dry-lipped smile with his teeth cracked.

Meetings with him were hardly any kind of crash at all. In fact, they were hardly even meetings. His mind was busy with things other than people. He was thinking of wires and bleeps. But that was good. He wasn't ready for any major crashes yet.

He sliced another sliver from a berry and wedged it under his index fingernail. He could then wave the sliver around without any suspicion, aiming for the bottom of Bill's nose.

Bill answered the door, grinning abstractly like he does. The light above the door made two yellow pools of reflection in his glasses. With his eyes hidden, the smooth wrinkle of his smile folding outward, and the nameless expanse of his forehead sweeping up and back, he looked bare, even more bare than when he has his eyes. He always seemed naked, even when he had lots of clothes on.

"Hi, Bill," he said.

"Hey, Willard, where've you been? How you doing? Come in." Bill backed off, and the pools of yellow narrowed away until his black eyes appeared inside the rims of his glasses.

Willard followed Bill into his long and narrow cinder block basement apartment. He didn't want to talk too quickly for fear that he might betray his inner excitement. He wanted to act his normal semi-despondent self.

"Well, Willard. Can I get you a beer?"

"Sure. Sure, thanks."

Along one wall was a long and heavy workbench covered with tubes and wires and control panels. Tools were scattered among the parts. Clearly, Bill was in the middle of a large project, as he often was.

Bill came back in the room and handed Willard one of the beers. "See my new radio?"

"Where is it?"

"There." His hand swept along the length of the workbench. All Willard could see was scattered pieces, tubes and wires.

"Oh. It isn't finished."

"Well, almost. It's going to be fantastic." Bill leaned into Willard's face. "I'll be able to make calls all over the world. Do you realize that?"

"No, I didn't. That really is something. When you going to finish it?"

"Soon, soon." He sat down at his bench on the stool. "I'm having a little trouble. I can't get some of the pieces to fit together without reshaping them. And that is a task. It's a cheap kit, but they say if you can get it together, it works well." He picked up a tiny flat chip and frowned over it, and then he looked up at Willard still frowning.

"Hey, Willard, where have you been? People have been wondering."

"Oh. I went camping up in the mountains."

"For a month? And not telling anybody? That's a bit strange, you know."

"A month? I didn't know it was a month."

"Yeah, Willard. It was a month."

"Hmm. Well, I had to do it. I was going somewhat frantic in this city."

"That's what I thought too. I thought you did go off your hinges, you turdface."

"Yeah, okay, Bill. Hey, who were the people wondering about me?"

"Uh. Me." He held up one finger. "The guys down at Herb's Restaurant." He flipped out another finger, and then dropped his hand to his thigh. "Hey, Willard, how come you put me down as your nearest relative? When you didn't show up at work, they called me."

"Oh. That's because you, buddy," and I pointed my index finger under his nose, "are my nearest relative. This is the safest place I know of." And it was. It was comfortable for Willard inside those cinder blocks.

"That's nice, Willard." Bill took a big guzzle from his beer, snapping the aluminum can like one of those toy metal crickets. Then he popped around, his glasses flashing and his neck stretching as he tried to swallow quickly. He held out three fingers. "And the police."

"The Police! What about the police?"

"They were asking about you."

"The police? Christ! What did the police want?"

"They wanted to know where you were."

"Why? I haven't broken any laws."

"No, no, not that. You are a Missing Person. The guys down at Herb's called you in as a missing person."

"I am a Missing Person. That's a new concept."

Willard cocked his head to the side and looked off to the ceiling. And he mulled over that a moment as he drank.

"Yeah, I think I like that, Bill."

"Well, that's okay. Just don't get me involved in it. Right here in my house, nothing else is my fault. And I want to keep it that way. Everything is fine in here. And I do not care to have anything to do with Missing or Non-missing Persons. It's just me and my radio. You can do what you want." He was twisting around in his chair like he often did when confronted with anything to do with human society, human civilization, human beings, or human meat. "You can be Missing or Non-missing or whatever you want. Just so that here in my place, the food in the refrigerator is still there and just so that the blankets stay right there on my bed like they always have done. Other than that it really doesn't matter. I don't care. To me, you don't have anything to do with Missing or Non-missing. You are Willard." And he punctuated that by pointing into Willard's chest. And

he flopped back in his seat, limp. "Willard." He stared forward.

Willard leaned over to him, put one hand on his shoulder, and waved his index finger under Bill's nose. "It's okay. Everything is fine. And you are right. If anybody asks you where Willard is, that is exactly what you do. Just say 'Willard' a few times and stare like that. You are exactly right."

Willard didn't have any idea what he was doing. He wanted to sound certain. And it felt like his voice came out in square organized metal boxes, arranged perfectly in a straight line. And then, inside, he began to feel certain.

Bill nodded slowly, gazing ahead at the wall of cinder blocks.

Something else was bothering him, though. He wanted to get some information out of Bill before he didn't care any more. "Listen, Bill. Have you heard anything from Bernie? Did she ask about me?"

His head shot back, his neck folding over the back of his chair. And he let out a great roar of laughter. "Bernie?" He looked at me with astonishment, then shot back again and laughed with moisture and a wide open mouth. It wasn't like Bill.

"No, she didn't ask about you. She didn't mention a word about you. What did you think? What do you expect?"

He was smiling right into Willard's face.

A prickling ran up his neck. And it was hot for Willard as if suddenly all the sweat inside him wanted to boil out at once. This whole thing was beginning to act like a Crash. A Painful Crash. What was going on? Things were getting much too real, much too with him, just like the city out there with its honking and sirens, shrieking by him out on the street with a rush of rubber and air. Criminals. Criminals and Missing Persons. Crashes and lights.

Bill looked into his face. His eyes were wide toward Willard. "Bernie didn't ask about you. And you know perfectly well that she wasn't going to. How many times have I told you that she is so stupid that she wouldn't think of it. It's not that she doesn't care. It's just that she doesn't think. Don't you know that yet? You have to beat with a hammer. Beat!" He slammed his fist into the workbench with each beat. "Beat. Beat. Beat! Then, once it's stuck, she will think of it. She will ask. But now, as I have told you one hundred times, she will not. And she did not." As Willard looked into his face, Bill's irises rippled and wavered in and out on his pupils. "And I have told you. And I tell you once again."

"Okay." Okay. Willard was solid as concrete. Yes, that is it. It is again a crash. A crash where he did

not expect one. And this is being a Missing Person. The Crashing of a Missing Person right there inside his head, inside Bill's cinder block apartment. "Thanks. Thanks, Bill. You are my God's Father. And I love you. And don't forget. This is Willard here. Willard." He often reacted to Painful Crashes in this way. It was easier. And he would do his best to wipe Bernie from his mind. To Hell with her.

Willard stood up and went to the bathroom. He remembered thinking in there that things seemed upside down. He had expected things to slide as smoothly as ice skates. He had thought that all would be cake here. He had never been confronted by anything in this place. But now suddenly, he was. And it was a heavy crash in the haven of peace. It had not been Bill's crash. It was Willard's, inside him. Bill had made certain of that. He would have none of it. Willard never understood how Bill dealt with his internal private aching, though. Maybe it didn't happen inside him. Maybe he never ached for crashing. At any rate, this was Willard's own crash, a private personal one. Bernie didn't know he was crashing with her. It happened inside him. His heart had crashed into his liver. And that was all his own. And yet, he had made it through that. What more could happen? Not much. The worst had happened. And that wasn't much.

He still hadn't managed to hold his finger under

Bill's nose for more than four seconds, all together. He knew he would have to do better than that. Up to now he hadn't really tried. Well, this would be the time. Enough of this sputtering around in organic crashes. Now he was going to get down to work.

When he came out, he saw Bill working over his bench, sorting out parts. He sat next to Bill on the stool so he was just above him. He pointed with his index finger to a piece that was just under Bill's nose.

"What's that thing?"

"That's a diode."

"And this?" Willard kept his finger moving around under Bill's nose.

"Oh, that's a resistor. You see, all these little colored rings are like cushions that regulate the amount of electricity that goes into a certain place. They hold the energy down."

"And this?"

"That's a switch. It automatically switches the current from one circuit to another." Suddenly, he twisted his head around to look behind him. Then he flipped clear around again to look over his other shoulder. "That's funny. I thought something was coming up from behind me. Yeah, the switch. Hmm." He was mumbling to himself and playing with the switch in his fingers. "The switch! That's it. Ah, yes. I have got it. Things are sorting

themselves out. All I have to do is put the switch right in here." He leaned over and stuck the switch inside a small metal box. "Oh, beautiful. Well, it's going to work out." He leaned back in his chair. "That feels good."

A slightly perplexed look came to his face. "That's funny." He shook his head. Then he looked at me. "It feels like there is some fuzz in my eyes. It's kind of furry in there. But it's really okay, Willard. I think things are fine." A little smile grew there under his nose. "But it is a little strange."

"Maybe," Willard said, "it's because you've been working so long on this and it is beginning to affect you."

"Yeah, that's it." He smiled harder, looking at me, and then he bent over his tubes and wires. "Oh fantastic. Just a little more work here and things will be all set." As he hunched over, his eyes, only a few inches from his equipment, were jolting around, his irises wavering. His arms and fingers were moving rapidly among the tangled circuitry, tools glistening as they whipped around.

Willard then decided to test his wariness index. Lifting up his can of beer, he poured a small puddle out on Bill's workbench a few inches from where he was working.

No reaction. He didn't change his actions.

Then he poured some on his pants in the center of

his thigh. It foamed and dribbled over the edge of his leg and splashed on the floor.

Bill stopped momentarily in his work and said, "It's cool." He didn't look up. Then the tools began working again and wires snapped.

"What?" Willard asked, bending down to him.

"It's cool."

"What's cool?"

"Aah. It's cool." He hummed a little. "And it's warm. Very warm. Cool and warm. Good." He popped a piece into place and chuckled.

Willard stood up, leaving Bill to his wires, walked into his bedroom and pulled an old gray work shirt out of his closet. Willard draped the shirt over his head and walked, looking out through a heavy gauze of gray, back to Bill at his workbench.

"Hey, Bill," he said, talking from underneath the shirt.

Bill looked up, his eyes dialating and tightening.

"Bill, if anyone asks you about Willard, what are you going to do?"

He turned back and leaned over his equipment and stared at it. He mumbled, "Willard."

"Willard?" Willard tried again.

"Willard." He mumbled, slowly and with drowsy lips.

"Okay. Goodbye, Bill." Willard stood up, patting Bill on the shoulder.

"Goodbye." He picked up a piece and began working. "Ah, a transistor. It needs to go right along this line. Here. Hah!" His head rocked around on his shoulders as he grinned smugly.

Willard pulled the sliver from under his fingernail and slid it through one of the tiny holes in the mouth of the radio's microphone, or what would soon become the radio's microphone.

He walked out of the front door, turning around once more to watch Bill. He was hunched over his boxy pile of silver, his eyes glued, and his fingers rapidly squirming around and among each other.

5

Willard was pleased with the results of his first test. He walked home in the evening drizzle with fluid steps into the soft rain and it felt as if things were going to work well indeed. His head floated evenly through the air as he strolled down the sidewalk, the cars sizzling by against the wet pavement. What was one insignificant Bernie, when one could wrap his hands around a whole world?

Bernie was only one flashback into the world of confusion, the world of lost Painful and Pleasant Crashes. What was one Bernie, when there is a whole world full of them? And anyway, he had higher concerns. He was out to build Pleasant Crashes and move his way out to Heaven. He knew he must work at that.

Above, the light of the street lamps showed wide hazy circles of rolling gray clouds eerily close to the earth. The sky was low and close as if it were the ceiling of an auditorium just above the lights. But it was rolling along and raggedly twisting.

A half block ahead of him, traversing his path, a slight woman walked across the street. Her black shiny raincoat glistened from the lights as she moved, her legs snapping with a keen light arch on each step. There was something circular about her movements, even though she

was thin and balanced upward, gravity reversed. Her fluid ran into him and grew inside him. It set his lesser longings in motion again.

They churned inside him. And his belly ached. He wanted to reach across that gap between them, dive in and move. He wanted to Crash. Hard.

But he could not move, and did not, knowing that he would always yearn on, driven by that churning. And then he remembered why it was that he wished to shoot off to Heaven. There, he felt, if he could satisfy the large longings, the lesser ones would disappear.

Sometimes he had felt the slope of his head reach and widen into something far beyond itself. And at those moments, the lesser longings dissipated away into vaporous ghosts dancing in the daylight without size or shape. And the beam shooting upward bolted like lightning as solid as granite, yet still flashing outwards from his brain, widening, carrying all his flesh into a range of electricity way above the dancing ghosts and the swaying trees. So he thought all things were centered there and above in a vibrant solid arc, a path to Heaven, a way to power and majesty.

But those thoughts dissipated from him now as he watched the ballooning spheres smooth out creases and seem to stretch the black plastic around with rhythm of shape.

He had thought before about using the power of the

berry to gain advantage over women when the impulse to crawl in flesh had driven itself into his groin. There had always been something a little perverted to him about using sly tactics in a thing so sacred and universal as love. But then again, the widening and the flashing of the arc told him it was only flesh. And besides, there was the smooth white glistening of the black raincoat as it moved, filling out in places with the lightness of liquid flesh. His lesser longings roared. They drove him past any qualms he still had.

He went home, where he sliced a couple more slivers off a berry and stuck one under each index fingernail. Then he headed out the door and walked his way through the drizzle to a bar. The heat of the woman in the black raincoat drove him on. Perhaps she had gone to the bar, he hoped. But he knew that she had not even gone in that direction.

He walked into the close darkness of the bar. Spots of dim light illumined gatherings of people chatting to each other, some gesturing wildly and laughing, others close to each other talking quietly with only slight nods and turns. Electric guitars wailed out with the thumping of drums and the clinking of a piano over the air above the voices.

He sat down at the bar to listen and look around as slyly as he could. He did much of his looking through the

mirror behind the bar, not to be foolishly gaping around.

Back in the corner, two girls sat alone and chatted with each other, occasionally running into periods of silence, when they then looked casually around at the people in the bar. Both were fairly good looking, but not too good looking. He thought he might have a chance with them. But it was in doubt. Normally, it took him a while to worm his way into the attention of attractive women. It also often took some painful Crashes.

He watched them. One woman with dark short hair had a cute round face that suddenly approached the edges of bland when the corners of her smile dropped. The other, a big ash-blonde, had a slightly outward slanting chin that made her face seem larger than it was, but her big eyes filled much of the space. Her hair curled inward slightly around her neck, giving her a very clean and trusting appearance.

The girl with dark hair stood up and bobbed away into the restroom.

He thought now was his chance, if any time was. He walked over to the table and stood there in front of her. And she looked up at him, fairly blankly, neither accepting nor rejecting.

Before she looked away, he spoke. "Hi. Can I sit down for a minute?"

She looked down, and quickly threw a tired look over

her face, as if this happened all the time. "Sure."

As he sat, she turned to look in her purse for something, avoiding, it seemed, looking at him. So he waited a moment, fiddling with his drink.

She kept poking around in her purse, so finally he spoke again. "Hey, have you ever had one of these?"

She looked up. "What?"

"These kind of drinks." He held it toward her so she could see it.

"I don't know. What is it?"

"It's a Velvet Hammer. Here, have a taste." He held the glass near her face, hoping that the berry slivers under his fingernails would begin to do their work. But she recoiled a little bit.

"Well, what's it got in it?"

"Vodka, Kahlua, and cream."

"Sounds like it would do a real job on somebody. What are you trying to do?"

"Nothing. Just enjoy myself."

She smelled the glass. "Smells good. I bet it tastes good too."

"It does. Have a taste."

She took the glass from his hand. And took a short sip. He held his finger out there.

She handed it back. "Yeah. It tastes pretty good. I wouldn't get excited about it."

He stuck it back towards her face. He also had to make sure he didn't keep his hands too near his own face. And that was hard. "Here, have some more."

"Listen, buster. What are you trying to do? Drug me or something?"

"No, no. Sorry. Just trying to be friendly."

"Well, take your drink out of my face, will you?"

"Oh, okay." He put it down. "I'm just an ordinary guy trying to talk to someone who looks interesting enough to talk to."

"Well, don't get pushy." And she started rummaging through her purse again.

He looked away and forced his attention around to the rest of the bar. He knew this was a failure. But if he could somehow get the berries working on her, it would be a real test. Besides, she was intriguing; she had spunk. Yet, that could mean endless bad crashing if he didn't watch it.

Then she said, "How can you tell by looking at someone that they are interesting to talk to?" Suddenly she looked interested.

He stuck his finger under her nose in a pointing motion. Very soon the berry should begin to do its work on her, he figured. "Ah. Well look at that finely sloping crease draping down from under your nose lent grace by the soft ridges that slowly curl outward as they move down

toward your lips. It is a sharp movement, but it is softened by the transparent tone of your flesh and the haze of white down resting lightly above all the gentle folding and pointing."

She smiled a little. "Do you like my blouse? I just bought it today."

"Hmm. Let me see."

She moved a bit back and turned around.

He watched as her blouse creased and folded over her breasts as she twisted back and forth.

Then he reached his hand over under her chin to feel the material of her blouse. "It feels good," he said.

"Well, how does it look? Do you like it?"

"I don't think it matters." He thought for sure by this time she would be under the spell of the berry. He was going to direct her attention to her own flesh and watch her push it around herself. "It doesn't matter at all."

"It doesn't matter?"

"Yes. Because it is what is underneath that matters. And that looks good to me. I like it."

She looked away. And she began to organize her purse.

He needed to get her interest back before she slipped into the contentment-longing cycle. "Here, have another drink."

Just that moment, her friend came out of the restroom. She smiled at him, a little guardedly as she approached the table, and then glanced to her friend. The blandness rushed back to her face as her smile dropped.

The blonde girl stood up. She threw her coat to her friend. "Barb, come on. Let's get out of here. This dude is trying to drug me or something. I don't know what he's doing, but I don't like it. Let's go."

"Hey, sorry. Listen, I wasn't ----" but they were gone, stomping down the aisle and out the door rustling their coats. He fiddled with his glass. He had held his finger under her nose for at least twenty seconds all together. It must not have worked. He played with his drink, afraid to look up around the bar for fear that people would be staring curiously at him. He didn't need to feel any more embarrassed than he was.

But the noise continued. The chatter and laughter rolled around the room. The music thumped through the floor. The bartender was mixing drinks and the cocktail waitresses were roaming about the room and bending forward, gathering glasses and money.

He sat for a while, beginning to look around freely.

Legs of black nylon approached.

"Can I get you another drink?"

"No thanks. Not now, anyway."

"Are you through with these glasses?" She gestured toward the three glasses left on the table.

"Yes."

She cleaned the table. And walked away, the nylon black and swishing.

He certainly had not expected a bad crash then. But then maybe the slice of berry under his finger was a very weak one. Whatever it was that produced the effect might not be spread around evenly throughout a berry. He didn't want to try it out on himself, because he wanted to be aware of what was going on. So finally he pulled the extra sliver he brought along from under the other fingernail and tucked them both under the same fingernail.

But then he didn't think he was ready for another crash. Maybe he should just go home and sleep, and try testing another time. So he stood up, threw his coat over his shoulder and began to walk through the bar.

Suddenly just ahead of him, a figure spun around from the bar and faced him.

"You blew it, didn't you?" She looked at him. She was dressed in ivory, a long pleated dress, almost as long as her shortness. Her voice sounded too husky for the child-like roundness of her face. Somehow it didn't quite match. And there was a small round nose that barely held up the two black circles of her sunglasses. Her light dust-golden hair hung straight and draped over her

strong and solid, yet smooth shoulders. She spoke again, her head dipping. "I heard the big one muttering something about drugs as she walked by."

He sat down on the stool next to her. "They thought, or one of them thought I was trying to drug her. All I was doing was trying to be friendly and make conversation. People are awfully suspicious these days."

The bartender asked if he wanted something to drink. He ordered a beer.

"Well, with all the crazies running around all over the place, what do you expect?" She lit a cigarette. "You know, there are a lot of lunatics running around. And there's no way of telling who is insane or not."

"Then why did you start talking to me?"

"Because my curiosity outruns my fear, I guess. And somehow, by the movements of your facial muscles, I can tell that maybe you are somewhere between."

"Between what?"

"Sane and insane."

He took a swig of beer and looked into the mirror behind the bar. "Yeah, maybe so."

Then he turned and looked at her. She appeared to be studying him from behind her black glossy shields. Her cheekbones were round and smooth under her glasses, but they slanted downward as they curved around the side of her face. It gave her a bit of a sad look. And it looked

as if the slanting cheekbones would soon make her look older than she was.

He casually threw his index finger out under her nose. "Well, you seem to be intelligent enough. Awfully much so for someone who looks like you. What do you do? I mean, how do you keep yourself on the track?"

"I don't try."

"You don't try?"

"No, I don't even try. I just go along and if I'm on the track that's okay. If I'm not, that's okay too. I don't worry about it, or even think about it. And so far, things seem to stay on the track anyway."

He let my fingers curl a bit, but kept them close under her nose. "Well, what is the track?"

"I don't know. I don't even think about that. Look, don't worry about it. Your only problem is that you worry too much."

"Well, if you ever hear of a good way to make this mess in here in my skull stop roaring around, you just let me know." He pointed again at her. She didn't seem to think anything of my hand always close to her face. "You know of any good plan?"

"Stop."

He instinctively pulled his hand back.

"Stop. Stop what?"

"Stop whatever you are doing. Turn to other things."

Don't have a plan. Plans always turn into mush. Here I'll show you. Watch." She became metal-backed and serious as her lips stiffened. Then she reached into her purse and pulled out a long hat pin with a white pearly ball at the end. Shaking the pin in her hand tightly enough that the fingers whitened over her bones, she said, "This...This is a plan. Looks real nice, doesn't it?" Then she poked the leather bar railing with her finger. "This is human skin. This is a real human being. And you take your plan right here and apply it." She swung her fist down, punching the pin in the leather, and drove it in clear up to its head until it was just a pea-size pearl sitting on the black leather. "There. Beautiful! The plan worked, didn't it? Well, now what? That human being down there with the plan stuck in him might not like it though. He might want to take it out, because it hurts. He may get mad enough to pull it out, and maybe, he'll even throw it back." Her jaws snapped out each word. "Or, if you insist on your plan, you can keep pushing on the pin, and you can twist it around." She pushed on the pearl and then turned it around inside the leather. The leather began caving in, making a dimple around the pin. "There. Now, we've made it stuck. We've managed to turn the muscles into mush. See, it works. All that will happen now is that the mush will infest itself, infecting into a gray porridge spitting out pus.

And there we are. That is the progress of plans. It feels very good at first, but then it turns to mush and finally spits back in hideous yellow-green globs."

He bent over the bar and leaned his chin into his palm. She lit a cigarette and a wisp of smoke drew across his eyes in wide slow circles. Something was hurting his elbow.

"Anyhow, that's how I see it. So I don't make plans and I don't worry myself about it. And that's what I think you should do too. Then all you've got to worry about is whether your clothes are clean and your teeth are brushed."

She stopped, and looked away to the line of bottles behind the bar. She turned back halfway, the black spheres slanting away, and asked, "Do you want another beer? Look, you aren't dead; nobody killed you."

His elbow hurt. He lifted it up from the railing. It had been resting on top of the pearl that was not sitting at the bottom of a deep dimple, gulleyed out.

"Uh, yes. Yes, I'd like another beer." He reached over to her glass and spoke out to the bartender. "I'd like another beer and could you get her whatever it was she was drinking?"

She said, "Thanks. And who are you?"

"What?" In a kind of daze, he continued to hold his hand on her empty glass. "Oh, me?"

"Yeah, you." She poked a kick into his calf with her shoe. "The fellow sitting right there in that stool."

"Yeah yeah, I know, I know. My name's Doug."

The bartender brought some drinks, and took the old glasses away. He kept his hand over there, limp and curved around where the glass used to be.

"And what do you do?"

"I'm about to leave the city. Maybe it's because too many plans are poking into me. But I want to get away and go to a little town in the mountains and hide."

"Sounds nice. Where are you going to go?"

"I don't know yet. Haven't made up my mind."

She seemed suddenly to grow in friendliness, gazing at him wistfully.

"Here, you want a drink?" He held her glass up.

"Oh. Yes." She sipped at her drink with a content little smile rising on her face. "Oh, this drink is really good. I wonder what it is." She stared into her glass and her smile rose and fell inexplicably, her cheeks bobbing up and down. "Just one more little sip. Mmm."

He couldn't figure out what was wrong with her. She was mumbling and cooing in her drink, and giggling in small snorts. Then it occurred to him. His hand was still under her nose and the berries were working into her. He drew his hand away. She had probably had enough, the way she was blabbering in her drink.

He looked into her black spheres, searching for her eyes. "Hey, what's your name?" She didn't move. He reached over and pulled her chin around toward him. "Who are you?"

She smiled. "Hi."

"What's your name?"

She weaved a little on the stool. I'm tired."

Perhaps, he thought, alcohol altered or deviated the action of the berries in some way.

She patted her hands around on her face. "These sunglasses are getting stuffy." And then she weaved in greater circles on her stool, grinning. "Hello. Hello."

He felt things could get embarrassing if she wobbled too far, so he grabbed her arm. "Maybe we should leave this place." And he began to stand up, placing himself behind her stool.

"Yes. Yes, yes." She said. And she slid off her stool, and became shorter beside him.

As he reached to grab her purse and raincoat, the bartender leaned toward him and whispered, "Careful, buddy." The bartender tapped his finger against the side of his head. "Intelligence."

Willard signalled an okay sign to him. He didn't know who he thought he was, Willard thought, somewhat indignantly. He knew it was in his own interest to use intelligence and discretion. He didn't need to tell him

that. He felt that was pretty nervy. And that was the kind of thing he hoped to leave behind when he left the city. Bad Crashes.

He slid her raincoat over her and tucked her up in it. She was a little bit chunky and moved solidly on the ground as we walked out into the drizzle. But she was smooth and moved freely inside her skin with its layer of baby fat that oiled things underneath.

She held on to his arm and smiled abstractly in his direction. "I can't see, so I'll have to hang on to you."

Can't see? He guessed that he had overdone it. Two slivers was too much. She was completely grayed out. "Don't worry about a thing," he said. "We are going to a good place. And I have a good hold on you."

"Good. Good, that will be nice."

"How come you can't see?"

"I don't know. It looks like I have big wads of dirty cotton packed in my eyes." She turned up to face him and asked, "Silly, isn't it?" And then she chuckled.

He led her along the sidewalk, the cars swishing alongside them on the wet pavement. She sang with her lightly cracking voice to the tune of a song from the jukebox. It sounded like an old Fats Domino song. And I peered down through that dark hazy tunnel made by the street lights, the trees lined up along the sides of the street, and that low rolling gray fog above.

6

Poor girl. She was so lost in her gray world of contentment and the softness at its edges that she would have enjoyed anything. She laughed and smiled for hours.

No matter what he did, she loved it. She moaned, and she screamed and she laughed.

He would have called it a Pleasant Crash. Everything worked out very well. He was in complete control of her, and whatever he chose to have her concentrate on, she had a good time.

At one time, he gave her an orange. For at least a half an hour, she fumbled and touched, and whiffed with her nose, laughing and moaning most of the time, until finally, with great care and long gushing pauses, she ate it, giggling and spurning out a spray of juice between swallows.

She enjoyed herself and much of the time Willard did too. But something was troubling him. It was that she often hardly seemed as if she were there. Sure, she was laughing and moaning and giggling, but she, what it was that defined her, the way she talked, her forceful kicking, poking and pointed remarks, were gone, submerged behind that packet of flesh that jiggled and laughed. It was as if she had lost herself.

But then, he thought, of course, it was a drug she

was on. She could not be herself. And it didn't matter if she was herself or not. She was having a pleasant time of it. And he was not doing her any harm, just playing. Besides that, it was all for a higher purpose that would yield him great rewards. He had to keep his mind on that and remember that what would have happened otherwise would have only been according to chance, the great fifty-fifty mush of pleasant and painful Crashes. Any deviation from that endless cycle had to be good.

Even if, for others, it produced nothing more than a few moments of gushing pleasure. Even that would bring them something. So he was doing well enough. He had to remember to keep pushing on, not to allow the confusing mass of fifty-fifty crashing to bewilder him.

Along with those reflections on his general progress, he had some other disturbing thoughts. They were images that flashed up into his mind like the flickering of a moth near a single dim lamp.

He thought of the lumps and folds of the human brain, tucked inside the skull, glistening in its strange liquid. He thought of the gray plant pushing its way up out of the timberline rocks with its cerebral folds and knotty limbs. The gray fuzz rose in his mind and vanished. There were, at one moment, the rolling clouds of a low storm, looking as if it were halfway between night and day, although neither dusk nor dawn. There appeared the gray speckled

granite of the peaks, whose texture and color was that of half earth and half heaven. And inside the low simmering of his muscles rose the contentment-longing flux pushing its head out from within, blown outward like a grease gun, and then it washed away.

But still, he felt it was a Pleasant Crash. He had not accomplished all that he wished, but he knew that he had established complete control. He felt well on his way toward implementing his Master Plan. That it had worked as well as it had with both Bill and this girl gave him the confidence and desire to move on with the Plan.

He could now go ahead with the next phase.

But, for the moment, he had to take the girl home. He could not allow her to wake up in the morning, fully aware, and discover who he was. So they had climbed into his old '46 Ford Sedan, and swished along the wet pavement with the other few early morning cars. She had sighed and moaned with each bump and swerve of the car, her head cocked back against the seat, and her hair lying limp against the gray felt.

When he arrived at her house; which took some time, because she had difficulty telling him the directions to where she lived; he dragged her in and tucked her in bed. Then he drove back home and fell asleep.

It was late in the morning, perhaps about eleven, before he woke. Very quickly, without so much as grabbing

a cup of coffee, he packed up everything he needed and threw it in his car. Then he drove out of the city, and up into the mountains, deciding, as he wheeled along, to stop when he saw the place, or when his car broke down, whichever came first.

That way, he could choose the general area he wanted, but the crucial choice of the exact town was left up to the fifty-fifty rule. It would either work, or it wouldn't. That was something he could not fully determine in advance anyway. So he rode along, watching the scenery and listening to the sounds of his car for any imminent signs of collapse. The only thing he heard was an occasional metal flap somewhere in the front end. But that had been there for a long time.

7

Later in the day, as he and the old black Ford careened along a dirt road and thundered over a pine-covered ridge, neither came first. He saw the town, and his car fell apart, almost simultaneously.

Clouds of dust ballooned up from the sides of his car, and the tires shuddered from the bumpy dirt and gravel road. He was pretending he was a race car driver in the movies, fish-tailing around curves and spinning his rear wheels out into wild sprays of gravel and thick dust. Sometimes he would hit a dip and the car would bottom out with a heavy thud and then heave up into the air with its wheels spinning. On landing, the car would again bottom out, crashing and grinding against the rocks. Smiling and gritting his teeth, he made believe someone was chasing him. And he became more frantic, sliding sideways on two wheels and even fishtailing on the straightaways as he began to really believe someone was chasing him. The car crashed around him, all its parts slamming against one another, sometimes in sudden claps of metal.

Until, as he was sliding into a sharp lefthand turn, the right front of his car suddenly dropped forward onto the ground and there was a great rumbling and bumping in roars as the car thudded and spun across the turn to its

far edge. It tilted over the embankment and crunched to a halt on top of a boulder, balancing at an angle.

He jumped out. And he walked around the car and saw that it was hanging over the edge of the road, the rear fender suspended out into space. The right front wheel well was empty, only a wide rusty hole with the surrounding fender lying heavily in the dust. The whole wheel assembly had fallen off. And it was lying flat in the road, right in the middle of the curve. The tire was shredded, its rubber hanging off in large flaps, and the wheel and brake drum were torn and tangled, rods dangling from the center. He lifted it up and rolled it over to the edge of the road near the car. Below, the drop was about twenty feet to the soil. He spun the tire off the embankment and it bounced and slashed off through the bushes, thumping and wobbling through the trees.

He pulled all his clothes, suitcases and cardboard boxes out of the car and threw them into the bushes to hide them until later when he could collect it all.

Then by propping himself between the car and the road and with clenched gasps and straining muscles, he pushed on the left front fender of the car. It groaned and screeched until something snapped underneath and the car drifted sideways over the edge and crushed onto its top in one crumbling thud, trying one feeble roll against the trees, and then settling back to a rest. A few small

rocks clattered down from the bank and clunked against the bottom of the car. And a light dust blew outward into the trees.

Above him on the ridge, he heard the crunching and thumping of tires on gravel. He ducked behind a rock and watched the dust that rose lazily above the trees wind its way down toward him. Peeking over the rock he saw a new model '53 yellow Chrysler with its sparkling teeth turn into the corner, drive slowly and carefully around, then straighten and roll off down the road until it disappeared into the forest. There was a lone girl inside with blonde hair, sunglasses and a cigarette hanging from her mouth. She looked much like the girl in the bar with that round little face. As the car rolled away down the hill, he noticed a black bumper sticker with a couple columns on it. In yellow letters that stood out in blocks, it read: "Visit Williamsburg." Her license plates were bright orange on blue.

After she had long passed and the dust had settled, he climbed out from behind the rock. He needed to find out where he was, so he walked across the road, clambered up the embankment and panted up the hillside to see if he could look out of the woods anywhere. At least he found a rock that poked its way above the trees. He climbed up the rock with some difficulty for he was still wearing his black street shoes. But when he finally reached the top

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he looked out and saw it. There it was.

A long narrow valley spread away between two small forest-covered ridges until it bent away and disappeared into the distant low mountains. Below him, where the valley began, a small town rested, its tiny houses spread out into the trees. In the center of town, a large street was cut away from the forest with a wide beige gash. It was walled with larger buildings, some maybe two stories high. Running along for two blocks, the street then opened into a village green, which was dominated at its far end by a large white church that shot a spire high into the sky above the trees. Behind the church, a circular lake opened the forest with its quiet blue expanse and then the forest closed again around the lake at its far side.

Off beyond the lake and its trees, the valley widened into a flat grassy meadow in a green much lighter than the forests. The meadow was sparsely dotted with houses, barns and trees. A silvery stream looped through the valley in wide arcs that were fringed with the dark green of bushes. The stream, the grass meadows and the forest-covered ridges rolled away into a deep blue haze where the valley bent away into the mountains. One snow-speckled gray peak stood silently and symmetrically with its wide slowly sloping shoulders reaching above those distant mountains, yet it was still further away, beyond them.

Above, a few small wisps of cloud drifted across the valley in the sunlight. A shadow of one cloud moved out onto the lake, a tattered splotch of gray creeping across the blue mirror of the sky.

And so this was the town. This was where he was to stay until the time he roared off to Heaven.

8

For twenty years, he planned and designed, and worked and worked. After the wild spree with the old Ford and after staring out at the valley from the rock, he decided to get down to work. He was going to bring something to fruition, he was determined, and he knew the only way to do it was to organize himself. So he was going to be strict, and tough, and tight.

After much experimentation and calculation, he had decided to grind all the berries into a powder and dilute them with corn starch. He had found that the berries were the most powerful when they were crushed into a dust. It must have had something to do with surface area: the finer the dust, the greater the surface area and the greater the potency. So he ground them all down into a powder. And with the huge supply he had after grinding and dilution--it seemed almost endless, just about filling a fifty-five gallon oil drum--he found he could take his time and calculate each step thoroughly and meticulously before taking any action. It was a pleasure working things out in advance very carefully and then watching events flow out evenly and precisely as planned.

Within five years, he had established himself as an almost absolute monarch over the little town. He had himself elected as mayor, had installed himself as the

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town minister, and was elected sheriff. He called himself the Abbot, figuring that the name would have no former meaning for the citizens. Then the name could come to mean him, their leader, their minister, their mayor and their sheriff, all wrapped up in one, the Abbot. They took to calling him "Abbey" for short, and that was fine with him, because it seemed to give a sense of friendliness to the word, and to his position. He also changed the name of the town to Willardville, although no one except himself knew why. And no one cared much by then. They were busy in their work.

He was beginning to enjoy himself. Almost all Crashes were comfortable and pleasant. He was going to be able to satisfy almost all his desires of greed, power and lust as well as set himself up solidly on the path to Heaven. He had taken over the old white church as his headquarters. Off of each side of the building, he had built two wings, one to house the police department and the town jail, and the other to house the mayor's office and the town hall. He rarely had to use the jail or act as sheriff, except in the case of the occasional outsiders who came to town and riled things up a bit. Our town held no criminals any more. Everyone behaved very well.

He had found that the affect of the berries had lost its potency when the powder was diluted in water. Somehow, a lot of water changed the process that made the

berries work effectively. So he had found that he could not use the most sensible method of distribution, the water system.

To ease the problem of getting the effect of the berries spread around at the right time to everyone who needed it, he had to set up a system of underground pipes that led to every building in town when the system was finally completed. It had been a task running around spreading the powder out by hand. The pipes were much like natural gas lines, running along under the ground in mains and then splitting off into smaller pipes that turned up into the wall of a house into some fairly inconspicuous place where the powder could come spurting out in a quiet dust. After a while everyone quit cleaning their houses and he didn't need to blast so much powder into the pipes. The powder's effect seemed to barely diminish through time, not enough to demand constant spraying.

In the town hall wing of the church he had his controls. Behind the carpeted and panelled office that he had mainly for show in case anyone felt the need to address the mayor, he had a small, secret control room. In there was a shining polished aluminum panel studded with red lights. Underneath each light he had taped the name of a household. When a particular home reached a dangerously low level of powder, an electronic sensor would trigger

the red light that would flash on and then automatically the system would spurt out a little powder through the valve and out into their house. Or he could switch the system over to "manual" and sit at the controls and work the buttons himself. It gave him great pleasure to feel that he was pumping contentment and longing into the homes of families. In the basement, he had installed a large air compressor unit that kept the pressure up in the system. The room downstairs was tightly insulated to disguise the thump-thump-thump of the compressor.

There were only a few problems in the system. Sometimes, a valve would plug itself shut with powder. Then he would have to wander into the house, making some pretense to visit them. Sometimes it would be difficult because they would be coming out of the effect, they would be de-graying, and he would have to use a good deal of tact. He would back up to the valve, lean against the wall, and work with the fingers of one hand behind his back as he nodded and smiled in conversation with them. Sometimes it took only a pin prick, and other times it took a whole new valve assembly.

On one occasion after discovering he had to replace the valve assembly, he screwed the valve off and a great cloud of gray powder blew out into the room. He had forgotten to turn off the pressure to the main. Everyone was almost grayed out into oblivion. He managed to crawl

from the house fighting the massive waves of contentment and grope his way through the deep fog down to the main and twist it off. Since the valves for the main pipes were hidden inside the old mail boxes, it was not too difficult to find. The mail boxes were a convenient place for controls and switches because no one used them any more.

Once he shut off the main, he felt his way back to the house and installed a new valve. Then he got out of there. It took him almost two days to de-gray from that mistake. After his vision finally opened before him, he went back to the house with a gas mask on and cleaned up the piles of powder spread around their livingroom and on the furniture. He even had to vacuum it off some of the members of the family who were lying around the room sighing with content. It took them several weeks before they began appearing in the streets and walking around at their tasks.

Another time, as he was leaning back in the thick leather mayor's chair with his legs propped up on his desk thinking of the glories of Heaven and how he might soon be there, he heard the heavy thump-thumping of the compressor clear through the insulation of the floor. Then his emergency signal beeped from under his desk. He jumped up and ran into the control room. All the lights of the control panel were shining with a deep brilliant red, and above, the yellow emergency light was flashing. He ran

outside to see what was going on. And clouds of gray powder were billowing from the windows of all the buildings and smoking off into the sky. Plumes of gray shot out into the air. The machine was pumping out powder indiscriminately, uncontrollably. It was a mess. So he leapt inside and shut down the whole system.

Afterwards he spent weeks in his gas mask cleaning up powder and moving bodies out of the streets, the stores, the factory and the lumber mill and carting them back to their homes. Some people were completely grayed out for months. And he was almost worn ragged feeding them, cleaning the powder up and getting the machinery back in order again. He carted limp bodies through the streets in wheelbarrels and in pickup trucks. He had to vacuum up the powder and then sift it to separate it from the dirt. He had to rebuild the compressor and rewire the control panel. And he had to stuff food into everybody's mouths to keep them from starving to death in their contentment. He had to grind up great vats of baby food and pour it into their mouths, and hope it went down their throats past their quiet blabbering.

During that time, whenever the occasional stray visitor came to town, he had to explain that everyone was on a vacation, and he swallowed hard and sweated as he watched their faces. If they became a problem, he had to gray them out and drive them in their own cars down the

road a few miles and let them come out of it. Then they would usually be late for something and confused and they would hurry off into the world they came from and remain confused.

But after a couple months things were pretty well back to normal.

Over the years he had developed some conventions. He took to wearing a gray robe for the double purpose of rendering himself invisible to anyone he wished if need be, and to make himself a part of the gray ring surrounding their fields of vision. He figured if he could associate himself with the visual representation of the contentment and longing they were feeling, then he would become an integral and permanent part of their lives.

He had also developed some rituals, or ceremonies and celebrations that he initiated as a community expression of the contentment and longing that washed up and down through their bodies. It was designed to give them a feeling of togetherness and to let each of them know that their feelings were not unique to them alone. And it all seemed to work. They were peaceful and kind to one another. Rarely was there a disturbance. And when there was, it was usually his own fault, or a breakdown in the machinery.

For income money, he had had the townspeople build a lumber mill and a leather factory. He sold much of the

goods to large companies that backed into the town with a railroad switch car, hooked onto the already loaded cars and pulled them away. One spur of the railroad wound up the valley to Willardville. And the train came up about once every two weeks to pick up the leather and lumber and to drop off anything he had ordered from the outside or to deliver mail, all of it addressed to him. The railroad men never asked any questions; they simply came to get the lumber and the leather.

Willard himself took care of most of the important things. He filed taxes for everyone and sent parcels of money to the Internal Revenue Service to keep them satisfied. And he dealt with the state government and any other local governments nearby, making certain everything was in order with them. He didn't want outside interference, or any state inspectors running around. But he did have some help. For the minor tasks, he had appointed assistants to manage the businesses, to collect food from the nearby farms, and to parcel out the goods and food everyone needed, within limits of course.

The Master Plan looked to be moving along well. After about twenty years, things were now coming to the point where he could soon shoot himself off to Heaven. The lumber mill was pumping out lumber and men were working on a huge ramp that sloped down from the ridge, curved across the town over the houses and then shot up again

over the church like a gigantic ski jump. The plane would come swooping down from the ridge, gathering speed as the engine roared, clatter over above the town and then whip up over the church and flip off above the lake, above the valley, sailing, and then would disappear off into the distant mountains and clouds. The smooth swoop of the whole thing could already be seen as men climbed over the structure, hammering, drilling and lifting heavy boards.

In the Leatherworks, men were already at work on the plane, building the shell that would cover the structure beneath. The airplane was to be made of wood and leather. Some parts he had had to order from the outside, such as the engine and radio, but otherwise it would all be built right there in Willardville.

The Master Plan was nearing completion; it would only be a month or two when he could shoot off from the ramp and be gone. And he thought it was about time. The tasks of holding his system together, and seeing that everyone was taken care of were becoming tedious and only induced weariness in him. More and more, lately, all he wanted to do was sit back, relax and dream of pleasant recollections. Crashing, even pleasant Crashing, did not interest him any more. It was only silly. He only wanted to rest back in the final serenity of Heaven, or at least try to.

He thought about these things as he leaned back in his chair with his feet propped up on his desk. His hair was becoming mostly gray now, and his face had taken on some more creases. His eyebrows had become more wirey and his eyes more deeply-set. He spent much time now in his chair musing, and letting his machinery and the people in the town do his work for him. They seemed to be enjoying themselves enough.

So things were progressing well. And it often gave him pleasure to think that he had actually just about accomplished what he had set out to do in the beginning. Sometimes, he even marvelled at it. All the larger tasks were running smoothly toward completion. All systems were functioning. Nothing major seemed like it could come

along and throw things out of control. At times, he could throw himself into little ripples of excitement thinking about the final plane ride.

But there were a few little problems. He didn't know whether they could develop into anything that could throw his Master Plan into disarray. But they were still disconcerting enough that his mind often fell into little pacing circles of worry.

One of the things that bothered him was the recurring presence of a face, the face of a woman. It caused echoes in his mind when he thought of it.

About ten years ago, when he was halfway through his Master Plan, he had discovered a small, slightly stocky woman wandering about the town talking to people, and apparently poking around. He didn't know who she was, or what she was doing. He approached her and asked her what it was she was up to. She claimed to be a tourist. She may well have been. He conceded that possibility in his mind. But he didn't need any curious tourists prowling around.

He decided then to instantly gray her out. He lifted her into the back of his pickup truck, and drove her four miles out of town. Just before he began to approach the next town down the valley, he pulled over to the side of the road. There, as he dragged her body out of the bed of the truck, he noticed something.

She was moaning pleasantly and when her lips curved upward at the edges into a small smile, he saw that strange downward slant of the cheekbones and that placidly round face. Then, too, there were echoes with that face. He felt he had seen her before. But then he had dismissed it, thinking that he was only getting paranoid from the continuous self-consciousness of his position in Willardville.

He pulled her out and dumped her in the ditch. But the face had continued to echo in his mind for some time after.

In the last few years, someone had begun to attract his attention. It was a young woman. For many years, his lesser longings had been kept in the background as he worked along. But with the late blossoming of this young woman, whose name was Mary, they had again boiled up within him, sending him into tiny fits of pacing about his room. She was fluid and alive and full, and wherever she went, joy seemed to follow her in bright colors. People turned after her as she moved past them, and older men and women seemed to brighten when she appeared. Willard too, was captivated by this presence, and he often slyly watched her from the background as she moved around and through the town.

He could certainly take control of her, although it seemed a little shameful to him to force his way in and

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remove that joy from the town to keep it for his own.

But still, he would be taking her to Heaven.

There was another problem with this. She had lately, perhaps a year or so ago, been married to someone, and she seemed to enjoy it well enough. But, he thought, he would see. There was still time left.

There had been times when he thought he had seen her again, but they were in fleeting glimpses: a face as it disappeared around a corner, a glance, or a distant face hidden under a bulky scarf or a bandanna, barely visible. But most likely, he thought, he was just getting overly anxious. He knew he could get carried away with those kinds of fears. So he tried to let it pass, even though it irked him some that he could never be sure about her.

His second problem was a little more serious. It had been a part of his Master Plan that he have companions to take with him to Heaven. One of the most important things to him was to have a friend up there with him, someone to enjoy the peace and comfort with, someone to share the pleasures with. But he had acquired no friends. He had been so busy seeing to it that his Master Plan became organized, and that everyone should take part in the Plan, that he had not bothered to take special care or notice of anyone. He had been congenial with most everyone, but that did not constitute friendship. He had

always thought that would be the simplest part of the Plan to fulfill, but now that it was coming down to the final crunch, he had begun to get worried about it.

And he had a third problem. He thought it was probably his least important problem, but it was the most difficult to define. His third problem was George, not because he was Mary's husband, but simply because he was George.

George was acting strangely, and Willard could not figure it out. He had tried extra dosages of the powder on him lately, but it had done no good. George was still up to his tricks.

On one occasion fairly recently, he arrived at work, at the leather factory wearing a great colorful butterfly suit, and once there, he simply buckled down to work, but wearing his butterfly suit. For one day, there was a great big butterfly walking around in the Leatherworks.

On another occasion, George, instead of getting down to work stacking skins, he spent the entire day building a cocoon out of leather in one corner of the folding room.

There were other things, but those were the most peculiar. And so far, there wasn't any solution that he could think of to change George's behavior. He had tried graying him out in varying dosages, he had tried reasoning with him, and he had even tried doses of fatherly love,

but nothing seemed to make any difference. George only appeared to be getting worse.

He thought George's behavior would probably not cause any difficulties, but it was disturbing. He had no control over it. And something inadvertently could crumble. Perhaps he would think of something soon for George as well.

Willard, the Abbot of Willardville, sat up and leaned over his desk. He tapped his fingers on the desk, creased his forehead, and looked this way and that around his office as if he hoped to find a clue.

None of his problems were too drastic, but still they irritated him, and he wanted to do something about them. At times, it felt as if they tore into his spine and made him jerk around and shiver with heat. He couldn't account for it, but it happened to him. It was like some kind of jittery longing that electrified his nervous system.

Now it was the height of summer, the moon was full, and he had about two months left before take-off. He slammed his fist down on the mayor's desk, stood up and wandered out into the gilded darkness.

TWO

George was walking home. The lavender of the evening widened out through the whole sky. Only the moon glowed. It dusted the ragged tops of the forest with a silvery powder. Below, the forest was black.

He walked down a road between the dark walls of the forest, his lips singing with a rush of air between them, shoulders rolling, and legs marching in a kind of dance to the beat of his breath's song. But drawing near a slight ridge, he looked up from his steps and wavered to a standstill, his body small, thin and erect in the center of the road. He listened. But there were no sounds. Only the platinum powder of the moon and the endless purple that spread away from him. He felt as if he could reach forever, past the moon and into the purple beyond, because the air was touchless.

A breeze brushed across the tops of the forest. Leaves clacked and sparkled against the dark woods. Rolling by him, the rustling of the breeze crept away up the ridge toward the hulking mountain above. Soon he would be home. His small house was at the foot of the

mountain and Mary was there waiting for him. He began walking again, thinking that soon he could rest his feet and feel Mary close to him as he lay.

Near him in the forest there was a quick tearing at a branch. George froze, and waited, listening. Nothing. After a moment, George's eyes roamed back to the full face of the moon.

"George," quickly, breathlessly, quietly.

George jerked back around and, staring, waited more for a sign of something else. He stared into the blackness, into the forest, in the same general direction that the tearing sound had come from. The quick, whispery "George" echoed in his brain and he searched for a person behind the voice. But he couldn't recognize one. It could have been anyone. He listened and watched toward the place. Gradually, he could distinguish a large rounded boulder tucked against the dark line of the forest.

Watching closely, he began to step carefully in the direction of the stone. He watched with all his nerves at each step. Nothing moved and nothing whispered. Only the brushing of an occasional breeze would restle the leaves of the forest. The boulder sat before him, half in the earth, half rounded outwards. He stepped, trying not to swish his boots against the grass or make any crushing sound as his weight settled. The stone was grayish-white, the size of a large dog, rising to his waist. As he

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approached, his eyes rolled over the top to look down behind it, trying to catch what was there. He stepped up to the boulder, looked forward and saw nothing--only the grass and the trunks of trees. For a moment, he stood and waited, watching the slippery whiteness of the boulder and its flecks of gray.

A breath of wind twitched at his hair. And slowly, he turned to walk back to the road. After a few cautious steps, he again waited with his eyes on the stone. Then he stepped away toward the road. As his feet found the road, he turned back to search out the place of the stone and to watch again, but he saw nothing. He found that the stone was clearer if he turned his eyes a little away from it and looked into the forest. With a kind of regret, he began walking down the road that gradually sloped away from the ridge into the valley below. Occasionally he would turn his face back to the place of the stone, but it had faded into the general darkness of the forest. And as he stepped more briskly, even the place of the stone receded beyond his vision, for it was over the curve of the ridge above and behind him.

Now he was coming home to Mary. And he was heading toward the warmth of his home. The night air had become colder and it was tickling his skin. He thought, it would be very good to be inside the yellow light of his house, and then inside the blankets of his bed where he could

touch the warmth and smoothness of Mary's skin next to him as she pushes her head into his shoulders and as she stretches herself along his legs. The thoughts made him walk more briskly through the night.

He didn't like this trip he had to make. He hoped he wouldn't have to go back to that town anymore. It was part of his job to deliver halters whenever anyone from that town ordered one. So sometimes, he made the walk clear over to the next town, which was a considerable distance. It usually took him four hours of walking. But that wasn't all he had to do. The people in that town were very friendly and expected visitors to visit with them. And the company considered it part of George's job that he visit with them. So George visited with them. And he enjoyed most of it. They did their visiting in the bar. George didn't mind the walking, the visiting, or the drinking. But he did mind the old lady who sat in the bar. She bothered him.

And she was always there in the bar. And she always wanted to talk to George, and only George. That wouldn't have been so bad either, but he couldn't understand what she was saying. And he had to look at the white puffiness of her fat rounded nose, porous and lumpy. It hung there like a huge cyst over the glutinous stained cavern of her mouth that was guarded by the stumps of a few brown teeth. But it was the tone of her voice, the grinding heavy rhythm

of her language and the impossibility of understanding what she said that really bothered him. Her voice groaned like the rumblings of a volcano. With resonances of magma shifting beneath the crust, it was the low hiss of gasses blowing through centuries of rock. Her nose, bobbing slightly, whistled behind every word, air fighting its way through twisting passages and wrinkled channels. Juices of ages dripped from the ceiling and swung back and forth with the passage of air. And sometimes things would snap, as if she were blowing bubbles through porridge.

But the worst part of it all was still that he could never through all the gurgling hear what she was saying. And no one else could tell him. And no one else seemed to care what she was saying. By the rapid darting of her eyes and the pointing of her arms, George knew that she was talking to him. He would never understand her, and he did not want to go back to try again. It just pained him. It gave him thoughts that maybe he was special in some way, or terribly sick. And he would prefer to just remain plain old George, loving Mary, and working on his farm. Maybe someone else would like to deliver halters to that town.

The mountain grew above him with its familiar slow massiveness, and he could tell by a gentle crease in the woods that he was approaching his house. He wondered how

Mary would be sitting or where she would be lying. Perhaps she would be asleep now. The frozen face of the moon sent a cold breath of wind humming across his hair and shocking his skin. He closed his arms in to his body and thought how Mary often stared and gazed at the moon. She seemed to worship it. Maybe she would be standing now, full-faced and naked, in front of the moon. And maybe she would be talking to it. She did that often. Sometimes she was kind to both George and the moon. And sometimes she yanked at both George and the moon and hurt them. In her frightful flurry of raven and moist sparks, she would bitterly tell the moon to turn its back when she took off her blouse, or she would heave sour oaths and curses at George, and then laugh as he skulked away. Sometimes, when the moon was dark in shadow, she would like listless and slack for days.

Once, she told the moon to turn away, but she didn't take off her blouse. She then told the moon it was okay to turn back its face and she began a strident limb-cluttered dance against the window waving a broom high in the air like a bird in static flight. Sometimes she froze in a momentary Egyptian triangle stance. And then she flayed out a limb and began a fluid march. George prowled down on the bed crouching on his paws, fingers extended, and flashed his eyes sideways under lowered eyebrows. At the right moment, he pounced.

Ahead of him in the darkness, he saw the peaked roof of his house slanting sharply against the rough edges of the forest. As he rounded a bend in the road, a weak yellow light filled a square in the dark. The box of light tossed a triangle of yellow out onto the ground, piercing the larger shadow of the night. It was his home. He walked faster and the size of the light grew and became stronger as it filled his vision. He made a straight dance with his feet.

When he opened himself into the light, he offered a soft poke with his voice, "Hooo. Mary."

"Hi, George," And there was a rustling in the next room. When she came around the corner, there were sparkles of ivory and jet black and the sheening of silk as they folded into one another. And held it a moment.

Mary mumbled, "Come to bed, George."

"Okay."

The lights went out.

Mary parted away to the window, lifted her face and, as her figure was washed with light, she spoke quietly and slowly, "Moon, turn your face away from us." The light seemed to lower, fading some. Mary bent down, reached under the bed and pulled out a dull black object, clumsy in her hands. Again she looked up at the moon and said, "Okay, Moon, you can turn your face back toward us and shine down." As the light grew stronger, it showed that

both her hands were clamped around the handle of a pistol with its barrel pointed directly into the face of the moon. She squeezed the trigger, gritting her teeth, and sprayed a balloon-like blast of fire and smoke out into the night, blinding the moon with cinders. But the moon just kept on looking as glass splattered outward on the ground.

George, wide-eyed, drew in a couple of sucking gasps.

Mary threw back her head and rolled out a string of bead-like laughter, and her back arched as if she were flying at breakneck speed through space, accelerating, nipples forward, with her legs stringing out behind like the tail of a comet.

George stared at her arching form. He didn't move. He watched her unbend and loosen one hand from the pistol. Her arms swung back to her sides. And George began to work a smile onto his face. He was working against fear. His muscles twitched in his face. And he managed a half smile.

Mary dropped the gun to the floor. It clunked. A sharp triangle of glass slid from the window and splashed, tinkling against the ground outside.

She lifted her silk robe over her head, wadded it up and dropped it to the floor. Leaning forward, she crouched over George and let herself lower onto him. She climbed and wrapped and opened and closed herself all over him

smoothly with the gentle oil spheres of her skin.

Increasingly, with widening circles, she moved him upward through a narrowing and ascending funnel of fire.

2

Later, deep in the center of the night, George and Mary were both asleep. And everything around them was covered in a moon-tinted darkness. A faint silver veil had settled on the earth like a very light snow. Behind the edges of silver, all was lost in an endless black shadow.

And now, George was sunk in the midst of a heavy syrup-like sleep, packed in safely by layers of darkness, when suddenly the bed screeched and bumped upwards. Then it thumped against the floor. It was as though the floor of the house rippled and heaved once, very quickly. George's eyes shot open. And he blinked as his mind slowly wakened outward into his eyes and ears.

He lay still. His eyes were wide open. And he waited, and listened for something to follow. But there was nothing. He tried to draw back the thumping sensation to see if it was something he knew of. But it was very dim. His mind had not been awake at the time.

He turned to look at Mary. She was still and seemed to be quietly resting. He whispered, "Mary." She didn't move. And he quietly rolled back.

He kept listening. There was a quiet hum and a soft battering sound, barely perceptible, but certainly there. And there was a quiet scratching sound.

As he lay, he thought of demons. Tiny claws working at the wood of the walls. The humming of delicate featherless wings. The taut reptilian bodies with small pointed heads and black eyes. Perhaps one creature was crouching just above them on the wall, its scaly neck jerking silently and warily from side to side watching for the right moment to leap. And then there would be hissing.

But, he thought, that is absurd. Yet again, it could be. Well, whatever the case, he couldn't lay there all night just wondering.

So, stealthily moving his hand from under the sheets, he reached to the table for a match, listening carefully. Finding the small stick with his fingers, he struck it. It burst into flame. And the curtains of the windows wavered lightly with activity, as the hum rose.

He lit a candle. The curtain fluttered, cracked open, and many white darts flew out from the curtain, streaking toward George. He jolted back, gasping. But they hummed into the candle. And then he relaxed. The little darts were just moths.

Moths. They were always seeking light. They had been behind the curtain trying to get at the light of the moon. Now they were fluttering around the candle, throwing their dust around, and thumping into the wall, the bed, and against George.

So he blew out the candle. And quietly, he climbed

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out of bed, walked to the window, opened the curtain and the screen. The moths whizzed out past him, humming and spraying out their small globs of spit.

George stepped back to the bed and climbed quietly back into the sheets. Mary still lay silent, her long raven hair sheening as it spread out over the pillow. It seemed as if she had slept through it all. He lightly pulled the blankets up over her shoulder and tucked them in against her back. Then he wrapped himself snugly in the blankets and mashed the pillow up under his head.

Lying there, he thought again about the demons. Maybe they had really been there. But because he acted first, they went away. If he had not acted so quickly, or if he had not acted at all, they may have come, after all. He then wondered why his fear sometimes got ahold of him like this. They might have been good demons, just as well as bad, couldn't they?

But, before he fell asleep, he spent more time thinking about the moths and Mary than he did about the demons and that strange unexplained thumping of the bed. He couldn't be sure that those had happened, anyway.

3

Later, toward morning, as the sky began to be fringed with light, George had a dream.

His brain was restless. Inside his skull, the lumpy mass of gray slush groaned, churning in its own protoplasm. Deep in its gray fibers, juices flowed and volts flashed along wavering lines, as a clear image was tossed against the inside of his eyes.

It looked like he was deep inside a thick bush. Twisting branches and round leaves dripped with moisture. The giant glossy leaves crowded against one another. And gray branches ran jaggedly through the mass of green, shooting off smaller branches and leaves in all directions, thickening the tangle. The bark of the branches was flaking off in small charcoal-colored chips that resembled the scales of a rattlesnake.

Alone on one heavier branch, a caterpillar, fat and green, worked its way along, stretching out and arching, stretching and arching, its miniature suction feet hanging momentarily in air, and then gripping lightly against the branch. It moved along slowly and deliberately in even strides.

A pistol shot cracked.

And in the middle of an arch, the caterpillar's loop was abruptly blown away, leaving only the caterpillar's

stubby tail, his small black head and splinters of the torn gray bark. From the nubs of the head and tail oozed an orange mucous spreading and mingling out among the splinters of bark. And where they met and jelled and trembled together, delicate papery petals squeezed forth, shimmering, rising and blossoming into a growing orange and red flower. And the frayed edges of the petals wavered lightly with the wind.

George bolted up, his eyes popping open and shut. He tossed the sheets aside and moved to a sitting position at the edge of the bed. Rubbing his eyes with his fingers, he reached into his brain searching for the flow of his dream. But he only caught old photographs yellowing with age and cracking at the edges, until they crumbled to dust.

He bent forward. Leaning his elbows on his knee and propping his chin up with his palm, he sought back still for the fading pictures of the dream, not just to look at the pictures again, but to feel the ice-hard clarity standing behind them. George felt some kind of longing expressed in the images, as if there were in this dream a place one could go where all longings were met and understood. It was like a home, a real permanent home that had been there from prehistoric times.

The leaves had been thick with boxlike edges. The bullet was not round, but square like a little box. And

the drops of water were cube-shaped. The colors were all solid colors, as they are in cartoons. And each thing was contained purely in itself. And then the smooth movements of the caterpillar moved into the slow building of the flower, as if they had worked together, planning it all out beforehand.

But, no matter what, he couldn't draw its precision back again. Not now.

He slapped his palm against the wall before him in frustration. But the slapping sound was very dull, much duller than usual. He felt his head. It seemed thick and felt as if it were buried in a heavy fog. Things were blurry around him. And all was dizzy and numb.

As a cloud passed, the warm morning light swept across the bedroom floor with a brilliant fringe of orange and splashed against the sheets.

To George, it was a hazy brilliance. His eyes roamed across the bed. And he saw that Mary was not there.

Swinging his arms in a motion to get up, his hand struck something wet on the sheets. Leaning over, he saw a small pool of thick transparent jelly seeping slowly into the sheets. George watched its dull shine. Then he stood up and walked over to the window to stand in the warmth of the sun. The screen was lying on the floor. And he saw that it had a small round hole punctured in it.

Feeling a cool breeze wash over him, he looked to the window and saw a large jagged hole torn in the glass. Much of the glass was gone. A few giant shards were still clinging to the wood.

The breeze woke him some, lessening the blurredness, but the broken glass confused him.

He pulled some pants up his legs, put his shirt on and stuck his feet into his boots. Occasionally, he stopped to listen for some sound in the house. After he was dressed, he ventured a cautious "Mary?" into the next room. There was no answer. He tried again: "Mary?"

The house was still silent. He walked into the next room, buttoning his shirt and looking around the room in all directions. He wandered absent-mindedly into the bathroom and twisted the water on. It rushed into the sink. And he splashed his face with it. Then he looked into the mirror. He saw a long triangular face with small features; slits of eyes and mouth; a nose, thin and sharp; and a pointed jaw, and it was all wet. Water dripped off the point of his chin. At the top of his head there was a pile of brown hair spraying out in all directions as if his head had exploded. He thought that was probably what his head looked like on the inside too.

But his green eyes were still there, staring curiously. He grabbed a comb and pulled his hair in alignment with his head. And again he stared at the

smoothly molded face. It was an object, a polished apple on the outside, but on the inside it was thick with its own private bacteria, tangled masses of black flies and rusty pipes, patched here and there with wads of gray cloth, soaked and dripping.

He looked into the toilet. Things were still blurry enough that he had trouble seeing the circle of water in the bowl. He said to himself, "Caterpillars don't have orange guts, do they?" And then with his urine, he drew some patterns on the water in the toilet bowl.

It came to him then that he didn't normally think about such things as drawing with his urine, or what color caterpillar guts are, or what the inside of his head might look like. That was strange. But he thought about it again. The inside of his head felt like a dusty gray moth was pattering around on the insides of his skull bumping against the sides of the shell.

He remembered that he was looking for Mary. Walking from the bathroom, George headed into the kitchen. He looked around the room, in the sink, at the top of the kitchen table, and at the refrigerator. He saw nothing to show she had been in the kitchen. Then he walked to the back door, opened it, and yelled, "Mary!" And he still heard nothing. Walking back to the refrigerator, he opened the door, stuck his hand into a large burlap bag and pulled out five long carrots. He tossed three carrots

into the fireplace to roast them. Stooping to a pile of twigs, he lifted a few small branches from the pile and dropped them onto the coals. The twigs crackled into brilliance.

Clutching the two carrots in his hand, George walked through the house once more looking for Mary. He saw no sign of her anywhere. And none of her clothes were gone.

He stepped out onto the back porch, a worn block of concrete with one crumbling step that led down to a dried mud flat. It was his back yard worn down to packed earth from the trampling of feet. Beyond the mud flat, first the vegetables, then beyond, bushes and trees grew in rising health and thickening greenness.

He walked around the farmhouse, stopping at points to yell Mary's name. Now he was troubled. He had seen no sign of Mary's departure anywhere in the house. She had left no note. And she wasn't working anywhere outside. Never before had she done anything like this since they had married. Sauntering back to the porch, he pulled one carrot out of his hand with the other, and he sat down.

It was probably nothing, he thought, but it was strange. He took a snapping bite off the tip of the carrot.

4

George looked up at the sun that was rising above the trees. It had been a very strange night, he thought. There was the old lady in the bar. There was the voice in the forest. When he arrived home, there was the thumping of the bed, the fluttering of the moths, and finally the strange colorful dream. And in the morning there was a patch of jelly, and there was no Mary. He had had strange nights before, but always before things had cleared in the morning and nothing remained left over, as it had this time.

George lifted a carrot up to his mouth and took a crunching bite out of it. And he chewed.

Perhaps he should not worry so much about Mary. She was probably doing fine. But she could at least have left a note.

Sooner or later, he would have to get used to more of her absence. For the year they had been together, they had spent much time with each other, always taking care to make the other feel safe, and certain. Even though it had not always been that way.

For years, George had been pulled into the mystery of her shape. All of her was just there, a physical presence. All Consuming Power. A whistling vortex of

energy. It almost didn't matter what she did--almost. All along the way since he had first known her, she had left him just enough souvenirs to keep him going, so he could be pulled along for the chance that finally he could know her. Always picking up on the latest, faintest clue, he continued to follow her and hope. It had been forever that he had followed her, staring at her in school, crashing around behind her in the woods, tagging behind her in the streets, and even sneaking over to her house in the night when everyone thought he was asleep. And all the time the force inside him was pulling, tearing and driving him inside out. Many times he was rendered useless, leaning against a fence staring at the grass.

But since they had been together, the chase had dropped away and she had always been there, and so was he. And still, as he sat there on the porch, she pulled on him. He wanted her now, even if they only sat on the porch and ate carrots before he went off to work. He knew her force now, when she was gone. The only thing to do for now was to try to turn to other things.

With some effort, he pushed himself up from the porch. He walked lazily across the dusty flat of his yard, chewing as he roamed along. He sauntered past the garden and entered the trees, walking along a small path that wound among the bushes. He strolled absent-mindedly along gazing at the bushes beside him and the trees

hanging their branches overhead. Then the path ended.

It ran straight into the wall of a battered shack. Its weathered planks were streaked with gray and dark brown. Most people, on seeing the shack, would have shrugged it off as an old unused outhouse. But George had an idea what it was for. George's father had spent much of his time in the shack. His father had worked endlessly in there. When he hadn't been in the shack, he had been taking long walks through the countryside.

George remembered walking in once to see what his father was doing. His father had been leaning over the table, looking in a microscope and carefully fitting tiny peices together with tweezers. Then his father had shown him the collection of insects and flowers, and all the tiny parts of insects and flowers that were arranged on the walls in jars and on shelves. He had only told George that he was trying to build something special. And that was as far as George's curiosity had carried him at the time. It had looked too complicated.

Sometimes his father had shown him a particular kind of insect or flower and asked him to find some more just like it. George had looked for a little while, but then he had run off into the woods, or searched for a friend to play with, or worked on his treehouse, and forgotten his search.

When his father had become older, he had told George

that someday he wished to show him what he was working on in the shack. But his father had died before that day could come.

George pulled on the rusty lock that hung sideways on the door of the shack and it snapped open. He swung the door gently outward and looked inside. Light flooded the small room.

Stepping inside, he saw his feet puff out tiny clouds of dust from the floor. And the work bench was coated with a layer of dust. But all was still neatly organized. The tiny parts of flowers were arranged in little wooden compartments. There were boxes of insects, many different kinds. Running his eyes along the shelves, he saw a great number of boxes and jars. One large box was marked with a giant exclamation point that was at least two inches high on a box only three inches high. Dusting the box off and knocking the spider webs away with his fingers, he pulled it off its shelf. And he opened it.

Inside was a giant insect, almost like a bird with its large colorful wings. But the wings were more beautiful than wings of feathers. They were paper-thin. And they were orange and splattered with great swaths of black and white. The streaks of color spread outward from a sleek fuzzy black body into a delicate fringed edge of

brilliant orange. George was dazzled by the sight. He had never seen anything like it. The wings wavered weakly from his hands that were quietly trembling underneath the box. But it was dead. It didn't move when he carefully poked at it.

Then he stopped gazing at the huge insect and he looked up around him. A feeling had come over him that suddenly made him feel as if he were trespassing. With care, he closed the box and slid it back onto the shelf. Some kind of fear had washed into him, and he began to feel anxious. It told him that he should at least leave now. Later perhaps it would be a better time. So he stepped out the door of the shack and, with a glance to see if all was in order, he shut the door and snapped the lock.

Standing in front of the shack, he bit into a carrot. It snapped in his teeth, fresh, cold and cleansing. He crunched freely with a wide open mouth, smacking his tongue against his gums. And between chews, he drew in deep breaths of the cool morning breeze. His jaw worked like a smooth machine rumbling around under his skin.

He looked around. And then he looked up into the canopy of the forest above him. The sun glinted through the leaves. And he began walking back on the path toward the house, chewing lazily as he went.

When he reached the open clearing of the mud flat,

a breeze pushed against his skin and rippled his clothes. He reached an arm out into the air and felt the breeze with the palm of his hand, and spreading his fingers apart, he felt the breeze pass through them as if the air were something hard. He could touch it with his fingers as if he were touching a rock. The breeze felt solid. Slanting his arm out, he held it in the breeze, and then rested it against the solid air, as if he were leaning against a post.

A milkweed seed with its tiny silk-like parachute floated by on the breeze.

5

George could tell from the height of the sun in the sky that it was close to the time to go to work. He walked into the kitchen with the screen door slamming behind him. Stabbing with a stick into the hearth, he poked the carrots out of the coals and tossed them into a small paper sack. He walked back through the halls of the house to the bedroom. There, he picked up Mary's robe, tossed it into the closet, and with his foot, he scooted the pistol back under the bed. Then he stepped back through the halls and into the kitchen. Grabbing the small sack, he slammed out the screen door and leapt from the porch.

He walked along the road toward town, and toward the Leatherworks, the place where he worked. When he thought of the steaming presses, the punching machines and the sparking hammers of the Leatherworks, he began to step more slowly and bent forward with a slight stoop. He did not enjoy his job at the Leatherworks. As his boots worked along the road, a filmy haze of dust clouded after his steps. Almost without thinking, he started looking for signs of Mary's footprints in the dust. And sometimes his eyes probed into the dark holes of the forest. But he saw nothing. There was only the quiet thrushing of birds, the buzzing of insects and the

rustling of leaves.

As he walked into town the air became filled with the barking of dogs, the roar of exhaust and the slamming of doors. A group of small schoolgirls were walking down the sidewalk ahead of George. They wore brightly colored dresses and stockings, and tried with their sharp voices to talk over one another. Each girl was trying to push in toward the center of the group. It was as if a force of gravity was pulling them all in. Each girl was working so hard to be at the center that each girl's foot was stumbling against all the other feet. And each one was trying to tell the group something very important.

In a flash, one girl in a white dress with large black dots ran from the group onto a lawn and began turning in circles with her arms flapping. Her dress rose into the air in an umbrella and spun into gray streaks. And she sang,

"Spinning, spinning off with the wind
flying away to Nowhere Land
twisting higher, higher up into the sun
until the world turns red like Fire!"

After the last word "fire" she wailed away with a surprised shriek, and fell to the grass in sleep, a pretend sleep. Her laughing friends lifted her up and guided

her away with them. All of them started running in a pack, still chattering and laughing, and they bounced off down the street in a cluster of colors.

George strolled along behind, blending almost perfectly with the gravel of the road.

6

Ahead the rusty sheds of the Leatherworks were already steaming and clanging with production. Heavy chunks of smoke boomed from the pipes and drifted across the roof. Some of the smoke seemed to cling to the tar as it rolled away.

George walked inside and was shuttered into darkness. Dark figures coated with dyes and soot moved about, lifting skins and hides from table to table and setting up thick metal presses for stamping. Others were organizing tools and skins at their working areas. They moved about like dark ghosts. Sometimes a glint of red fire would flash from the furnace and spread shadows around the room.

One man with his white flashing eyes and teeth looked up from his bench and said, "Hey, George, whaddaya know?" and bent over to his work again, the eyes and teeth disappearing.

George headed back toward his table through rows of benches and men preparing their hides and presses. Arriving, he threw his lunch sack down under his bench and began to clean his table. But it was already clean. And that had never happened before. Something was strange. Then he looked at the work spaces next to him, where men were usually sitting and organizing their tools. They

weren't there and neither were their tools. Slowly he moved his head up to stare at a crack in the wall where a streak of sunlight seeped in. Behind him steam hissed and hammers clanged as the men moved in their work. Smoke and fermented dyes seeped into his nose and congealed inside him, stiffening him into a fleshy cartilage, slack and dull. A gray fringe moved in on the edges of his vision.

A hand tapped on his shoulder and departed. It left a soft sting. George turned his head around to a bulging white shirt heavily pushed out forward by a large weight of flesh. It was his supervisor. A large rubbery chin marked with red corpuscles hung out over the collar of his shirt. His eyebrows were folded down over his eyes in a gesture of sympathy. As he opened his mouth, he revealed a wide gap between his two front teeth. Sometimes a ripe red bubble of tongue would blossom between. George watched for it this time.

And as the supervisor began to speak, the bubble popped out. "George, we're awful sorry, but it looks like you're just not cut out for this kind of work. For several months now we've been trying to get your efficiency up, but you keep working along very carefully and slowly and we can't afford it, George. I wish we could keep you, but we just can't do it." He stopped and curled his lip. "I hope you can find something more to your liking and I'm

sure you will. Here's your check, George, and good luck." He handed George a piece of paper, tapped him on the shoulder again and walked away chunkily into the darkness. The furnace pulsed red light into the room and lit up wispy curls of smoke, climbing. George breathed.

He stood up. He tucked his way along the wall and stepped quickly and quietly toward the door through aisles of working men, whose heads were bent over their tables and presses. No one looked up.

When he stepped out into the sunlight, he blinked from the bright light that struck his skin and slapped his eyes. On the dirt road, slivers of mica flashed, reflecting the sun. The bright lights and the barren raw heat, white at its core, tore George from his body as if sliding a shard of glass between his brain and torso. He became only a gaseous part of the limp air, waiting, as the grayness moved in around him. His leg strangely arched and kicked a worn leather strap in the dust, sending away a weak cloud and weakly twisting the strap. It flipped into an S.

George looked up at himself as if he were the strap, one that maybe his own hands had fashioned. He saw an aged and rumpled young body waning in the dust with the heat waves. He didn't know where Mary was. She could be melting into the gravel. So could he. He had lost his

way to live and might lose his house, his garden and all. And maybe he had lost Mary. But things could congeal again. It had happened before. But then why the wavering gleams of light, the shards of glass, and the teeth, yellow saw teeth, grinding at his tendons until they hung loose, useless, out of place?

He screamed. Out there in the street, no one else had heard the scream, for it was inside him. Passers-by just thought he was moving quite slowly.

7

George stood in the street. A battered truck, groaning and crashing, came tearing around a corner. The driver began honking furiously to get George to move. Finally, George dived, his hands clutching outward toward the curb. The truck rumbled by. Dragging himself up off the road, he sat on the curb and dusted his clothes off.

He rubbed his chest. He was looking for something hidden deep inside his ribs. It hurt in there. Searching behind the greasy lobes of his organs, he saw his liver glistening and his pink lungs expanding and contracting. As he pulled on his organs, elastic sheets of gristle kept snapping back into place. One can't expect immediate miracles, he thought. Things take time to heal.

But for the moment, across the street, a squat old woman with a huge cloth bag staggered from window to window down the line of shops.

A bright burst of giggling and screaming washed away George's dusty silence. Turning around, he watched a group of children burst from the schoolhouse in a flurry of arms and legs, bright colors and smiles. They scattered out over the playground. In a flash, the empty skeleton of the jungle gym was filled with moving colors wriggling into themselves. Bodies arched into the air, arms waved and they ducked under into the twisting mass

below. Swings swung and hovered in the air with a scream. The seesaws rocked. Faces were open and laughing, and arms were flying.

The noise, the light clanging and the high screams, rolled in waves, rising at times into huge puffs of laughter. George sat on the curb--chin resting in his palms, elbows propped on his knees, and his feet resting on the ground, pointing together--and he smiled vacantly in a daydream. He was in front of the children and he was building their laughter with his own hands. One touch, one movement with his fingers and they exploded upwards into a higher laughter.

It was a dream he had often had in the Leatherworks while working over a piece of leather. He was lost in the cheering of the crowd. Faces were crushing toward him. And Mary stood next to him watching and filled with the dream. He struggled up a rocky cliff. He drove forcefully through huge piles of rubbish. He dove, slicing through the air. And the crowds still screamed in ecstasies of hope and joy as he looped upwards above, arms outstretched. He rode, teeth gleaming, on the soft edge of a growing balloon.

Down the street, from around a corner, a truck emerged gnarling in black smoke, its sides clashing against the frame, and its gears grinding. It crashed past George and a cloud of oily dust, warm and rancid, washed over him.

George stood up from the curb. Rubbing his hair, he shook the pebbles out and knocked some dust off his clothes. Swiping his hands against his shirt and pants, he tried to rub his pants smooth. He thought now was as good a time as any to try something he had wanted to do for a long time. Knowing that it doesn't often work, especially in moments of desperation, he still wanted to give it one last punch.

He had long wished to teach the children about the plants and animals in the woods, feeling he knew a lot about the squirrels, rabbits, birds, insects, and the heavy blankets of leaves and ferns. He had spent years among the forests watching the thick life in all its forms. His father's knowledge had been great, and he had taught some things to George. So maybe he could teach the children something about it all. And it was all right outside the door; it was everywhere. Besides, what was anybody going to learn by studying walls and desks? So he decided he was going to ask the school teacher for a job teaching the children about the woods. But the problem was how to go about it.

"Hi, got a job?" No, that wasn't the way. He had to sound educated.

"Perhaps you have an opening for a teacher?" No. That didn't sound like George. He couldn't follow it up.

"I was wondering if..." No. That was too mushy sounding. Planning this in advance would never work. He had to go in there and ask and stop thinking. He dusted off his clothes again and straightened his hair out.

"I think that I have an idea that will help you out." Perfect, he thought. That sounded like George and it would blind her with optimism. It would develop a nice solid positive frame of mind.

George walked into the schoolyard through the children, who were still playing and screaming. They didn't pay any attention to him. Here and there sharp sprinkles of laughter broke out. George hesitated a few times in his march toward the schoolhouse. His eyes scanned the squat brick building, red and dusty, and very solid looking. It looked much the same as when he went to school there ten years ago, except the building was dustier and seemed a bit smaller than it was before.

George stepped up into the open doorway. The faded yellow enamel walls were plastered with large cut-outs of animals and flowers, yellowing charts of letters of the alphabet and large colorful maps of different countries. The smeared blackboard was cluttered with tiny white numbers. And rows of little wooden desks, rounded and worn, were faced toward one bigger wooden desk. A handsome middle-aged woman was sitting behind it. She was of solid build. Her pen, poised in mid-air, was deliberating

over a stack of papers, but her eyes, peering inquisitively over her glasses, were slanted toward George. With stern curiosity, she asked, "Can I help you?"

"Hi. My name is George. I don't know if you remember me, but I sure remember you. You're wearing the same clothes, but they're bigger now...heh. But, uh, but you got new glasses didn't you?" George thought she was still a good looking woman, but somehow he couldn't think how to say it. Things were coming out backwards.

"Yes, George, I did."

"I was wondering, ma'am, if I could ask you a question? Maybe you need some help here in the school?"

Her head shook back and forth and she scratched the top of her head. "Oh...well, George, have a seat, won't you?" And she pointed her pen to one of the little desks. When she spoke it was slow and musical. Her lips shone with a red lacquered glossiness. With the musical changes in her voice, her neck bobbed up and down. And her chair squeaked.

George squeezed himself into one of the desks and bent forward. "What I was wondering was if you needed someone to teach about the animals and plants in the woods? And bugs, too." It was all jammed up in there. And the grayness was moving in on him.

"Oh, yes, I remember you now, George. You were the shy boy that always had grass in your hair."

"Yeah, I've spent a lot of time in the woods, lookin' for bugs and lookin' at the trees. And I saw a lot of animals too and even made pets of some. And I'd like to teach the children about it, because it's all over the place. It's everywhere."

George knew it wasn't working. Somewhere it was jammed. The gray fuzz was puffing outward. And his tongue would only flap nonsense.

"That would be very nice, George. But the parents wouldn't like it. They don't want their children running around in the woods, ripping their clothes up, and maybe getting lost. You can't be too careful about the woods, George."

The gray fuzz was moving in on the schoolteacher, slowly surrounding her as George stared into her nose. He had a good idea it was growing out of his mind, so he thought it best to remain silent.

"Besides that, we just hired a scientist from a university who will teach about animals and plants, chemistry and physics, and even more. And he will teach about all that right here in the classroom."

The gray sheet of fuzz was tightening in on her head. It didn't seem to bother her though. She kept talking perfectly well.

"He has excellent credentials. George, do you

realize what you have to do to get a job teaching?"

George nodded.

"You have to go to college, get references, transcripts, talk to personnel directors and boards of education and type out applications. It is a complicated process, George."

George nodded again, afraid to move his eyes from her nose. It was all that was left of her. He didn't want to lose that.

"George, you should keep the job that you have." And she moved abruptly, disappearing from sight.

The sheet of gray closed off. George raised up and slapped his desk sideways, yelling, "But I just got fired!" He started toward the desk. "They fired me!" He choked and his face scrunched up and he ground his teeth. His head pulled back and he swung it forward. Reeling, he reached his hand out to the teacher, who pulled her head back like a repulsed turkey, eyes widening. George slumped over on the desk and nestled the top of his head into her breasts. They spread out sideways like wads of loose bread dough. He burrowed his head in there, twisting. Grinding his teeth, the muscles of his skull tightened on his brain and squeezed. And he growled with a kind of gravelly scream.

A hot gust of blood rushed into his skull, and knocked him back off the desk. The fuzz was jarred free.

It was as if his skull had suddenly been reamed. He walked briskly toward the door. When he reached the doorway, he turned and shyly said, "Thank you, ma'am." And he stepped out the door.

As he was leaving the schoolyard, the teacher appeared from the door and called out in her musical voice, "Children! Children, come in! Recess is over." She clapped sharply. "Come on. Hurry up!" The chatter of the playground diminished into silence. The children became limp and scuffled toward the school building. In a swirl of dust, a husky boy smashed his fist into the stomach of a thin boy, who reeled against the steps of the slide.

8

George walked down the street heading for the bar. He decided that it was time to go to the bar.

He stepped inside and the bright metallic sun was abruptly closed off. There was only the waxy glow of candles here and there in the various cave-like booths. It was like a mine shaft with splintered rafters hanging above and glowing tunnels leading off into hidden rooms.

In one booth an old man sat pondering the waving light of a candle. He looked up at George with his narrow eyes. He had a large round nose and his face was splotched with red and surrounded by a winter storm of gray and black hair that puffed out over his shoulders. George recognized him.

"It's the Abbot. Hey, Abbey, what are you doing in the bar?"

"George, George, my boy, sit down. Good to see you. Where you been? You haven't been to church since you've been married. You're looking healthy, only a little pale and stained from the leatherworks."

Sitting down, George asked, "What are you doing in the bar, Abbey?"

"Oh, Well, George, nobody's ever up at the church. And the ones who need saving are in the bar. So I'm in

the bar, saving people."

"Oh, I see. Makes sense. Why didn't anyone think of that before?"

"I don't know."

The barkeep brought a beer to the table and George handed him a quarter.

"Well, George, what's been happening to you? Wait! First, I have to explain something to you. I've been having a problem lately. At any moment my voice may give out; it's been happening quite often lately. I talk for ten minutes and then--sput!--nothing!"

"Yeah, your voice does sound more hoarse than usual. It sounds kind of strange. Isn't there something somebody can do about it?"

"Maybe, but I'm not going to waste my time talking about it. I have got to save my voice and make sure I stay alive for the festival that's coming up."

"What festival?"

"The Vacuum Festival. It'll be in a few weeks. Now look, George, would you shut up and quit asking me questions and tell me about how you've been doing?"

"Oh yeah. The Vacuum Festival. That's when they have dances and plays and then everybody gets very serious and the Abbey gets up there--you get up there and mumble and throw dust around and everyone is very quiet, right?"

The Abbey's face reddened in anger. His eyes turned into hawk's eyes and his lips tightened.

George backed off. "Okay, Okay, Abbey, I'll tell you about myself. But it isn't much. Things haven't been going good for me, Abbey. Up until last night, everything was going fine. Mary and I were doing fine. We were making enough money. We were happy with each other. But then--wham!--everything falls apart. I woke up this morning and Mary's gone, disappeared, and she didn't leave any sign to where she might have gone. No sign of her. And there is just a glob of jelly sitting there soaking into the sheets. You ever heard anything like it? I don't like the whole thing. It makes me cringe."

The Abbey took a swig of George's beer.

"Then, after Mary disappeared, I went to work. And I got fired. They fired me because I don't work fast enough. But I couldn't do it any faster. Not the way they wanted it. It was a crummy job anyway. But I needed the money for a couple more months. And then, after getting fired, I thought I'd go get a job teaching at the school. No, that doesn't work either. Somehow, just when I started talking to the teacher, I began blanking out. Everything turned gray inside my head, and I started blabbering like a complete fool and thrashing around like an idiot. Besides that, she says I have to go to college and get a pack of papers. So that was it. It's a mess,

everything is screwed up and now I'm wandering around wondering what to do. Most of it I could handle if only Mary were around." George threw his arms in the air and leaned back against the seat. "It's all just turned into nothing."

The Abbey leaned forward. "Well, George, what do you expect?"

George jerked up. "What?" He scratched his head. "What do I expect?"

"Yeah, expect. What is it you expect?"

George stared off into the rafters. "Expect?"

"Yes, what do you expect?" The Abbey leaned forward, the gnarled trunk of his face waiting patiently.

George shifted on the bench, his eyes opened wide and with a quizzical look, he asked quietly, "Nothing?"

The Abbey grinned and took another sip of George's beer.

George's arms flung up in the air. "Nothing? Nothing."

The Abbey said, "You expect nothing."

"Nothing. Nothing at all." He propped his arms on the table and looked with frowning eyebrows. "Well, Abbey, I understand you. But now what?"

The Abbey started to hum, but stopped, remembering the time limit on his voice. His face reddened again and he brought his fist down on the table, muttering a "Damn."

The barkeep plopped a bowl of steaming vegetables in front of the Abbey and dropped a fork down on the table.

Picking up the fork, the Abbey slammed it into his bowl of vegetables, gritting his teeth. "George, it's frustrating to not be able to talk."

George was staring into the Abbey's bowl of vegetables. "I know what I expect," he said, still staring with open lips.

Quickly relaxing from his rage, the Abbey looked concerned. "What?"

"I figured out what I should expect."

"But...but...what could it possibly be? I just thought we came to a final understanding of this, George. What is it you expect?"

"Food." George reached his arm out across the table and pinched a large piece of potato from the Abbey's bowl.

"What?" The Abbey yelled and slammed his arm down on George's. The bowl flipped into the air, spraying vegetables around and the juices flowed out and seeped into the cracks of the table. "Oh, Christ!" Under the table, the Abbey's legs thumped around.

Chewing on his lump of potato, George mumbled, "What's the matter?"

"The juice is dripping all over my legs!" He started scraping the scattered vegetables into a pile. "Oh, to hell with it. I deserve it. I'm always dangling

food in someone else's face. I'll order something for you, George." Throwing his arm into the air, he yelled, "Hey, Bill, could you get a bowl of your special stew for George?"

"Thanks, Abbey, I been gettin' hungry."

"I could tell, George."

The barkeep plopped a bowl of stew with thick steaming gravy down in front of George. The Abbey scooped his vegetables back into the bowl with his hand. "Don't worry about it, George, I don't like the juice anyway."

"Oh, good. I would've offered to buy you a new bowl, but I spent my last quarter on the beer."

They both hunched over their bowls, eating in large bites. George worked with his spoon and the Abbey with his fork. They chewed and probed their bowls.

George stopped chewing suddenly and backed off. He tried again and stopped, as his face wrinkled in disgust. He gritted his teeth and gravy drooled down his chin. He spat violently. Spitting again, his body shook and his lips sputtered. "Good God!" He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Oh God!"

The Abbey looked up slowly, still chewing on a chunk of broccoli. "Something wrong, George?"

"Yeah, there's something wrong. The chunks in this stew are just pure grissel, or cartiledge, or something. It isn't meat; I know that! Whatever it is, it's disgusting!"

The Abbey grinned and snickered a little in his throat.

"Well Abbey, it doesn't seem to bother you with your vegetables."

"What did you expect, George?"

"Food."

"You did, didn't you? What made you think you could expect food?"

George rubbed his hands in his hair. "Food... eating...I can't expect it?"

"That's right, George."

"Nothing! I can expect nothing."

The Abbey shot out a finger. "There you go. You got it."

"Nothing." George held his head up with his hands, his hair spraying out between his fingers and his eyes bulging toward the table. "Nothing. Nothing. Maybe, Abbey, you better tell me about the nothing. It looks like I'm in for it, whatever it is, and you better let me know what it is. Instead of Mary, I get nothing. Oh, God. Help me, Abbey." His face went pale.

The Abbey leaned forward with his finger poised in the air. One eye was closed, and the other zeroed in like a microscope on George's face. "George, listen. The nothing grows backwards like the opposite of asparagus

sticking its tongue through the ground, and you have to listen very hard to hear its quiet sucking. It won't come to you through my words or gestures. It only comes through what I am not saying, in the gaps and vacuums between. I can't show it to you. All I can do is try to flash my flashlight around in the dark vacuum. And I can only try." The Abbey leaned forward still more.

"The nothing of the vacuum---" Suddenly the Abbey's voice stopped even though his mouth kept moving. Then his mouth stopped, realizing he was making no noise with his voice. He tried again, but no sound came. His lips worked and his tongue flopped. He stopped again and threw his arms in the air. Shaking his head from side to side, he pointed to his neck.

George shook his head too. "It's okay, Abbey, I understand. I'll just have to find out about it later, I guess. It was really nice of you to try, but it is disturbing." George looked into the Abbey's eyes and saw that the whites of his eyes were slowly pressing in on his irises. It seemed as if his irises, and then his pupils were sinking behind the whites like egg yolks folding into milk. And then there were no pupils, only whites. A few veins crept across the white eyes to make them bloodshot.

George's lips slowly wrinkled. And he let out a whimpering groan. Then with a sudden spasm, he shot from

the booth, smacking tables and chairs, scrambling through the door into the light of day. And he ran and ran.

George ran down the street past the buildings, making a light haze of dust trail off behind him. He ran past trucks growling in the streets, past workers loading and unloading boxes, past people walking down the sidewalks, past the rows of houses, and he sped off out of the town until he was on the road bounded by forest on both sides. And then he slowed to a walk, breathing heavily. He was glad to be alone and out of the town. Relaxing, he walked and breathed, his chest heaving deeply. And he ran his fingers through his hair.

Ahead, he saw a group of three people walking down the road toward him. He didn't want to see any people now. So he slowed and after a moment, he turned off into the woods. After he was out of their sight into the tangle of bushes and the trunks of trees, he ran again, leaping over logs and twisting around trunks in a zig-zagged path deeper into the woods. The spongy mat of leaves on the forest floor squished under his feet. And he darted through the thick growth, turning quickly and knocking branches aside with his arms.

When he whipped around one thick bush, a pond popped up directly in front of him. Stumbling, trying to stop his speed, he instead tripped and dove headlong into the pond, arms and legs twisting. He splashed and the water

sprayed outward in muddy sheets.

Rolling over like a log, he stood up and shook himself. He waded toward the edge of the pond and collapsed on the bank, breathing.

Seemingly from nowhere, drops of rain pattered the leaves of the forest canopy above him. A heavy drop smacked into the dried leaves on the bank next to him. A few more pattered around him. His hand clenched into the decaying leaves and he gripped his fist around a pack of mud and drew it up. Sitting up, he angrily threw the fistful of mud against the pond. It splashed quietly, as the rain rose up to a roar against the forest. Little splashes bobbed up all over the pond in a restless fury. The leaves above crashed noisily. And George sat looking into the pond, drops of water falling from his hair.

Two old tree trunks, with a few thin branches, partially submerged in the water, began to bob from the activity of the pond. They were entwined in each other, but did not touch as they continuously moved toward one another then bobbed away, back and forth. Their stiff rolling motions looked like two old Greek Gods put under a spell. They were forever trying to make love with one another, but because of their dead stiffness, they could never reach it. Never would they be able to touch the other. They could only bob there in the pond endlessly, or lie still, until they finally rotted into soggy dust.

The roar of the rain slowed and finally pattered down to a stop. The forest and the pond were quiet now. And George started to stand up to go back to the road. But he stopped. Where he had pulled the mud from the bank, he spotted a few tiny cylindrical white eggs resting in the mud. Carefully he picked each one up with the tips of his fingers and rested them in the palm of his hand. When he picked them all up, it looked like there were about eight of them. Then he stood up.

A dragonfly buzzed out of the woods and erratically circled the pond a couple of times. Then it hummed off into the woods in another direction.

George stepped up the bank and started walking home.

THREE

At home, he did not find Mary.

For a few days, he did nothing but wander around in town and out in the forests looking for her. He found nothing.

In town, everyone seemed to ignore him. They were either heavily involved in their work, or they just ignored him altogether. It was as if he were a leper, or a lunatic. It s true, he had never paid much attention to anyone but Mary, but, he thought, they didn't have to react like that. Only the Abbey seemed to tolerate him a little, but whenever George had tried to explain his problems, the Abbey only began to blabber on about Vacuums and the Great Nothing. It was infuriating.

In the forest, he only saw the proliferation of plants and animals.

Mary's disappearance obsessed him, and he still could not understand it. Surely, he thought, she never would have left town. In all her twenty years, she had never gone further than two miles out of the town. So there was no reason for her to leave now. Surely, no one

came and dragged her away. No one had ever done that around here, and never had they seen any mysterious figures prowling around, or hardly had they seen anyone walking by just for a stroll.

So she had to be somewhere in Willardville. And in order to find her, he apparently was going to have to get somebody's attention. He was going to have to shake them up to get them to respond. He had to do something.

Just then, his eyes struck the old shack out in the fringe of the woods. That was it, he thought. That was just the thing he needed. He could immerse himself in something to get rid of this painful aimless searching at the same time as build something that would blow the townpeople's eyes wide open. And this would do it. When he completed this, they would talk with him. He would begin now. He stood up and began working.

In the kitchen, he mixed and kneaded about twenty pounds of bread dough. While the loaves were baking, he yanked several bagfulls of carrots out of the ground. He dragged the stuffed bags across the ground out to the shack and dropped them into a corner until they were piled to the ceiling. And when they were done, he dropped the loaves of bread into a bag and carried it out to the shack over his shoulder. He was arranging things so he could stay in the shack and wouldn't have to leave. Then he could keep working without interruption.

The only thing left to do was set up a portable toilet. Finally, after trying several different arrangements for a toilet, he decided on one. He fixed up his chair so that it would hold a bucket right underneath. Occasionally though, he would have to take the bucket out and empty it.

After he had arranged the shack, he went out for a day and collected specimens. He searched for long hours in the forest and in the meadows, picking up petals of flowers, and gathering all kinds of insects into jars, nets and bags. He even carefully pulled spider webs and cocoons off bushes and set them neatly in boxes. During the day he had made several trips back to the shack to drop off boxes and bags, and by the end of the day, he almost had no more room to store things, and had acquired an especially deep red sunburn.

Finally, the next day he was ready. He was checking over his inventory of materials. The dried flowers were all arranged in little drawers by type and color. Rows and rows of dead insects of all different types were lined up on tiny shelves. Cannisters of pollen were stacked in neat rows. And jars of live worms, flies and other bugs were labelled and organized on shelves. Inside the glass, they squirmed and buzzed around. Everything looked all set.

From a large cabinet on one wall, he pulled out a

huge four foot tall microscope and settled it on the work table. And from a drawer, he sorted out several chromed and precise tools such as tweezers, pliers and scalpels, all in different sizes and shapes. He removed some small petals from their drawers, some pollen, chose several dead bugs and placed them all on a glass plate. Uncovering the microscope, he put the glass under the microscope and, climbing up on a stool, he began examining the pieces. With careful and exacting movements, he started snipping pieces off the petals and the bugs. Later, after much time, he began selecting and organizing the pieces into groups. And he worked on and on.

The days passed by. The light of the sun came and passed. It was dark and then it was light again for a time, and then it returned to darkness. And he remained bent over the work table. Only now and then, he emerged from the door, tossed a bucket of slush out into the woods, and then returned to the bench. And the days rolled on by.

At one point, he had managed to build a worm that wriggled by itself on eight legs for about thirty seconds. But then it collapsed.

Another time, he had created a moth from flower petals, insect larvea and spider legs. It flopped around a few times on the table top, skittering around until it ran into the wall, thumped, and expired, its pieces

scattering about. George figured it was too delicate and needed to be more symmetrical. After that he decided that he could now begin working on his most ambitious project.

He worked on and on, his tools glinting in the light.

After a few failures of design, George finally felt he had what he wanted. It had a cylindrical furry body with large green eyes. Two graceful antennae curved out in front. But the finest part was undoubtedly the wings looping lightly out into the air. George had painstakingly crafted them and they looked like colorful stained glass windows in their brilliant oranges, yellows and reds. He was ecstatic, bounding around in the shack. All he had left to do was spark it into life. And by then he felt sure it would work. All the guts were just right, and he knew he had crafted it perfectly for flight.

He placed it carefully in a small box. Grabbing a jar, he dusted some yellow powder into the box. Taking another jar from a shelf with extreme caution, he placed it on the table. Inside the jar were two infinitely small sparkling lights. Opening the jar with utmost care, he reached in with a pair of wire forceps almost too small to see and he touched and lifted one of the small particles of light and placed it in the box alongside his glorious flowered insect. He closed the lid and breathed.

Then he fastened the box's tiny lock and lightly shook it.

He placed the box next to his ear. Again he shook it just a bit. And then he heard a soft pattering come from inside the box.

He bit his lip and ran from the shack trying not to leap too hard when he ran.

2

George loped down the road carefully holding the box in his hand. He was running in a kind of fluid jog, because he wanted to be able to run the whole way into the town without collapsing, and because he didn't want to shake the box too much. His stomach was filled with a tingling of joy and he couldn't suppress the wide-eyed smile that seemed to wash right up from his stomach. Sometimes, he had to remind himself of what he was doing and where he was going.

He arrived in town and began noticing that things were especially quiet. No trucks were crashing through the streets as they usually were. No people were walking around at all. There weren't even any dogs barking. It seemed strange to him that it should be so deserted. But he kept on trotting--perhaps there would be somebody in the center of town.

There was. And it appeared to be the whole population. Approaching from a side street, George heard the low rumbling "Ooohs" and moans of hundreds of people. There was a vast concentration of people in the city park and they were all faced toward a platform at one edge of the park. They all seemed to be intently watching a lone figure moving about on the platform. The figure was waving about, arching his arms, crouching and slinking across the

little stage, all at once, it seemed.

George moved closer, circling around the crowd. He quietly arrived at the side of the platform and recognized the figure as the Abbey. He was tossing himself about with quite violent, yet graceful gestures. Sometimes, between different motions, he would slide up to the microphone and utter some somnambulant tones, his voice wavering and gleaming as it wandered through up and down through the scales.

George thought, "Well, it's the Abbey. Perfect. I can show him what I got here." George walked up the steps onto the platform. The Abbey, his robe puffing and waving, was working his way across the stage tossing a fine dust into the air, that sprayed out in pillows and then rained very softly down. George brushed into him as they were both approaching the center of the stage. From the Abbey's hand, a glob of dust fell in a clumsy lump to the floor. The Abbey slowed in his swooping arch and stopped, frozen, looking very bewildered toward George. He was astonished and perplexed.

George said, "Look." He lifted the box above his head and opened it. The butterfly popped to the edge of the box, moved its bright stained glass wings up and down carefully, and flapped into the air. Its oranges, reds and yellows glowed in the sun. It battered its way upwards, and with widening circuitous and boxy gyres, it

fluffed its way slowly toward the sun that was bursting white directly above them. The butterfly became an orange fluxing dot against the sun and finally disappeared.

George turned back down to look at the Abbey and saw a furious purple face glaring at him. The Abbey's hair was blown like electricity from the sides of his pulsing head. It looked as if he might suddenly burst into a hundred pieces. George dropped the box and bolted from the platform, raising dust, and again, he ran and ran, no matter whether his rib cage was crushing in and out. And he kept running.

3

George was again sitting on his porch back at his farm. Apparently his plan had not worked. No one had screamed or applauded him. Nobody had seemed to notice him except the Abbey. And, what's more, no one had even had the curiosity to come out and ask him what he had been up to, or even to come out and talk to him.

It had been disappointing. The only thing he knew for sure was that he had enraged the Abbey. And that was not good. Perhaps that was why everyone had ignored him in the first place. Everyone held the Abbey in such high esteem that anyone who annoys the Abbey becomes a kind of temporary outcast. It was true that the Abbey was often easily annoyed, but that didn't make much difference. Perhaps that only made being an outcast the temporary thing that it was.

George supposed he had messed up the Abbey's ceremony. And he had even gone to that risk without producing any results. Now he thought he just better stay clear of the Abbey. Besides, he wasn't going to be of any help anyway. He would only keep talking about Vacuums until his voice sputtered out.

The loss of Mary had begun to reach deeper into him. Sometimes, he would feel sick as if his center had been burned out with kerosene. Sometimes, he felt a great

twisting knot grow in his bowels. And at other times, he simply felt nauseous and groggy. One way or another, it hurt him all the time. Where could she be? And what could be happening to her? He tried to keep his mind away from thoughts like those.

Once again, he tried wandering through the town among the shops, the houses and through the factory to try to talk to anyone who would listen, but he was ignored, this time even more certainly than before. Nobody spoke with him, or looked at him, except with quickly fading smiles. And finally, he had gone back to his farm, the sickness still gnawing inside him.

And so, for a few days, he sat on his porch, everything around him generally fogged away into a nauseous blur.

Until, one morning, as he was sitting on his porch, the screen door slapped behind him. George turned around, startled, and he saw that the wind was swinging his door open and shut. The wind sucked on the door and pulled it open again and a small crumpled piece of paper skidded out of the kitchen, slid out the door, bumped along the porch, and fell to the ground.

George reached down and picked it up. Uncrumpling the wadded paper and smoothing it out, he began reading:

Dear George,

I didn't want to hurt you by staying around and explaining to you what was bothering me. So instead, I left you a note to explain it.

I decided that I needed to get out of Willardville and see something of the world. I have thought about it for a while until it became all I thought about, and finally I decided to leave and just go do it.

Someday, I will come back, but not for a long time. But don't wait for me. It would probably be best if you tried to forget me and went and got yourself another wife.

Mary

For a moment, George was bewildered, and his stomach groaned heavily. But then, he looked at the handwriting. It was not like Mary's, who wrote in nice clear boxes. This was written in wide scratchy strokes. Besides, Mary would not have done what the note says she did. She would have told him about it. She would not have written a note. Particularly, he thought, she would not have even thought of writing the last paragraph. If she had gone so far as to decide to leave, she would have said when she was coming back. And she knew perfectly well that he would not go out and find himself another wife.

He was disgusted. It was clearly a cheap trick to him, some kind of hoax. He crumpled it up, and tossed it to the ground.

He looked up. The rage that the letter had aroused had seemed to clear his vision. And for the first time he noticed that weeds had overrun his garden. Tall ragweed plants had buried his carrot patch in a heavy greenery. Leaves of pigweed flapped in the wind.

With a sudden rush of anger, George dove into the weeds and began pulling and yanking furiously at them. When he bent down, the tops of the weeds around him would shake violently and suddenly one would rise above the others. The limp plant flew through the air onto the ground. He yanked and pulled, and weeds flipped limply in an arc, landing in a rustle. The wilted weeds grew into a pile building gradually higher and higher. Sometimes George's back snapped instead of the weed he was tugging. But he worked on through the morning and into the afternoon. After a time, his farm looked suddenly barren, but the carrots seemed to shoot up their leaves with a new strenght, suddenly flowering out over the crumbled ground. When he was done, George stood up as well as he could, gnawed on a fresh carrot, and stared hazily into the massive lump of weeds. The rounded stack reached a few feet over his head.

George shook a fist at the pile and said, "There you go, you sons a' bitches." And he grabbed a can of kerosene, splashed the liquid all over the pile, threw a match on it and watched the orange flames grow upward into black

smoke. He stood near the flame and let the radiant heat burn the grease of sweat off his face. The weeds, in the midst of the thick red and black roar, crumbled quickly into a black powder that swirled in little tornados and floated erratically into the sky with the boiling smoke. Only powdered stalks remained on the ground.

After the fire had died and wasted away into heat waves of clear air, George saw a white bulky figure waddle out from the forest. It padded lazily back and forth down the road toward George's house. The lumpy white robe snapped around the legs, even though the legs couldn't move very quickly. It was the Abbey.

George backed off. Moving slowly at first, then with rapid steps, he leapt onto the porch and scrambled into the kitchen. Once inside, he whipped open a cupboard door and jumped inside. Then he slammed the door shut, and waited.

"George!"

There was a rustling in the yard.

"George!"

The screen door creaked open.

"George!"

The screen door slammed shut.

"George!"

"Hey, George, don't worry! I'm not going to do anything to you."

There was a moment of silence.

"George, my voice is going to give out!"

George waited a moment. There was a shuffling against the floor. And there was the click of the refrigerator door opening.

"Carrots. Carrots! George, all you have in the refrigerator is carrots!"

George opened the cupboard door and looked out.

"Hi, Abbey."

"Hi, George, you goddamn jerk."

"Abbey, are you hungry? Do you want some food?"

"Yeah, but I don't want to eat a bunch of carrots."

"That's all there is, Abbey, except for a little cottage cheese. It's underneath the stack of carrots in there." George pointed into the refrigerator.

"Can I have some of your cottage cheese, George?"

"Yeah, but it's got chunks of carrots in it."

"Gads, George."

"Carrots are good for you."

"Yeah, I know, But Christ, George!"

George grabbed a couple of bowls, set them on the table and motioned for the Abbey to sit down. Spooning out the cottage cheese into the bowls, George spoke:

"You probably have something to say to me, Abbey, if you came all the way out here. You didn't come out here just to eat my food. And if you got something to say to me, I

wish you'd start, because I don't want your voice to wear out."

The Abbey stuffed a spoonful of cottage cheese into his mouth and chewed, his jaw moving slowly in wide circles. "Yeah, George, I do want to talk with you. I figured that you were having some frustrations, because of all the problems you ran into all at once back there, and that you still weren't able to cope with them. I mean, the things that happened to you were powerful things, like losing a job and losing a wife. Those aren't just little things and it makes sense if someone flies off the handle. So I thought about it awhile. And I decided to talk to you a bit, and then offer to help you go look for Mary. Maybe we can find her."

"Yeah, but where? There's nowhere she would go." George threw his arms desperately into the air, spoon in hand. His bowels twisted again, and the knot tightened.

"Wait, wait. Slow down, George. First we relax, think and talk."

"But what about your voice?"

"Oh. That's right. I forget. Hey George, do you have any bandages?"

"What for?"

"I cut myself on a screen and it tore my palm open." The Abbey opened his palm, putting it out in front of George, and revealed a deep raggedly sliced gash that

opened across his palm. Blood oozed heavily from the edges of the tear. And George could see the pink of muscles and the white of bones at the bottom of the cut.

George jerked back, winced deeply, then with a look of heavy disgust, he grabbed the Abbey's hand and threw it into the sink and gushed it with water.

The Abbey pulled back his hand. "George, what are you doing?" Then he reached over and turned the water off.

"I was cleaning it. It's disgusting." Then with his stomach writhing upward, George bent into the sink. His diaphragm wretched and twisted, and he belched out globs of cottage cheese and carrots into the sink.

The Abbey opened his palm and looked into it. "Now George, what did you go and do that for?"

George, looking into the sink, continued to cough and spit.

"That's the kind of thing I'm talking about, George. Now, I'm going to have water in my blood. For Christ's sake, George."

George tried to speak, but had to turn around and throw his head into the sink again.

"Besides, it's a waste of blood. But I don't expect anything is wrong with it." The Abbey began to nibble at the cottage cheese. "I probably have plenty of blood. Heh heh."

George tried to spit the strings of saliva away from his mouth.

The Abbey was now licking at his palm. "Anyway, George, that's the kind of thing I was talking about. I mean, that's what you do. Something happens and--Whap!--something else happens. And you are the second thing that happens. You've got to slow down. George, you've got to stop and look at things and think them out before you bolt into action." The Abbey turned to look at George. "You've got to look closely into things and examine them to see clear into their Vacuum." And he slammed his fist to the table.

George twisted the water on. It rushed into the sink and he watched it wash the chunks of slimy food down the drain.

The Abbey licked his fingers clean. "See? Now you're taking care of things, slowly and easily. That's the way. You see, what I was doing on the stage that day was slowly bringing things to a gradual completion. I was like the wind, always there, penetrating, working quietly with gradual influence. I knew exactly where I was going for thirty years. I was very inconspicuous, moving like a shadow into the souls of the people, building them to stand up and walk gently too." The Abbey moved his hands across the table like a slow snake. "Oh yes, it is ceaseless, a slow upward movement."

George stuck his mouth under the faucet and washed the bitterness of stomach acids from his mouth, the water rushing into his mouth and flashing out in a stream down his chin.

"And then you came through striking with a desperate attack on everyone. It battered their senses. And everything went berzerk. The penetration was lost. All that quiet work was crushed in one reckless blow. And they are dazed now, lost again to wander pointlessly for twenty more years. All because George can't control himself and goes berzerk. It's because of you and your problems. Because of that, the whole thing, the whole silent symphony collapses." The Abbey gazed abstractly into his palm.

George stood up from the sink. Drooping heavily, he walked over to the table where he leaned over and looked into the Abbey's face. He was very pale and his eyes sagged. With lazy lips he spoke, "I didn't realize that. I'm sorry, Abbey. Really, I'm sorry."

The Abbey settled back in his chair. "Well, as far as knowing it, I didn't really know it either. I was just going there too. Then we were going to see about things. As far as being sorry, there isn't much to do about that. I suppose I could start over."

George sat down and slumped over on the table. "Abbey,

what are you talking about? I just been in the sink throwing up and had some trouble listening to you while I was doing it. Can I just ask you a question?"

"Sure."

With his head lying on the table, George spoke from the side of his mouth. "Where was it that everybody was going to go? I mean, what were you trying to do?" Saliva dripped from his mouth into a tiny puddle on the table.

Shifting forward, the Abbey leaned to look into George's face. "George, we were heading toward the Vacuum. We were gradually working into a state of expecting nothing."

George closed his eyes and moaned.

"George, you see, we are all operating in a world of somethings. Everyone is messing with things, and everyone is looking for something. It's all something, no matter where you turn. But instead, we were going to turn and quietly sweep off into nothing."

Wriggling a bit on the table, George tightened up into a dry heave. His tongue rolled out and he belched.

The Abbey looked up to the ceiling and scratched his beard. "It's important, George. The something idea plagues us everywhere we turn. But the nothing--ah!--what a concept!--nothing. It is sublimity, George! No expectations!"

George drew himself up from the table and scratched

his chest. "I'm hungry."

"You're hungry! Look, George, what do you think you're doing?"

"I don't know, Abbey, but when you came here you said something about looking for Mary. If you've got any ideas, I'd like to try to find her."

"All right, George, and on the way I can explain to you about the nothing."

"Let's go, then." George drew himself up carefully.

The Abbey walked to the refrigerator. "Don't you think we ought to take some food, George?"

"Yeah, good idea. There's a bag on the counter. We can use it. Fill it up with carrots." George stretched and shook himself, trying to arrange his inner organs.

"Carrots. Christ!" The Abbey grumbled as he shovelled stacks of carrots into the bag. "Why don't you grow some food out here, George?"

"Carrots are good for you."

"Yeah, but they don't taste. And food that doesn't taste isn't food. Oh well. Come on, George, let's go."

George grabbed a jacket and the Abbey flung the bag of carrots over his shoulder and they marched out through the screen door. The Abbey waddled along with the bag of carrots and George, thin and slightly slouching, followed behind.

"Where are you going, Abbey?"

"This way."

"Why this way?"

"Because I have an idea where we ought to go.

Leave it up to me, George. This is the way one goes in order to learn to expect nothing."

"Then why are we going this way? We're trying to find Mary."

"Gads, George. You are hopeless. I know that! I'm talking about the before and after parts. The times before we find Mary and the times after we find Mary. They are like the nothing." The Abbey leaned over toward George, his eyes suddenly intense and he snapped his fingers. "That's it! The Vacuum is like the times around when we find Mary." The Abbey's robe skirted along the grass of the meadow. "And...Yes!...And it is also like the times before and after we don't find Mary. If we don't find Mary, the Vacuum is like the times before we don't find Mary and it is like the times after we have found out we have not found Mary." The Abbey's gray hair flew from the side of his head with great energy as he bounded in larger steps through the grass.

"George, that's it. Add it all up. Add all the times together and subtract the part about finding or not finding Mary and you get it. You get the Vacuum. But it is magnified! It is even bigger than normal. And that makes it like...just add it up and subtract...and you get

it, clear as crystal. And! And even beyond that...Oh my God! It's like...all that addition and it's like the noth-----" The Abbey's tongue flapped recklessly around in his mouth. In a desperate effort to keep talking, his tongue flew from his mouth lapping wildly at the air with a fluent spray of saliva. But he only sputtered and wheezed. Nothing came from his throat, even though his arms flew in the air, and his hands grabbed at his throat and squeezed, and his robe whipped and thrashed in crazy flutters. The bag of carrots spun out from the vibrating mass and carrots scattered clumsily across the grass.

George backed away cautiously. Afraid that the Abbey might explode, George moved toward the carrots and began to pick them up. It was all he could think of to do. He stuffed them carefully into the bag.

Gradually the Abbey began to wind down, his movements becoming slower and slower. George took his time gathering carrots, waiting. And finally the Abbey stopped and stood still. At first he looked imploringly at George, and then a look of blank resignation came over his face and froze there.

George watched the Abbey and clutched the bag of carrots. The Abbey slowly and gently sat down on the meadow and folded his legs. He signaled to George to come near. Pointing at the bag of carrots, he motioned to George to hand the bag over to him. George stepped over

to the Abbey, sat down and handed him the bag. Reaching in with his speckled hand, the Abbey pulled out a carrot and bit into it. He chewed staring at the ground, and then looked at George, held up the carrot, raised his eyebrows and nodded approvingly as he continued chewing. George reached into the bag, pulled out a carrot and began chewing with the Abbey.

George was hungry. He took very large bites while the Abbey worked slowly down the carrot, just nibbling. George began pulling two and three carrots out of the bag at a time and he swallowed large chunks, one after the other. They sat in the meadow and chewed together.

The meadow's grass spread away from them, a speckled field of tan and green sprinkled with yellow and red flowers. In all directions, the meadow was fringed by thick woods, sometimes encroaching close to where they sat and sometimes quite distant. At the farthest end of the meadow, in the direction they came from, the forested mountain overlooked the valley, the meadow and the woods with a quiet certainty.

The meadow darkened around them. A cloud moved above where they sat, surrounding them in shadow. And a breeze washed over them, cool and fresh with moisture. Stretching his arm out and pointing with his carrot, the Abbey signaled George to look above the mountain. George turned to look. Heavy gray thunder clouds roiled above

the mountain, darkening and lowering toward them. The clouds rolled and folded in upon themselves, building up their power from the inside and spreading outward.

As he began to stand up, the Abbey tapped George on the shoulder and pointed in the opposite direction. At the other end of the meadow standing just above the tops of the trees, a pile of rocks squatted solidly like a rounded haystack against the woods. The Abbey motored off in a kind of stiff shambling run. George flipped the bag of carrots over his shoulder and loped off behind him. They trotted across the meadow toward the rocks, George slowing himself to stay back with the Abbey.

In one corner of the rock pile, they found a slight overhang to hide under where they could keep dry and protect themselves from lightning, which had begun to flash into the woods at the far end of the meadow. They both were breathing heavily. But the Abbey was straining for breath and bright red splotches appeared on his now pale face. George dropped the bag of carrots and the Abbey plopped himself down and leaned against the rock wall at the back of the overhang. The floor of the cave was heavily covered with small hard egg-shaped pellets. George recognized the dark green pellets as deer turds. They sat, breathed, and waited.

The rain came. It crashed to the earth in heavy sheets and rolled off the rocks in thick streams. Things

became dark. Lightning slammed down around them. Thunder boomed and shook the ground. The rocks crunched. George peered into the dark sheets of rain. And the Abbey fell asleep leaning restfully against the mattress of deer pellets.

George moved his eyes from tree to tree carefully to see how far he could see into the rain. The water splashed so hard against the ground, it sent up a mist among the tree trunks. Peering intently, he thought he saw in the most a moving form sliding among the trunks. It looked human. And it looked light and graceful. George stood up and moved slowly out into the rain toward the figure. He crept quickly to a tree trunk and stared again into the mist. It had long black hair and all the rest was white. And it moved softly. George worked closer. It walked like a woman and it seemed she was naked.

It was very strange: a naked woman walking in the heaviest kind of rain. And she was graceful, walking slowly just as if it were not raining at all. George stepped toward her more quickly. The shape and the hair and her way of moving was much like Mary's and it could have been Mary. But she was facing away from him and he could not see her well enough. He approached within ten feet of her as she walked slowly in the rain. Then, startled, she turned and looked at him with open full

eyes, frightened. Then she ran, darting lightly off into the mist until she disappeared, one thin arm poised off to the side. It wasn't Mary. Her face was a touch too broad and her eyes were deep brown, not green.

George started to run, only to tell her not to be afraid. But after a few faltering steps he realized she would be afraid no matter what. He only wanted to find Mary.

The rain diminished from a roar to a steady slow beating. And the sky lightened some. George was standing in the woods. Heavy drops of water gathered from the rain falling on leaves pattered onto his shoulders and into his hair. Just ahead of him was a small clearing in the woods. He walked forward toward the clearing.

Then his eyes focused. Near the center of the clearing was a small plant with a tiny flower that seemed to sparkle. George thought that it couldn't be sparkling from the sun, because the sky was completely overcast. No sunlight could get through. He walked to the plant and bent down. He thought that maybe it was the plant that made its own sun, the plant his father had told him of. George had never seen one. Very carefully, he reached down and plucked the flower from the stem and placed it in his hand. He cupped his hands over it.

He stood up and walked back to the cave, walking carefully at first. But he couldn't contain his excitement.

By the time he reached the cave he was almost running. At the cave, he yelled to the Abbey. The Abbey was still asleep. "Hey, Abbey, I've found it! I found one! I have to go! Fast." The Abbey jolted from his sleep, shook his head and tried to get up quickly, but fell over to the side.

It was too late. George was gone.

4

Once he was back at the farm, George ran to the shack, opened the door, and carefully placed the flower into a jar. Then he stared at it. Leaning intently over the jar, he gazed at the tiny blue petals that curved out into a bell. The sparkles were so small they could hardly be seen and the more he looked at them the harder they were to see. They were like the faint stars that fade away when one tries carefully to focus on them. When he looked away, the glow from the tiny suns of the flower would grow again. They were there, but it was as if they were to be felt, not seen.

As he stared at the delicate blue bell, a warm glow grew in his stomach and rose in his chest. It was as if something strong was going to happen to him. As if he was going to do something and do it well. He would make something of this. It brought a confident smugness to his face and it misted a quiet fog of pleasure over his head that blended him with the air around him.

Momentarily, a sparkle on the flower gleamed brightly, shooting off a ray of gold.

George wondered why they sometimes faded and why they sometimes sparkled. And he wondered why they only sparkled brightly when his mind and his eyes had wandered away from them. It had been the same before. When his

father had first shown him the sparkles, that was what they had done. He remembered when his father had first found the flower. And he remembered his father's steady excitement at the time. It seemed much steadier than what George felt now. Somehow his father had been able to direct his excitement so that it came out easily through his eyes. It was as if his father had known where to place it. George thought that what he was feeling was much more restless and out of control.

His father had told him that when he was a young man, an old lady in the park had spoken to him about the flowers, but she didn't know what they were good for, except that they were rare and had some magical power. His father had looked for them for years on his long walks. And one day he found one. After that, he had spent years trying to build something that would work under its own power. But he had only managed to make things twitch a little bit. When he was getting too old to see the pieces he was trying to put together, he told George about his plans and told George to work on with it if he felt like it someday. At the time, George couldn't imagine that he would want to, but he said he would. His father had told him then that his effort might come to mean something, or it might not. Something strong could grow from it. Instead, later, the strength grew inside him.

Until now, when again the pleasure bubbled up from his bowels and rose, widening through his stomach and up into his chest. Why the glow in his chest? What was it? Why was it there? His mind would look down to his body and question, and as soon as it looked, the glow would ebb away, leaving his chest empty. It would not stay to be looked at. As soon as he felt something coming, he would look at it, and it would disappear.

There was something about the rising feeling in him that resembled the quiet burn he felt in his stomach when he was with Mary, when he made love to Mary, or when he missed her, as now. It drove him to move towards her. It drove him to be with her, it pulled on him to be next to her and it finally drew them together. But as he was with her through time, it moved from beneath his stomach upward and changed from its first bloody thick red. It worked upward slowly shifting through the colors of the rainbow until it rested in his mind and became white. But still, the blood-red bubbling was really quite different than what rose in him now: this yellow ballooning of silk. He couldn't look at it enough to know what it was or where it came from. He wanted to understand this welling upward. He needed to know it so he could place and direct it, for he felt that in it lay the strongest thing of all.

But nothing was coming of all that thinking. Instead,

for now, he would get down to work. Somehow, at least, he knew that was right. His tendons tightened and he pushed back from the table. After placing the jar carefully on a shelf, he slammed out the door of the shack. Again, he yanked piles of carrots from the ground, baked loaves upon loaves of bread, dragged heavy bags of carrots to the shed, and wavered with high tilting stacks of bread loaves across the farmyard, preparing himself for a long stay in the shack. Securely locking the door, he set up his portable toilet and arranged his tools. Again, he got down to work. But this time, he dumped great piles of insect pieces and flower petals onto the table. He organized the piles in a long line down the center of the table. It was going to be an assembly line. This time he was going to build many butterflies, not just one.

Starting at one end of the table, he began by moistening digestive tracks and connecting them to the nerve string and the tiny brain. He worked on them for awhile until he had a small stack and then moved on to the mouth and eyes. As he worked down the line, the shapes were gathering size and form.

There was a soft tapping on the door. George tried to ignore it and kept working. After a moment, there was again a knocking, but louder. Then again, but it was a heavy bumping like someone was using their fists. George continued to work. Then came a heavy slow crashing like

two arms swinging from above the head slamming against the door. Then it stopped. George wondered who it was.

Slowly and silently, he stood up and tip-toed to the door. Peering through a crack in the boards, he saw the gray robe of the Abbey. He was bent over in the woods rummaging among the bushes and the undergrowth. Pulling violently at the plants, the Abbey yanked out a heavy branch. Jerking a leg into the air, he stomped off the smaller branches. Then he lifted the big branch over his head and trudged to the door, his face purple and furious. George pushed against the door to hold it shut. The Abbey swung and crashed the branch into the door. George shuddered with the blow, but he held. The Abbey smashed a few more times, and then, fatigued by the effort, he stopped. George heard the Abbey wheezing harshly. And saliva snapped.

"George. George, you in there?" He breathed heavily. "George, didn't you find the girl out there in the woods? What's the matter with you, anyway? Wasn't she pretty enough?" Again, thick breathing. "Christ, Goddamn. Where is that jerk?" He dropped the branch to the ground.

Then the Abbey shuffled off, his robe dragging a little in the dust.

George sat down and worked. And he worked ceaselessly. Days passed and then weeks. Butterflies, stiff

and still like they were frozen, were piled up at one end of the table. Others were lined up in neat squadrons on shelves. Some were scattered randomly on the floor, including a few unfinished rejects, either without a wing or legs. One butterfly was perched in George's hair, its wings dipping lightly whenever he moved his head. And on his arms, a few flower petals and insect pieces were matted into his hair. And he kept working.

Finally, one day when the air lay thick and hot with the moisture of deep summer, George leaned back and breathed. He stretched his arms. Then he got up, grabbed the bucket from under the chair, stepped out the door, and dumped the chunky liquid into the underbrush. Then he swung the bucket back and with a violent jerk, tossed it flying into the woods until it crashed into the bushes. He was angry at the bucket, because it stank hideously and he was sick of it, especially at how easily it tipped over.

Back inside the shack, he pulled a huge bundle of cloth from a closet. He unravelled it and whipped it open until it became a huge bag. Then he began throwing butterflies one by one into the bag. After endless flapping, he finally decided to scrape piles off the table with his arm and their little bodies pattered against the cloth in large clumps. The air became dusty and yellow from the pollen.

Once all the butterflies were in the bag, he squeezed its open end shut, and reached carefully for the jar with the sparkles on it. He opened the jar and slowly lifted the wilted flower out. It had no sparkles on it.

Looking in the jar, he saw the tiny glows scattered around in the bottom. He opened the mouth of the bag and dumped the sparkles into it. Quickly closing the bag, he lifted it above his head to keep it off the ground, and walked awkwardly out into the early morning grayness.

George tried to focus on the green fringe of the summer forest, but his eyes were cramped into close vision. The hot gray sky blurred into the forest. The sun, just rising, blinked behind the trees, even through the clouds.

In the back yard, George started shaking the bag. It was so large and puffy that George's body jerked around crazily when he tried to shake it. So he held the sack out from him with stiffened arms and swung it around him in circles. It swished through the air as he spun around.

Then he slowed and stopped. Again he shook it. The bag fluffed out a little with the sound of a thousand flutters. All over the surface of the bag, the cloth vibrated and jiggled with a soft frenzy. And the bag puffed up, billowing outward like a balloon.

George stared at the action of the cloth for a moment. He didn't know that this puffy fluttering inside

the bag was what he had expected. Then he remembered that he had forgotten to imagine what this final moment would be like. It had never occurred to him what would be happening. In the furor of his work, he had forgotten to expect anything. And he was about to open the bag. He tried to imagine now what was about to happen. So he stopped to think.

But he wobbled and his stomach turned nauseously. He realized he was dizzy from spinning the bag around. Then he thought he'd better open the sack before he messed everything up. He could fall over on the sack and squash all the butterflies.

He whipped open the bag, arms outstretched. Nothing happened.

He looked down into the bag and saw hundreds of orange wings unfolding in what was an orange and black pool slowly beginning to stir. A few fluttered up to the edge of the bag and one landed on George's arm. They appeared to be stuck.

George shook the bag. An immense windy roar shook him. Many fluttered up past George's face. Their furious pattering began a hundred little swirls of wind and they covered his vision with a dusty orange blur. Their frenzied battering of wings grew into a heavy fog. Pelting and smacking, their small moist bodies thumped against his skin. Some thumped cold and wet. Others patted his

skin with dry and dusty wings as they brushed up his face. They roared past him, a thousand little fans, shooting up together like a swirling orange fire. They rose up above him into the sky, wavering off in an erratic, wobbly line. In clusters, they shifted into a horizontal flight, turned flat at the level of the tops of the trees, and wavered off just above the forest. Occasionally, one small piece of the chaotic orange plume of steam would fall out and drift slowly down to the trees. After a few moments, the largest clump drifted off over the forest and out of sight.

George looked down to the bag. A few butterflies rested motionless in the bag, and a few fluttered but couldn't get out. Some still rested in the edge or on George's arms. He shook the bag. And some pattered up and erratically drifted away, flapping. A few tried, but couldn't fly and some lay completely still. George dropped the sack to one hand and looked around. He could only see a few orange flutterings here and there, all of them already off to the edge of the forest or slipping just above the grass or over his garden. Several dead butterflies were scattered around in the dirt of his back yard.

George felt hot in the morning air. The sun had not come up enough to lift the sky. He was also tired. And the spinning dizziness swirled back into his brain. Standing there, a little limp, he wobbled lightly from

foot to foot. So he started walking. He walked slowly, slouching and wavering a little, as he dragged the limp cloth along behind him through the dust.

5

In the town, things were very still, because almost everyone was still asleep. From above, the cloud-softened light of the sun touched the roofs of the houses and the yellow fringe of the trees. A truck clanked quietly down one of the streets and the birds chatted freely in the trees and on the lawns.

In one small house at the edge of town, the school-teacher was turning restlessly in her sheets. She had been having a very hard time sleeping. Her sheets were drenched in sweat and she was hot all over. She would twist and the sheets would stick to her skin. Her skin stuck to itself. Her arms would stick to the side of her body and her thighs would stick to each other. It had been this way all night. Now sweat was pouring down her brow and she was still sticking to everything. She rolled sideways. And she gasped. Throwing an arm over her head, she breathed shortly and quickly. Again her eyes opened halfway, as they had done countless times before during the night. She threw the sheets off herself. And, lying on her back, she spread out her limbs in an effort to dry herself. It didn't help; it hadn't helped any other time either.

Her eyes drooped open. Slowly and with much effort, she drew herself up. Standing up, teetering, she walked

to the window and threw it open. The cool air washed over her body and cooled her. She moaned thankfully and a lazy smile opened on her face.

The small clumsy cloud of orange butterflies flittered above the trees and in their jagged flight they battered out over the fields at the edge of town, still working along at the level of the tree tops.

As the schoolteacher leaned back to let the air flow over her, the butterflies flew as a flock in through her window. With the light force of their fluttering mass, they pushed her back on the floor. Moving down, they flickered all over her and brushed lightly as they flew against her. All of her skin was covered with butterflies and they patted their wings all over her. She squirmed and rolled under them. They tickled her and touched all of her at once, softly. Letting out a short gasp, she moved a little, upward. The butterflies ran chills up her and compressed tiny points of pressure against her skin. She tingled into a moan. And as the butterflies moved over her rolling in and out of one another like an orange sea peaking in waves, she cried out softly with a very quiet moan-like laugh.

And then, just as quietly, they rose up from her and flew off through the window, out into the gray sky just above the trees.

FOUR

George had gone back to the shack and collapsed. He was very tired and could have slept for two or three days for all he knew. Actually, he had only slept twenty seven and a half hours, but he never knew that.

He slept on the floor boards of the shack. The floor was covered by a furry film of dust that was tangled with dried petals of flowers and the torn, cracked legs, wings and hollowed out abdomens of insects. Here and there among the clutter of the dust rested the unfinished remains of winged bodies, the rejected butterflies. George had collapsed into this thick dust. He had pulled the large butterfly bag up over his body, using it like a sleeping bag.

The next day, later in the morning, he opened his eyes to the dust and the ruins of his labor. A great plain of dust met his eye and travelled off toward the horizon, littered along the way with flimsy thin skeletons. It was like a strange dry feathery desert, its mountains formed by the wreckage of great flying beasts.

George jerked up. A thudding dull pain shot up his

spinal cord. He froze for a moment. Then he dragged himself up, his whole body aching like he had slept on a rockslide. Everything hurt. He reached into the sink and drank great glugs of water and thought that he should get something to eat. He creaked outside, squinting painfully in the sun and walked haltingly like one who had been slugged on the back of his skull. George felt as if he had slept three weeks, the last waking moment somewhere on the distant edges of his memory. He struggled along toward the carrot patch. Then he worked his feet slowly between two rows of carrots and in the center of the patch, he plopped down. Yanking a carrot from the ground, he knocked the dirt off against his pants. And he chewed into the carrot. It was followed by a slow cracking.

That, he thought, ought to make them stand up. Now they would pay attention. How could they avoid thousands of butterflies the same color and shape he had made before? Every moment they moved, another butterfly would appear somewhere in their line of sight.

But, my God, what if they didn't react to that? He had to find Mary. He still ached on the inside. And he needed to know if she was at least safe. It was one thing to miss her; it was another to wonder if she was in pain. If this didn't work, then he would have to smash down every house in Willardville until he found her, or at

least found a clue.

He tried to remember back to those times when he was in school or when he was working and had Mary with him. He wondered if he would have paid any attention to someone then if they were doing the kind of strange acts he was doing now. That question bewildered him. And he could not answer it. He tried it over and over in his mind.

As he sat and chewed and thought, a large boxy truck rumbled into the yard. It was white, and wrinkled and dented fairly evenly all over. George tried to look at it, but it was awfully brilliant in the sunlight. It screeched to a stop. The door swung open and the Abbey climbed out.

"Hey George, get up!"

George spoke quietly, "Hi, Abbey." And he limply waved a carrot in salute.

"Hey George, you have to get up. You got to go with me. You are in trouble."

George continued chewing while looking curiously at the Abbey, who began walking now toward George with solid steps. He stomped across the carrot patch. "Come on George, let's go."

George struggled to get up. The Abbey reached down and pulled him up by the arm and dragged him across the field to the truck. With puffing breath and bulging veins,

the Abbey heaved George into the back of the truck and he closed the door.

The truck bumped into town with some crashing and swaying. George held tightly onto his head until the truck rolled to a stop at the railway station.

The Abbey pulled George from the truck and set him up on the ground and held him there for a moment. "Now, start walking, George." The Abbey held George as his legs wobbled along on top of the ground. With some confusion of movement, they moved up onto the train and the Abbey plopped George into a seat and then nestled down between George and the aisle. The railroad had continued to hook a passenger car onto the freight train that rode the spur up to Willardville, even though no passengers had ridden the train for twenty years. They were the only passengers in the car.

George sat pale, staring forward to the headrest in front of him.

The Abbey leaned toward George and spoke earnestly and apologetically, "George, I'm sorry to have done this to you. I know it wasn't nice. But you are messing things up in this town and the people are getting angry about it. They were ready to come get you and take care of things their own way. And it wasn't going to be nice."

"But Abbey. Oh Christ, Abbey. I have only been trying to find Mary and no one listens to me. Not even

you." He spoke quietly and looked ahead into the back of the seat.

"George, I had to do this for your own good. I saved your life."

"What life?" His jaw muscles rippled up the side of his head. He still looked ahead.

"You see, George, I just happened to be going on a little vacation and I thought I'd take you along. It will do you good. And it will do the town some good too. No more of those crazy bugs flipping around shredding up personalities that were so hopefully blossoming upward. You shouldn't have done that, George."

George looked out the window at the forest spinning by. He thought of Mary. The whipping of the trees swerved in through his eyes, twisting into his chest, whirling his stomach into a grinding knot. "Yeah, well that isn't all I'm going to do. You just wait a little bit."

"What you need George is some warm tropical sun, palm trees swaying in the wind, hula dancers swinging their hips with soft music, and large bowls of fruit punch sitting there, thick and creamy." His arms drew a wide circle.

"What I need to do is to find Mary. And I'm going to do that. When can I get off this train?"

The Abbey's head jerked back. "What? Get off this train. You can't do that." The Abbey slid one of his hands into a pocket in his robe as if he were trying to do it unnoticed. "George, you don't want to get off here. This whole town is crazy. The train doesn't even stop here any more." The other hand reached into another pocket. "And besides, what are you going to do? Go out and make more butterflies? Cause another great rucus in the town? Start a whole new series of butterfly attacks? Keep everybody off their jobs, because they are wandering around looking at butterflies?" His hands were searching frantically around in his pockets. "Goddamn. George, you aren't going back to that town. The whole place is falling apart.

"Then it worked!" George sat up, his eyes widening.

"What worked?" The Abbey asked quickly. He stopped shuffling in his pockets.

"Now maybe somebody can tell me where Mary is. Now maybe they'll listen to me."

"Nobody knows----." Then the Abbey stopped.

George looked at the Abbey. "Nobody knows what?"

The Abbey's red splotches deepened for a moment.

"Nobody knows where Mary is. I've asked around the town for you. And no one has seen her. Listen George, you just need a nice vacation."

"Then where did she go?"

"I don't know, George. But you better settle down. You might wake up the conductor."

"I don't care if I wake up the conductor," he shouted. "Mary's got to be somewhere." He jumped up.

The Abbey slammed him back into his seat, pinning him with his arm.

George stirred and twisted, but it was of no use. He fell limp.

"George, it's of no use to struggle. You are going away and you are going to stay away for a while. Then you can come back. But for now, you better get used to the idea. So sit there and relax. If I have to, I can get tough."

George thought that was true. The Abbey's grip felt as if it was crushing his ribs.

And then the Abbey relaxed his grip.

In a flash, George dropped, squirming down under the Abbey's arm, and he fell to the floor under the seats. Wriggling along, he pulled himself from seat to seat underneath. Then he jumped up, leapt into the aisle and dashed down the center of the car. He flashed along even though he jolted as he slammed into the corners of some seats along the way.

The Abbey was stuck, furiously yanking at his robe, which was tangled around the armrest of his seat.

George leapt out the door of the car and jumped

down the steps of the vestibule and snapped the door open. Suddenly, the wheels clacked loudly against the tracks as the train crashed along. George surveyed the rolling forest. Just ahead, poking barely above the trees, he saw the roofs of a town.

He heard the Abbey yell, "Stop! Stop!" And with a soft spring outward, he leapt from the train, and rolled spinning down the bank, dirt flying and weeds thrashing. He spun into a thicket of bushes and slowed to a stop.

As the train clacked off into the distance, he could see the Abbey's head poking from a window and his gray hair flapping in the breeze. Then the train turned away off into the trees.

2

With jagged rips in his clothes, several bloody raw scratches in his skin, and a sooty covering of oily dust over his body, George ran into town, limping a bit from the fall. He wondered where he was. He had never been anywhere except Willardville and Dorian, the town he had occasionally delivered halters to. But he wondered more about the Abbey's strange behavior. He thought he had better see if he could get some help to take back with him. Otherwise the Abbey just might overpower him again. It worried him that he knew no one in Dorian.

Cautiously, he crept onto Main Street and peered up and down. Then he recognized the town as Dorian. That gave him some relief. But he saw no one. The town seemed deserted. All the buildings were old, tattered and peeling. And some of the buildings sagged in the middle from the weight of age. But the dirt of Main Street was neatly packed down from heavy traffic and no weeds grew there.

A small whirling wind curled down Main Street past George and lifted a little column of dust in the air and swirled it along.

A loud crunching cough ripped through the air. It was followed by the guttural clutter of throat-clearing. George turned to look and he saw a gray rumped man wiping

his face with the back of his hand, and sniffing wetly. He was staggering out of a bar with a bottle swinging in one hand. George thought he might as well try him.

"Hey, can you give me some help?"

He looked up. "Huh?" And he spat into the street.

George walked closer. "Can you give me some help? I've got to find some people to help me."

"Everybody's outta town. Hey kid, you wanna drink?" He swung the bottle in George's face. The odor shot a tiny dry heave up his throat.

George said, "No thanks." He gasped. "Where did everyone go?"

"We got a problem here. This town's got a problem." He took a swig on the bottle. "But I ain't the problem, in case you're wondering."

"I gotta get help. Fast."

"Yeah, we got a problem. So everybody's gone outta town."

George's eyes bulged out of his head and his tongue quivered. "I got a problem," he implored.

"Yeah, looks like you do. Just look at you. You're barely hanging on. Out town's got a problem."

"I gotta get some people to help me. Can you tell me where some people are?"

"Up where everybody else is. Up at the hazak mine."

"Where's that?"

"'Bout a mile up the road." He whipped the bottle into the air, plugged it into his mouth and let the liquid bubble into his throat, his adam's apple bobbing. Then he dropped the bottle forward and wiped the drool from his chin. "Yeah, everybody's up there. Doctor too. But it don't look to me like you could make it up there, the way you're torn up and bleeding. You oughta come inside and set a few minutes. Then you might make it up there. Come on in here." He motioned George up the stairs and then helped pull him up. "What's yer name, boy?"

"George."

"Well, hi there, George, welcome to Dorian." He grabbed George around the shoulder and squeezed him twice. "I don't got a name." And he tossed the half-full bottle of whiskey into the street where it rolled and dumped a curving line of liquid onto the dust.

"What'd you do that for?"

"Hell, it's all free. I'm the town drunk." He led George into the bar and sat him down at a table. "It's my job."

George looked up, confused, and watched the drunk wander behind the bar.

"Yep. You see, the town here didn't have a town drunk, so they had to hire somebody. I needed a job, so I took it." He lifted a bottle of gin from behind the bar and, taking aim, he lobbed it through the air across

the room where it splattered across the piano. "That's the kind of work I'm supposed to do every once in a while. They say it makes things more fluid around here. Heh, heh. I don't know what they mean. It's just another goddamn job."

George fidgeted at the table. "Hey, mister, I do have a real problem and I need to find some people, quick."

"Maybe you need something to eat, kid."

George looked up at the ceiling. "I mean it."

"I think you need somethin' to eat, kid. And I'm not going to tell you where the people are until you eat something." He flipped a bottle from hand to hand. "What I'm going to give you isn't really food, but it's good for you. Maybe, it will even make your problem go away."

"If that's what you're going to say, then give me the food, and let me start eating."

"It's called hazak. It's not really food, but it's good to eat. Comes from the mine up there." He brought a plate of thick steaming white hazak and plopped it in front of George.

George started shovelling it in.

"Good, isn't it?"

George thought it tasted like water. He couldn't answer because he was shovelling it in so quickly.

"Looks to me like you like it the way you're jammin'

it down your throat.

George nodded as he chewed. Then he threw down his spoon, and then blurted out through sputterings of hazak, "I'm done. Where is everybody?"

"I told you. They're up at the hazak mine."

George began to turn red. "Where's the hazak mine?"

"Just wait a minute. My, you're a restless young fellow. Just wait a minute and I'll show you." The drunk pushed himself up slowly from his chair. "Let me put this here bottle back on the bar like nothin' ever happened to it, and then we'll go."

George stood fidgeting by the door. "You can just tell me where it is and I'll go."

"Nope. Nope. I want to go with you. I've got to show you the directions. I can't tell them to you." He was standing there explaining and it looked as if he would keep standing there.

So George said, "Okay, okay. Let's go." And he stepped out of the bar and out onto Main Street.

The drunk emerged more quickly than expected and they began walking down Main Street, the drunk never explaining where they were going. He simply began walking.

George charged ahead, moving off in the direction the drunk had started in. After a moment, he heard a voice come from behind.

"Hey, fella, you sure walk fast. Boy, if you expect

me to show you where we're going, you're gonna hafta slow down a bit. You took off like a furnace rake. You oughta slow down and take it easy a little bit. I seen a lotta guys like you workin' in gas stations and restaurants. Never makes much difference. People should be home chewing gum instead anyway."

"Listen, you are a real nice man, but---"

"Maybe that's what's wrong with those gas station guys. They aren't nice."

"---I have a real problem. You don't seem to understand."

"Maybe that's their problem." He mused. "Why don't you chew some gum. Maybe that will settle you down."

"I don't have any gum." George kicked a can across the street. It bounced and clattered.

"I should've sold those gas station guys some chewing gum. Why didn't I ever think of that? I could've made near a hundred bucks. Oh--see, I used to sell chewing gum till I came here to Dorian. I showed everybody the gum here and they thought I was a lumber salesman. They gave a great big bash and threw plates all around in honor of my coming. Next morning I was wandering around in the dusty street when the mayor came up and asked me if I wanted a job. He said there was an opening for town drunk at \$200 a month plus booze. So I decided to help him out."

"Why don't you help me out," George asked.

"Well, I don't have any more gum. I'm not a gum salesman any more."

"I know. I know."

He looked over at George. "Now I'm the town drunk. And drunks don't worry about gum."

They had passed out of the town and were climbing higher into the tall puffy trees. The road became gutted and washed out. A stream rushed down beside the road.

George asked, "Is it far?"

"I don't know. I've never been up here."

On one side of the winding road, leaning against a tree, George spotted an old rusty red wagon. They were still not moving as quickly as he was hoping. Many times George had to stand and wait for the drunk and fidgeted and twisted, popping his knuckles.

When the drunk panted up to where George was examining the wagon, George asked him, "Would you like to go for a ride. I'll pull you up."

"Heh. Sure, but, boy are you nuts."

"Yeah, get in. Quick."

As soon as the drunk got most of his body into the wagon, he pulled it with all his strength. The wagon twisted and bumped over the many rocks in the road, but there were no groans from the man behind in the wagon. Soon his mouth became dry and pastey and sweat dripped over his eyebrows. He was breathing deeply and rapidly.

He only hoped that the destination, whatever it was, would not be very distant. A huge boulder, embedded in the ground, stretched across the width of the road. Running toward the steep and slippery incline of the boulder, he gathered momentum. His face grew full and pounding red and his breath burst in gasps. At first, they rushed up the surface and he heard the wagon's wheels crash into the rocky surface. They came to a standstill, perched at the top momentarily and with a small jerk, they ran out of control down the other side.

After they slowed, the drunk said, "Boy, I can get out and walk now if you like. No need to kill yourself."

George kept pulling. And then he looked up to view the new terrain.

Across a wide meadow and reaching high above the pines was a steel granite cliff with wooden scaffolding leaning halfway up one side. Just above the platform of the scaffolding, a deep black hole punctured the gray of the cliff. The late afternoon sun sent a sharp black shadow across the cliff.

"That's the hazak mine, George."

"There are a bunch of people up there on the platform and sounds like they are arguing and yelling at each other." George was looking up squinting.

"Yep." The drunk said, "that must be where the problem is. Looks like they've got one."

George dropped the handle of the wagon. He ran across the meadow and leapt up the stairs of the scaffolding, panting heavily. The bickering and arguing grew in intensity as he approached the platform. There was much shuffling and stamping of feet on the platform and rude bursts of disagreement.

As he climbed, a sudden cold wind whipped at him, tearing at their clothes and tingling their skin. The noise of the people above them quieted and George looked up at the sky. Against the sunset, a massive thunder cloud was building and it glowed in yellows, oranges and reds that curled and turned in on one another, growing on itself, pushing tall yellow mushrooms higher in the sky and sending its heavy orange center downward to suck up power from the earth.

Arriving on the platform, George saw a group of people dividing their attention between the churning orange cloud and a wrinkled sheet of plastic that lay crumpled in the center of the group. A few were studying the plastic, looking for clues.

George spoke up, "Hey, can I get some help from someone?"

Someone said, "No, not now. We have a problem. We can't get our swimming pool to work here. We been pouring water on it all which ways and it just keeps running off. For awhile, we were really getting upset at each other

because it wouldn't work. We tried holding all the edges up until it filled with water, but as soon as we put it down, the water runs out all over the place. We're beginning to think it's no good. If so we're all going to get real mad. And then, we aren't going to be any help to anybody."

The storm lowered into a deeper orange and blasted waves of cold wet air across the platform. Glowing from deeper behind the storm, the sun pushed through a radiance of orange and red. Clearly, the storm would soon blow onto the platform.

"Helluva cloud!" Someone said.

Others stared and gaped.

George walked over to the piece of plastic. Searching around the bottom edge, he found a tubular nozzle, wrapped his lips around it and began blowing. Gradually, the plastic blew outward with air, filling and stretching.

Most were watching the storm, but after a while, some noticed what George was doing.

"Hey, look at this!"

People began turning around to look at George and the plastic pool. They stared and quizzed over it as it became firm and stiff. George plugged the nozzle, set the pool down on the platform, and stuck the hose in it. And the water ran into the bottom of the pool, filling into the folds.

A great roar rose up from the crowd on the platform. They cheered and screamed and hugged each other. And they laughed at their own folly and their old crazy ideas about how to put water in the thing, making jabs at one another.

But just then a huge roar swooped down on them from the thunderstorm. People dove from the platform and tried to scramble down the steps, but there were too many for the steps. Some hugged the platform floor and some clung to the cliff face. And others simply cringed.

The orange cloud dove down on them sending a full flurry of frozen mist over them. The stain of the cloud surrounded the atmosphere blurring all in a haze of orange, whipping and twisting in the wind.

The mist grew into heavy orange flakes. They pattered against the platform and twisted erratically through the air. George saw the orange butterflies surrounding him, battering him and driving him back. They dove at him, twisted and fluttered against his skin, swishing and poking with cold moisture and jabbing like ice. He was pressured backwards by the force of the wind and the cold and the flittering of the butterflies. Then he slipped and fell.

For a time, he was sleeping or unconscious; he didn't know which. But when he woke it was still dark, pitch dark, and the air was thick and damp.

He felt around. Everywhere he touched was slimy muddiness, slick and cold. He shivered frightfully, rattling loudly as the cold and dampness soaked into his skin and worked deeper inside, turning skin and limbs numb. He could hear a dripping that slightly echoed on its way to him. Trying to call out quietly, he opened his throat and pushed air through it, but nothing came. He tried again and it only wheezed or coughed. The coldness and dampness had pierced his throat.

A deep groan rose from caverns below him. It was as if the earth rumbled. The groaning seemed to belch upward through ages of rock, throbbing the whole mountain and echoing from all sides.

He tried to move. He thought that there must be a way out of here. Reaching around, he felt the mud turn upward. He crawled in that direction, slowly and carefully making secure steps in the mud. After a few steps upward, he felt the mud beginning to slip under his weight. And he slid downwards, sideways, off into a different direction from where he crawled. Clutching on all sides, his body reached for support, but he slipped helplessly and securely into a tight passage. The mud on all sides squeezed lightly in on him. It felt especially slimy and very mucuous, but it gripped in on his body like a muscle.

Light filtered into the cave in the morning. George

began to see that what was around him was white, not dark. And finally, he saw that he was surrounded by hazak. It breathed around him and sent small bubbles up beside his body, burping. And it sweated a thick mucuous.

Above, outside of the entrance of the cave, he heard voices. And after a moment he heard splashing and noisy comments.

"Hey, this is great!"

"Yeah, it was really good of that guy to come along and fix our pool."

"Yeah, he was really something."

"I know. I wish I could be like that. Come along mysteriously and fix something and astound people. And then disappear just as mysteriously!"

"Yeah, but you wouldn't disappear. You would hang around and wait for everybody to pat you and kiss you and love you. That's the difference between you and him. He is like a God. You are just a regular jerk."

George wheezed desperately through his throat and kicked and wiggled trying to reach the voices.

"Hey, do you hear something?"

"Yeah. It's just the hazak burping again."

3

For a time the hazak squeezed in on him with a tight secretion of mucous. Breathing was hard. And the moisture sank into him.

He heard the voices from outside. Sometimes there were few of them, and sometimes there were many and they were loud. But no one looked into the cave.

After an hour or two, to George it could have been a day for all he knew, the hazak began loosening. It drew away from his ribs, and breathing became easier. But then, gradually it began loosening more and he felt himself slipping slowly through the opening. He was sliding downward into an unknown. His feet reached and kicked around in air. He could feel nothing anywhere as they swung around in the dark. And he slid downward, his shoulders catching for a moment in the narrowest squeeze of the hazak. No longer could he see light coming down from above. But then the hazak released and he slid through with one last ripping suck. And he dropped down into darkness.

For a moment, he spun around in the air, dropping. Then, splash, he hit water.

George struggled back to the surface. He could see nothing and thought he must be in an underground stream. Nearby he could hear a great rushing of water, the tumble

of a waterfall.

Then he felt himself rising up, the water lifting him, and he was tossed sliding over a rock and thrown into the tumble. He fell, slipping by the rocks, pushed on by the roaring water.

Then he and the stream gushed forth into light. He spun for a moment in a small whirlpool at the bottom of the falls and was swept out into the stream that slowed into easy rapids. His head bobbed along between swirls and peaks of water with white caps foaming on top. He watched himself roll along in the valleys, felt himself slide over large rounded boulders, and every now and then his knees bumped the rocks on the bottom.

After a time, he began trying to work himself toward a bank of the stream. He pulled and pulled moving downstream ten feet for every foot he moved toward the bank. Then it occurred to him that there could be another waterfall down the stream. He didn't know where the stream was headed. And he began to pull harder.

When he had pulled himself into shallower water near the bank, he found that he had been swept into a town, and from what he could see, it looked like Dorian. He was at some back edge of the town he had not seen before.

When the shallowness of the water and the slowness of the current allowed it, he stood up and walked to the

bank. And next to a large willow bush, he sat down. He tried clearing his ears and his head, and let the water run out of his clothes. He felt groggy, cold and very tired.

He stood up and climbed up the bank, but it was difficult for him. His head throbbed and he shivered. He knew still that he wanted to get help. But he was moving much slower, and couldn't get his legs to run at all, so he walked into the streets of Dorian. Things were a bit foggy and unclear.

People and cars were moving about the streets. It looked like a normal busy day. A few people stopped to look at George as they passed, but then they moved on by. Some stared and whispered with one another as he walked by.

Once he thought he heard someone say, "You see, he isn't any goddamn God. He came back, trooping right on into town to collect his praise. But he sure is wet."

No one stopped to help him, and he figured, considering how he looked, he would have some difficulty getting help and explaining his situation. He decided to head for the bar. There he might find the town drunk, the only person he knew in Dorian. And he wanted a cup of hot tea.

The streets were gradually clearing of people and cars and the sun was lowering down toward a mountain.

The shadows were stretching out across the ground when George found Main Street, saw the old bar and headed toward the door. His clothes were beginning to dry, but underneath he was still shivering.

When George opened his way into the darkness, a few others, mostly men, were shuffling their way through the door. They seemed to avoid him, stepping back away from him when he passed through.

"There he is, ladies and gentlemen, the old swimming pool God himself. Think you're cool, don't you? Hah hah."

George looked up to see the drunk leaning against the bar, gesturing wildly with one bottle in his hand. Scanning the room, he saw a few people looking at him.

Someone else said, "Yeah, he thinks he's a God. Stupid punk."

And somebody else blabbered, "Aaaee, thpph allgeshplushkk thpither cluugsh." And George heard a hideous lung-snapping laughter followed by a rumbling wet cough.

George stepped up to the bar at the other end away from the drunk. He asked for a cup of tea.

"Yeah, okay," the bartender said, sneering lightly. "But you better get out of town real soon after you drink your tea. We don't like Gods around here."

George picked up his cup of tea and walked back to

find a hidden place to drink it.

The drunk asked, as George passed, "Where you been all night? Out frolicking around with some goddess? Heh heh."

Everyone laughed and snickered.

When George walked by the old lady, she said, "Thappaasklash theph shmarrish shplar karr." Her nostrils grew a transparent bubble. And then it popped.

Everyone laughed again.

George found a lonely booth hidden way in the back and sat down. He slid across the seat and stuck his feet against the heater vent in hopes of warming himself up. The tea was hot and it tasted very good. He thought that it was clearly going to be very difficult to get anyone in Dorian to help him. He might now have to go back to Willardville alone and see what he could do.

While he was immersed in thought about what to do, he saw the old lady hobbling toward him. Underneath her brown dress, her flesh jiggled about, and she coughed nearly every couple of steps. She sat down in his booth, sliding slowly into the seat across from him.

Here she was again, closer than ever. George was terrified. He shivered and sipped on his tea. Her nose hung from her face in a twisted glob. Hairs and warts poked out from the pasty skin. She wheezed and her nose bubbled. George stayed still and looked at her, not

out of a sense of courage, but because he was frozen. His eyes were locked on the pits and craters of her skin. His aversion was overcome by his curiosity.

She sat, looking back at him, her eyes hidden behind folds and wrinkles of skin. Then she drew her hands up to her neck, and pulled a flap of skin up off her neck. She ripped her chin away.

But there was another smoother chin underneath. She slowly peeled the skin up her face, ripping small pieces off at a time, yet keeping the whole rubbery mask intact. She peeled off her nose, and then her forehead, and dropped the mask to the table.

She was a middle-aged woman and it was a broad and elegant face. She had wide cheekbones that sloped away as they curved off into her hair. Blue eyes and smooth skin.

The mask sat on the table like a dead fleshy rat.

"Hi, George." She said.

"George? How do you know my name?" He asked.

"I've known you for years, both here, when you used to deliver halters, and in Willardville, most all of your life. You have been having trouble lately, haven't you?"

"Yeah. But who are you?"

"That, I am not permitted to tell you. But it won't do you any harm to know me. Tell me, what has been happening to you?"

"I've been looking for Mary."

"Oh yes, I figured you would. But I didn't think you'd search so diligently as you have. But I know about all that. Where were you last night?"

"I guess I was in the hazak mine. Last night? Is that how long it's been?"

"Yes, you disappeared last evening about this time when that storm appeared."

"What do you mean? You know about all that. What do you know about my search for Mary?"

"I know all about it. Hey, George, tell me if anyone comes around the corner. I've got to put this mask on if they do. Only reason I took it off was so you could understand me."

"What do you know? Do you know where Mary is?"

"Settle down, George. Trust me. If I tell you anything now, you are liable to run off half cocked and screw everything up. So I'm going to tell you nothing yet. But soon, very soon, you will see Mary. Just do what I tell you."

"Somebody's coming." George said.

She snatched up the mask and pressed it to her face. And she straightened it as she got up. Then she leaned over him and quickly whispered, "Meet me at the bridge on the road to Willardville. Two hours."

She stood up and smacked him on the side of his head

and said, quite loudly, "Thpershtth phfthatmek!" And she turned away and hobbled off, sniffing heavily.

The man walking into the back room smiled at her, said, "Yeah, heh, heh," and he turned into the men's room door smirking at George.

George stood up, feeling lightened. He at least had some hope, even if it might not work. He walked out of the bar dropping his tea cup off at the bar on his way out the door. He let it slam down fairly hard. And he walked down Main Street and on out of town.

He arrived at the bridge, walked off the road a ways along the bank of the river and sat down on a large boulder that was orange from the light of the setting sun glancing across it. The rock was warm and he let his body soak in that warmth.

The rock stayed warm as the sun set behind a mountain and its orange light turned upward into the sky and rolled away westward until it too disappeared beyond the mountains.

Then he fell asleep.

4

When he woke, the forest was dark. The moon above in the dark blue sky shone brightly; it was almost full, and it spread a silver glaze over the top fringe of the forest. And from its light, the rock beneath him glowed white against the black vegetation around it. It was quiet except for the stream rushing beneath him.

"George," whispering, quiet.

George turned around startled, and froze. He watched, trying to see into the undergrowth that was only one deep shadow.

A branch rustled. And then a figure emerged from the bushes onto the rock. "George, I've been trying to find you. It's getting late. And we've got to go." Her voice was muffled, probably from the mask. She pulled George up.

"Whew, I was asleep. I fell into a deep sleep."

"You must've. For a while I was yelling out loud. But when you didn't answer I began to think some kind of counter plot was going on. I knew you wouldn't leave unless someone had dragged you away." A small pistol poked out from inside the folds of her dress.

"Okay, Let's go. I'm ready." George pulled his pants up by the belt.

She tucked the pistol back into her dress. And she walked away off the rock into the bushes.

George followed her, "Where are we going?" He wanted to ask if they were going to find Mary, but he didn't want to start pestering her. He might begin to irritate her if he asked everytime he wondered.

"To Willardville." She turned partially around to talk to him, and the outline of her lumpy nose appeared, fringed from the shining of the moon. Some of the hairs glistened. "But we are going to avoid the road and walk on a small path through the woods. The road might be patrolled."

"Patrolled?"

"Yeah. By the Abbey. He has his feelers out everywhere. You've got a lot to learn, kid. He had electronic sensors hidden in the woods around the town so that he can tell when anyone is leaving or entering the town. Soon we are going to have to walk as silently as we can."

"Why are you wearing that costume?"

"So that I can remain as anonymous as possible. I made myself as hideous as I could and no one pays attention to me. People even try to look away. It's great for snooping around."

"It sounds sad to me."

"Yes, I suppose it is. But there is work to be

done, regardless."

They walked on for a way, snaking through the dark undergrowth of the forest.

After a while, she stopped. She pulled a bundle out from underneath her dress. "Here, George. Put this on. I have a work uniform for you. And a Jerry mask."

"A Jerry mask?"

"Yes. You know Jerry. He's the assistant foreman in charge of the ramp construction. If you look like him, you can move somewhat freely around the town. But George, you are going to move very carefully. None of these outbursts."

"What outbursts?"

"Like you had with the teacher. And don't go wandering up to help somebody if they have a problem. Like with the swimming pool. Walk along in a nice straight line. For at least the next twenty-four hours."

George groaned with a tone of quiet resentment while he was climbing into his clothes.

"And put the mask on now. Just in case we get caught while still in the woods. Maybe we will be able to get out of it, at least much better than if you were George. And if, for any reason we get separated, meet me at the teacher's house.

"Well, what about Mary?"

"I'm still not going to say anything, George. Don't

get so wrought up."

"I'm not. I'm just asking you a question about somebody who matters a lot to me."

"Yes, I know she does, George."

"Well, at least, is she okay?"

"The last I know she was. Now, that's enough."

"When was the last you knew?"

"Not long ago. Now, that's it. No more. If you shut up, everything will work out fine." She crossed her hands in front of her, palms out. "From here on, we are total silence. No talking at all. And you don't step on a twig, or make any sound. It isn't hard if you stay on the path. But if we need to stray off, it gets very difficult and we have to brush things out of the way of each step. Now, if at any time, I want you to stop, I'll hold out my arm like this." She held one arm straight out to the side, her fist clenched. "When it is safe to move, I'll repeat the action." And she repeated it. "Now. Let's go."

She turned and walked off into the woods. George stayed behind, following closely, watching her brown dress ripple under the shadows. When they reached the outskirts of town, she slowed. Staying low and near fences, she crept into alleys and darted across streets silently until they reached the back yard of the teacher's house.

She held her arm out. George froze. She opened a

gate and snuck into the back yard. For a few minutes, she moved up and down the inside of the fence and then came back to the gate. She held her arm out again, and signaled for George to come in.

They stepped slowly across the back yard until they came up against the back of the house where there was the doghouse. She knelt down on her knees and crawled in. A dog started whimpering.

"Hush up, John," she whispered. The dog stopped whimpering.

George followed her into the doghouse. It smelled dusty and close, and was very dark. George felt for the dog so he wouldn't step on it. Then he felt a wet tongue slurping against his face.

She clicked something and a small trap door into the kitchen flipped open. They pulled themselves through the door, walked through the kitchen, the dining room and climbed the stairs. On the second floor, they turned into a bedroom. Kneeling down over the bed, she shook the covers. A groan came from the bed. "Hey, teach, wake up."

"What, huh?" She moaned, and turned over. "What do you want?"

"Wake up. It's Marian. We've got to do some business."

"Marian. My God, you work in strange ways. Who is there with you?" She sounded startled.

"George."

"George? You brought a man into my bedroom? Marian, what will you do next?"

"That you don't know yet. You'll have to wait and see."

"What do you want? I want to get some sleep."

"What's the late news?"

"School is called off tomorrow. Big celebration."

"And the Abbey?"

"Oh, he's lost it. Today he came into the school-house and scared the wits out of the children. And he yelled at me in front of them, telling me I was teaching them all the wrong material. He told me to teach them the evils of water, and how it dilutes and dissolves things. And he told me to teach the value of airlessness and vacuums. Oh, it was terrible. I'm glad there isn't any school tomorrow." She yawned a great long yawn. "Ooh. I'm tired. I want to go to sleep."

"Well, you can take a big long rest now, I believe. Have a good sleep, and thanks teach." She patted her on the hips. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight. And goodnight to you, George." The sheets rustled as she tucked herself in.

He said, "Goodnight." And they walked out of the room.

They sneaked through the alleys and across parks to

another part of town, toward the Leatherworks. George didn't know where she was going; he just followed. When they reached the Leatherworks, they went around behind the building to where a lit window was shining in the darkness. It was certainly the only lit window in town. They approached, but it was painted on the inside so it couldn't be seen through.

Marian bent close to look in a crack. She moved away and motioned to George to look into the gap where the paint was chipped away. George bent down and looked.

He saw an airplane. Much of its body was built with wood, but there were patches of leather here and there, and the wings were stretched with a thin leather covering.

Then he saw the Abbey walking down the side of the airplane, running his hand across the woodwork. The Abbey then pulled a tight leather helmet over his head, stretched a pair of tight goggles around his helmet, and climbed into the cockpit. He bounced a little in the seat, and George could see the Abbey's lips flapping. Barely audible through the wall was a muffled flapping hum as the Abbey bounced along in mock flight. Then the Abbey climbed out with a jaunty leap to the ground and started shaking hands with the air and nodding with a cocksure grin on his face. Tucking the helmet and goggles back into the cockpit, he walked out of the room, clicked a light off and came outside. He strolled down the street and, before turning a

corner, he danced a little jig.

Marian whispered to George, "Now, I've got something special to do. You go back to the place in the woods where we dressed and wait for me. I should be back in an hour or two." She began to pry on the bottom edge of a pane of glass in the window, and after a couple of twists, popped it out. She said, "See you soon, George."

George walked off, circled the edge of town through the woods and arrived at the place, where he sat down against a tree and waited.

About two hours later, she returned and said, "Now, we've got to get a good sleep. Tomorrow is a big day."

George couldn't sleep very well. The mask was sticky and hot against his face. And he thought a good deal.

5

In the morning they walked around the town through the woods to a place near the large ramp. They reached a rock that gave them protection but was situated in such a way that they could look out over the entire town, the complete sweep of the ramp, and the road that wound its way up the side of the ramp.

All day they waited and watched. The town was busier than usual. Children ran in the streets all day. And their parents went about their work with a special frenzy. There was especially great activity around the Leatherworks. Sometimes a man or small teams of men tramped up and down the ramp, stopping here and there to check certain places or to discuss something. But they did not seem in a hurry or too concerned.

In the early evening, the bustle around the Leatherworks grew. Everyone in town seemed to be there; all the streets were empty except those in front of the Leatherworks. Then with noisy activity on the part of the crowd, a truck emerged from the factory pulling an airplane. The airplane was being pulled backwards, its tail resting in the bed of the pickup.

The pickup slowly drove out of town toward the ramp. And the crowd followed. Children ran near the cab and around the wings of the airplane looking it over and

trying to touch it. Some young boys were trying to jump onto a wing or in the cockpit, but whenever they tried the driver would give a spurt on the accelerator and the boy who had tried to reach the plane tumbled to the ground, his friends laughing at him. A few official-looking men rode in the back of the truck and scolded the children. The older people straggled behind as the pickup truck worked its way slowly up the winding road off the side of the ramp. Whenever the truck reached a point where the trees narrowed, it slowed, men jumped out of the back and watched the wings and signaled to the truck driver as the truck inched forward. And then it would move faster until the next narrow place.

George turned to Marian. "Shouldn't we get down to the edge of the road?" The sky was turning darker as it became evening and off beyond the valley and the mountains, the moon was rising its red edge above the earth.

Marian looked at him, a little surprised. "Yes, as a matter of fact. Let's go."

They walked down through the trees slowly and with light feet, shielding themselves behind trees as they moved. Through the trees on the road ahead of them, they saw the truck pass, its engine revving in low gear working up the hill. Then the children passed and they lowered closer to the road.

When the last stragglers had passed by, they jumped down onto the road and began walking briskly up through the crowds. They reached the front of the group just as the pickup truck was backing the plane onto the platform at the top of the ramp.

The crowds were packing around the platform and dribbled a little ways down the ramp. The Abbey got out of the pickup, now dressed in a brilliant white robe and carrying a bright golden harp. He directed the pickup to move forward. It did and the tail of the plane dropped down to the platform. And the pickup pulled away.

The sky had become darker. It was now a deepening azure. George looked down the ramp, saw it drop sharply away, then saw it swoop sharply up into nothing off into the deep green valley, into the mountains and off beyond into the deep red-orange egg of the moon, now rising up from the mountains.

The Abbey dropped the harp into the cockpit, and striding back to the pickup, he pulled a large odd-shaped package from the bed and hoisted it into the passenger compartment behind the cockpit. He then faced the crowd and held out his arms widely, his robe flapping lightly in the breeze.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we have approached the day. Today is the day when we suspend space and move beyond into the vacuum between things. We now dawn on a new era, the

Era of Nothing, suspending ourselves into the gaps that space objects apart from each other. Let us be thankful to ourselves and proud of the work we have done. Because now we must stop; to stop is to suspend in the Vacuum.

The crowd let up a roar. A few waved their hats and whistled.

George poked Marian, "Let's move down the ramp a few feet. I think we'll have a better chance there."

The Abbey climbed into the cockpit, waving. "Start up the engine."

A workman spun the propeller. The engine popped and snorted into motion. A cloud of smoke wafted over the Abbey and drifted away into the dark green forest. He pulled a champagne bottle from inside the cockpit and held it by the neck of the bottle suspended upside down in mid-air. With the other hand, he tugged the leather helmet and the goggles over his head and snuggled them down tightly.

The motor rose in pitch, screaming, the propeller spun into a blur. The Abbey splashed the champagne bottle against the side of the fuselage, and the plane began to roll. Then it tipped over the edge onto the ramp and began to drop.

George screamed, "Aaah!" and they leapt. They jumped onto the side and pulled themselves up into the passenger's seat behind the cockpit.

The Abbey turned around. "What? Jesus. Get out of

here!"

Marian pulled out her gun. "Stop this plane."

"I can't. It has no controls."

Then they could talk no more. They were dropping down the ramp and gaining speed rapidly.

George muttered, "Whew."

The Abbey turned around to look ahead. They all looked ahead. They were dropping fast. The plane spun down the ramp. A great clattering began as the boards of the ramp beneath them shook and trembled.

George looked down the runway. It dipped and swooped up and turned into the beyond, tossed itself into the space of the scenery.

They drove, screaming down. The plane lifted for a moment then crashed back onto the ramp. It jarred and shook. And then, with a clattering roar, they dove, sinking into the bottom curl of the ramp. It sucked them down, pulling their stomachs beneath them, stretching their cheeks from their faces. The plane crashed and clattered, the engine spinning. And with one swooping lift, in one heaving toss, they whipped out into the air, still and quiet. The nose of the plane dropped slowly until they were moving along, striding through space. It was smooth and still, a slow drifting. They were gliding along into the orange and yellow moon, looming large above the mountains ahead.

George reached down and began tugging at the package. He tore the strings away and yanked large sheets of paper away from the quiet lump.

Marian held the gun on the Abbey. "You can just sit there and dream, buddy."

"It is Mary." George had touched through the paper into her raven hair.

Marian pulled a microphone from a corner of the passenger's pit. "D-O-C -- D-O-C. Come in please. Calling Domestic Operations Chief." The radio crackled on.

Now the package tore away, paper ripping from the inside until Mary's face appeared.

"This is D-O-C. Who's there? Who is calling?"

Mary looked at George with a full face.

"This is CI-542 calling D-O-C Number Five."

"This is D-O-C Number Five. Go ahead."

"D-O-C, we have Willard in the air. Which plan do you want to use now, D-O-C?"

"CI-542. Use Plan Two. Plan Two, do you hear?"

"Yes, D-O-C. Plan Two. We hear."

The Abbey was looking back from the cockpit. He asked, "What is Plan Two?"

"You'll see. D-O-C, Plan Two is Active." Marian reached back and pulled a stiff lever from the floor-boards. She gave it one big yank.

The Abbey slipped from his seat and dropped through the floor, spinning out into the open air beneath the plane. And he dropped into the darkness of the earth.

"D-O-C, Plan Two is on target."

"Okay, CI-542. Thank you. We will pick up."

"No, you won't, D-O-C. I am going after him."

"CI-542, you will not."

"D-O-C, I declare war. CI-542 is going after."

Marian turned off the radio and from under the floor boards, she pulled a parachute. She pulled it up over her arms onto her shoulders and snapped a belt across her chest. She began climbing over the side of the fuselage and said, "Take it easy, you two. Have a nice trip." She dropped down, spinning into the dark space of earth.

The plane lifted a moment and yawned. George and Mary saw above the mountains and looked into the yellow moon.

FIVE

The Abbey spun through the air. At one moment, he saw the lake below him; at another, he saw the plane twisting and turning against the stars above.

He spun splashing into the lake. His robe twisted around him as he sank deeper into the black water. He crushed into it, sinking, plunging. And he dove deeper and farther until he hit mud, and then he stuck. Suddenly, it was thick and deep, and he had to tug himself free from the gray muck surrounding him. He yanked and pulled, and in one quick sucking, he was free, and he floated to the top through the gray striations of muddy water.

And he breathed, spewing fresh air into his lungs.

As he swam to the shore, he discovered his harp was hooked over one of his shoulders. It made swimming more difficult, but it pleased him.

When he reached shore, he sat down and breathed in great gulping breaths for a time, and then he pulled the harp off his shoulder. Turning it upside down to look into its base, he found that his plastic stopper had fallen off. He stared into the hole that was left.

"Nothing! Nothing at all. Only a wide gaping hole."

He turned it over again and a small gush of water ran out.

"Christ. Nothing at all."

He looked up into the sky. He saw the plane banking against the full moon that was changing from yellow to white as it rose higher into the sky.

Below, he saw a parachute, fringed with the white light of the moon, slip into the woods on the other side of the lake.

He stood up, tossed his harp into the lake, and walked briskly off into the woods, that sloped up into a gentle mountain.

THE SPACE COWBOY

by

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ABSTRACT
of
THE SPACE COWBOY

The introduction to the novel explains the process of its creation and the reasoning behind alterations and additions that were made during that process. Over a period of four years, sections were added on to sections in an attempt to make the structure complete and all elements fully explain themselves consistently throughout the work.

The novel itself attempts to portray two radically different types of people who are trying to come to terms with the desire to create for themselves a pleasant and satisfying way of life. One, named Willard, or the Abbey, after having absorbed a certain amount of experience, creates for himself a Master Plan to deal with life's complexities and life's end. The other, George, does not consciously try to create a life-style at all; he operates on sheer intuition or impulse. Furthermore, because these characters are in a social world, even in spite of some desires to the contrary, their actions have an impact on one another and their various plans or lack of plans. The novel also attempts to dramatize the natural series of events that their conflicting desires would reasonably generate within the framework of their personalities and their environment.