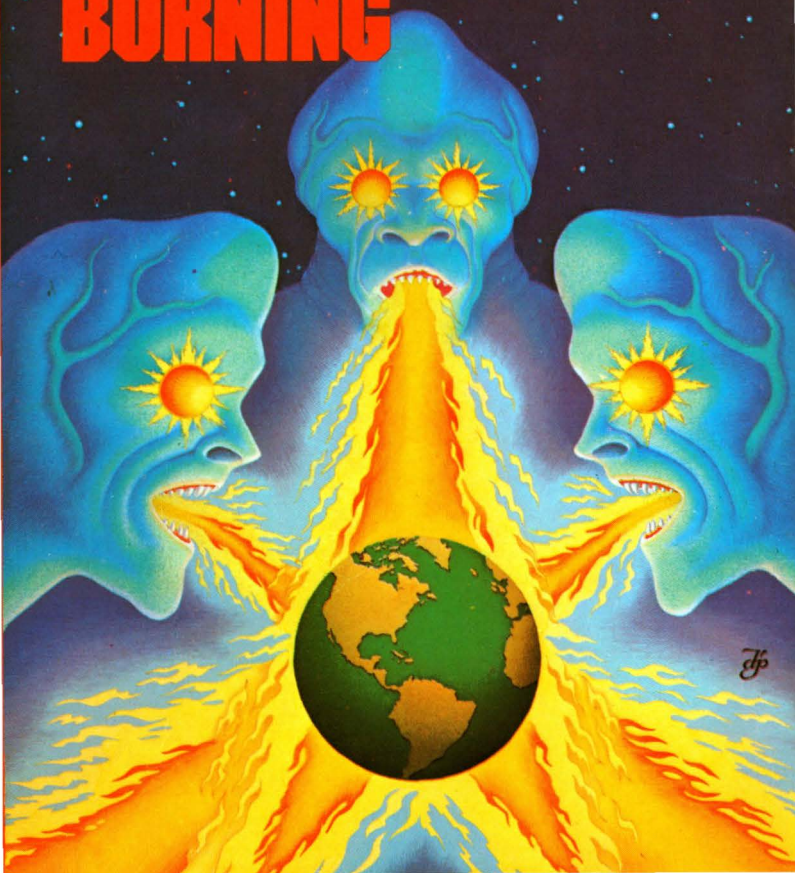


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**BARRY
MALZBERG**

**THE DAY OF THE
BURNING**

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"Listen to me Mercer, I'm an emissary appointed to observe your planet. I have been advised that the stage one period of information-gathering has been concluded; we are now moving into stage two. Like it or not, as of the beginning of this conversation, it is entirely up to you to determine whether your people will be allowed to join the Galactic Federation."

"What are you talking about, Lucas?" I say with admirable calm. "What do you mean?"

"Don't interrupt, Mercer. I am going to assign you a task. If you have not completed it satisfactorily within twelve hours, it will have been decided that your planet is not worthy of joining us and, hence, you and the three billion other miserable representatives of your defective species will be destroyed."

by Barry N. Malzberg:

SCREEN

ORACLE OF THE THOUSAND HANDS

THE CONFESSIONS OF WESTCHESTER COUNTY

THE FALLING ASTRONAUTS

BEYOND APOLLO

OVERLAY

REVELATIONS

HEROVIT'S WORLD

TACTIC OF CONQUEST

IN THE ENCLOSURE

UNDERLAY

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE

PHASE IV

ON THE PLANET ALIEN

THE SODOM AND GOMORRAH BUSINESS

THE BEST OF BARRY N. MALZBERG

OUT FROM GANYMEDE AND OTHER STORIES

GUERNICA NIGHT

CONVERSATION

DAY OF THE BURNING

by K. M. O'Donnell:

FINAL WAR & OTHER FANTASIES

THE EMPTY PEOPLE

GATHER IN THE HALL OF THE PLANETS

IN THE POCKET AND OTHER S-F STORIES

UNIVERSE DAY

DWELLERS OF THE DEEP

**BARRY
MALZBERG
THE DAY OF THE
BURNING**



ace books

A Division of Charter Communications Inc.
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036

THE DAY OF THE BURNING

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for Robert P. Hoskins

Printed in the U.S.A.

“ . . . their alienation informs them with the cunning of true madness . . . a shrewd and dangerous population . . . most careful measures must be taken . . . protected areas are conditional upon the judgement of the Police Commissioner and no infractions of his judgement by civilians will be permitted . . . root causes must be sought . . . they must be uniformly considered to be armed and hostile and for the duration may be shot on sight if in the judgement of the detaining officer . . . ”

from Procedure 37B-241

for the Brownsville Sector

4/18/76; revised 4/19/76

PAST MAINTENANCE: Further in the pending interview, the worker must discuss with the client the method of past maintenance: i.e., how did the client support himself prior to the application for assistance and why is the application necessary at this time? Logical explanations might be: loss of employment, loss of assistance from relatives or friends, exhaustion of savings, sudden and unexpected financial losses or others. Worker will maintain a sympathetic attitude throughout the investigation; it is truly stated that most applicants for assistance are there against their will and the ego-structure must be guarded against further infarction or social deterioration . . .”

Report of the Senior Case Unit for Municipal & State services: 1973 (withdrawn 1973).

“‘I need money for *food*,’ she said to me, ‘I need money for *rent*, I need money for *shoes* and *beans*; my chillun is starving and I *don’t feel too good myself*’ she said. ‘Oh, who do you like in the fifth today?’”

Investigator: NYC Dept. of Welfare 1964 (probably spurious).

I

I will try to make this as objective and clear for you Lords as I can: I know, I know the penalties. Subjectivity will not intrude except shyly and by small degrees: it was not my fault. It was *not* my fault. The documents, God help me, will prove it not to have been my fault. It could have been no other way; of course, I hope that this conclusion will not offend the Lords.

II

1981: Do what I will, at the most intimate and terrible moments of my life, Lucas is always there. I call him Lucas. This is the name I have given him, since he appears to be of Lukine dimension and personality and came with no credentials of his own. He accepts what I call him as he accepts everything: blandly and with a whimsical overtone.

I cannot know his name, he explains to me. Lucas is the name we have settled upon, but it bears no more upon his objective reality than "Richard" or "Elizabeth" or "X234". We agree upon this with an aspect of self-congratulation, fewer and fewer still are the misunderstandings between us. I have always yearned for a friend such as Lucas; now that he is mine, do I have the right to find him a burden?

I will stop this. I really will, I will learn to come directly to the point, lean and hard, sustaining the narrative elements and leaving the question of idiosyncrasy entirely out of it. The Lords prefer a tightly knit prose with a minimum of exposition and many fast-moving action scenes in which the character can be shown in pursuit of an objective. How can I quar-

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rel with their literary taste? I know almost nothing of literature myself.

Lucas has told me of the Lords' preferences, along with much else. Always, always he is beside me, in or under the seat of purposes.

He is beside me during contemplative moments at the Center when, with case records open before me, coffee in hand, I try to work out the ethos of past histories for the sake of certification. He is in the field to whisper a hasty confidence or two during one or another of the crises which erupt in this deranged and muddled occupation to which I have been tenured. Lying casually in my bed at odd hours of the evening, legs crossed and at ease to continue his dialogue, Lucas continues to coach me, even should I have someone else in that bed. There is a great deal of information to impart, he keeps on hinting, our time is limited, he (and we) must therefore use the moment.

I am trying to say that even when I am having sexual intercourse, that ritual and astonishing act which I have been able to piece out with certain girls at the Center (I make my opportunities close to home) through luck, fortune, circumstance or boredom, even then when I am engaging in my spiteful but necessary acts of lust, Lucas is there to observe and comment. The creature has no sense of shame. He does not even possess a common if bemused decency.

Dolores, the key to this tragic history, and who would have ever known this? I am hovering over Dolores in the dim and light-spotted surfaces of my

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bed, huddled under various religious *motifs* on the walls fortunately shrouded by the darkness, wedging myself into her at last with power and authority, small birdlike cries, either hers or mine floating wingless. It is a consummation, an ending; one nurtured through months of hurried conversations at the Center, hundreds of drinks or sandwiches taken bit by bit in neighborhood restaurants, five or six evenings of more calculated concentration and rage during which I have worked on this girl, this girl investigator, this twenty-three-year old idiot possessor of two enormous breasts (Lucas tells me I am quite mad) which I want, with all the cunning at reach, to manipulate. (It turns out, however, that she hates to be touched there and so I have not Had My Way after all; the Lords may appreciate this irony for I do not.)

It will be good for you, I have pointed out to the scatterbrained but intent Dolores, it will take our relationship to a newer and more important level. Resistance to sex is an anachronism, a bit of culture lag; here in 1981 it is impossible to take the old codes seriously. Toss away those restraints and let us, unprotected by superstition, carve out a relationship of our own, which in terms of your breasts could hardly fail to be stunning. Etc. And onward (I am not a cold or a calculating man but it is my best estimate that it has cost me upwards of three hundred investigator's dollars and hours to bring Dolores to the position she at last occupies) and now Lucas, that bastard, sitting tailor-fashion at the far corner of my bed, his fingers poised against his chin for thoughtful con-

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temptation—he is very slight, not dwarfish, perfectly-formed in fact but very nubile and thus—to my discomfort, able to tenant almost any space near me, is ruining the whole thing as he has disrupted so many others.

“Think about this, George Mercer,” he says, (he still insists upon addressing me in a formal way although one would think that our relationship, by this time, would have arrived at horrid intimacy), “and think well, do you really want to do this?” No one hears him when he is speaking, of course, except me. This is a common aspect of demons and Lucas, I suppose, is a demon, or at least that is one word for it.

“It goes against your best instincts you know, and besides there is something wrong with this girl. I cannot put it into words but she fills me with fear and disgust, much as if I were repelled on the deepest level and my instincts, in any event, are excellent. Not only that, she is no good for you. She allows none of your peculiar sexual liberties and can only warp your own mind through the corrupt transference of her ruined blood.”

Lucas talks in this fashion. You hear not my rhetoric but his. I have been unable to introduce any changes at all in his manner of speech and will not be responsible for it.

“Please,” I say, “you must leave me alone now, Lucas.” I am still working my body in the motions of generation, being obsessed by the thought that Dolores might think something amiss. Also, I subvocalize my conversation but have not yet learned how

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to do this skillfully. "I'm entitled to some privacy," I say. "I really am. There have got to be limits to everything; I've done all I can for you but this is impossible."

"I am leaving you alone. I'm leaving you quite alone, George Mercer. Do you see me attempting to stop you from this madness? Although I could, I would think, if I tried. But I take no action. Think of me then as one functioning purely in an advisory capacity. It's your problem."

"No," I murmur, "no, I've really got to be left alone." I heave myself into a position of deeper penetration, the enjambment slightly painful to my abused organ but I am not going to alter positions now. Under no circumstances. "I'm entitled to some consideration myself, damn it. I work hard, I worked hard for this one."

"You do not understand, George Mercer, or barely understand what it is to work hard. Not that you should take that as a personal insult."

Too much. My subvocalizations have burst forth; the integrity of the dialogue has been ruptured. "What's going on here?" Dolores wants to know. "What is this?" Her little eyes fluttered open against my wrist, not that those eyes would see much in the darkness or that she would be able, in any case, to see Lucas. He is, as has been proven to me on so many occasions that I no longer entertain hope of discovery, a private visitation without objective referent. It would be useless, then, to take my problem to the authorities.

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"Nothing's the matter," I say, "really nothing at all." I groan, simulate passion, try to indicate that I am completely absorbed in her and that my conversation, indeed, was only the sound of lust.

"You were talking to yourself, weren't you? I heard it."

"He isn't," Lucas says, picking up the conversation. This I suppose is the attempt to be lightly humorous. "This man is perfectly sane or at least as sane as you are which is to say by the standards of your planet, he is functioning adequately. He is talking to me; he calls me Lucas and I've been trying to give him knowledge in a few areas. He's an intelligent man but still needs a great deal of advice which, of course, I am happy to yield. Advice is my function."

Lucas is perfectly capable of such extended speeches and whimsicality; the fact that no one is witness to his dialogue gives him the leverage and freedom of the truly insane, not that I am in any position to contemplate him at length in this format. I feel Dolores's awareness underneath me, she is winking into activity. Murmuring hopeless threats and imprecations against Lucas (who burrows into position as if it were a crevice and regards me with wicked delight) I will myself back to connection.

"This is *some* time," Dolores says, "this is just some time to stop. That's all I can say. What's wrong with you?" and I realize that my organ, faithless in this extremity, has indeed become limpid and slipped at least partway from her interior to hover dangerously in the area of her thighs.

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"I'm sorry," I say, "I'm truly sorry about this," having no gift for such graces, and return my mind, not to say my organ, to the task at hand.

Usually, even in the face of Lucas's dialogues (he has done this to me before but never with such insistence as with Dolores: is there something about her which interests him?) if I cultivate a fierce determination and single-mindedness, Lucas will desist. That is not to say that he will leave the area, he will *not* leave the area, he is stubborn, but he will, at least, become silent. It is hard to block him out entirely however should he decide to put the issue strongly. I dread this. I really do not quite know what would happen if Lucas should begin, one evening in company, to scream.

"Well, you ought to be sorry," Dolores says, "I don't think you know what sorry *is*," and so on and so forth but her body, cooperating as her voice does not, still yielding and ingratiating under me, belies the harshness of this statement. "You know," she says, running her hands up and down the sheets, talking, still inexhaustibly talking (most of my women do this), "I couldn't stand to think that you were a nut. I mean, with what's been going on now, there's just too much stigma attached to fucking lunatics, I couldn't live with myself if I were." All of them sound like this. I seem to have an ability, maybe the very ability which attracted Lucas to me originally, to become involved with people who do not converse or think normally. "Well then," Dolores says, sensing as well she may that I have again become somewhat abstract, her eyes focusing upon Lucas who is sitting

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with an air of civilized involvement, chin perched upon palm to regard Dolores who, I have been assured, cannot possibly see him, "well, what is this? Are you here or are you over there?"

"Here," I say, "I'm right here." I begin to roll and pummel upon her in that peculiar and individuated *modus operandi* which I have lately adopted for intercourse, not so much a fusion as conference or confrontation, extending my hands to fondle her stomach (but not her breasts) as rather stiffly, but with the requisite skills, I sidle inside her.

"Not there," Dolores says, slapping a finger away as it points helplessly to an extended nipple, "didn't I tell you I didn't like that? I don't want to have to tell you again; the next time I'll stop you," but then as if in repudiation extends her well-formed, luminous arms and gathers me against her, working on a cheek. "Go," she says, "go baby."

"You know," Lucas says, "I really think that you're making a big mistake." He extends a delicate hand to muffle a yawn, leaning at ease against the pillow but still modestly averting his eyes as an act of minimal consideration. "This is really a deadly and limited life you're leading, George Mercer, and these cheap and aimless little affairs with which you manage to squeeze out the time are getting you nowhere. You must find a better prop for your life than pitying and bored collaborators. However," Lucas adds, raising the yawn-stifling hand to pat the plaster on the wall until some vagrant pieces sift to cover him with a fine, white dust imparting upon him a rather saintly look, at least as far as I can judge in the dark, "however,

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I will admit that it is certainly your life and I cannot control your series of choices. All that I can do, at least for the moment, is to give you advice. I hope that we can do better than this, however," Lucas says, dwindling on the pillow and then, in a rather absent-minded way, he vanishes.

Lucas comes and goes with shocking rapidity. He is as unpredictable in the one as the other but on this I can always count: he will never calculate his appearances or disappearances for my benefit. "Listen here, you bastard" I begin and then stifle this against the air.

"Do you?" Dolores says petulantly but with some finality in her tone, "do you or don't you? I can't take this anymore," betraying a certain worldliness and insistence which, perhaps, I would have been better not knowing. I have a tendency to idealize women, particularly under stress. "Well—" she says, making a series of tentative motions, "oh well, now, if that's—"

"But I do!" I say with enormous passion, "I do, I do." Lucas is gone and I tell myself that concentration can be fueled totally by energy . . . but he has made, oh he has made as so often before, a complete mess of my evening and social life and with all the good will in the world, I simply cannot seem to bring off matters satisfactorily, looking at it in the sexual aspect. Although I try. Oh yes indeed, how I try! Those groans and shakings would fill the world: if only they would fill Dolores.

Lucas has advised me that I cannot blame him for personal limitations, pre-existing conditions if you

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will, and that the *doppelganger* theory of our relationship would be self-defeating and useless. Perhaps it would be. Perhaps this is true. I simply do not know, ramming myself again and again into the girl's yielding but spiteful flesh, whether any of this makes a difference.

Sometimes I think that my burdens are insuperable: I cannot stand this any more.

III

Bulletins inform us that the Venus mission proceeds on schedule: now the countdown has been established. Newsprint demonstrates us pictures of the two astronauts entrusted with this fearful but necessary mission of conquest: tall men with stunned eyes in full dress uniforms who speak of their families and the timeless lust for space. The bulletins and newsprint surround us, piercing the welter of other, even more useless information—sometimes I think that the government is, perhaps, a little frantic about this expedition after the unfortunate Mars situation of some five years back. Looking at the astronauts in the newspaper, I envy their apparent solidity and weight, but at other times I feel more doubtful. There seems to be something rather spurious about this conquest. I would talk it over with Lucas but by some kind of common, unspoken agreement we do not discuss the topics of the day but reserve our time for more pressing, personal matters.



IV

In the morning, Dolores having left my bed early to establish her own, more private, routines, I report for work at the Center. Lucas does not check in with me: his hours are not in true conjunction with mine nor is his metabolism, and he tends, by his own testimony, to be rather more of a night-person. Rarely does he make his initial contact until noon.

Even at this early hour, the Center is filled with activity, surrounded by menace. Applicants and active cases are lined up outside of the doors, a trickle already being eased through the intake section, sitting with ominous paper bags in their hands and murmuring about the status of their cases. Upstairs, one flight above the intake section, the early employees of the Center are already responding, with full midday terror, to the advisements of supervisors who are required by the Laws of 1974 to report one hour earlier than ordinary employees in order to maintain full control.

“All *right*, Mercer,” my own supervisor, a heavy but rather graceful man named James Bowman says, “all right now, all *right*, let’s get those case records

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and certifications moving right out." I do not want to quail before him but I do and he leaps upon the twitch with pleasure. "Got to bring you up on charges if things don't shape up around here," Bowman says, "got to get some work out of you here and now. Getting restless, Mercer: got a crew on its way to Venus so we've got to tend to matters on this here earth. More than ever, right? Right I am; right this man always is."

I will say it and be done for I do not have the time to repeat this: Bowman no less than all of the supervisors in this Center is truly insane. He has come to terms, I have rationalized, with the madness, terror, waste, panic and loss on the murmurous intake level below with an excessive and compulsive interest in forms, bureaucracy, corrected applications, the controls of certification, the rigors of procedure, thereby—or such is the theory which I have conceived—distancing himself from the ethos of the situation downstairs, although never sufficiently to keep a cast of true desperation from his features or a tone of pure rant from his voice. Bowman never speaks but declaims. In more relaxed, informal moments, he fulminates.

He seems, in fact, on the verge of falling to his knees at almost any given time to beg God or the spirit of Venus for release, his eyes abstractly searching the fluorescent ceiling of the Center for what might be angels or flame, his hands instinctively remitting to penitential gestures and ritualistic motion. There is nothing that can be done about this although enumeration helps.

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“Let’s get it all moving out,” he says, “beginning with the Dawson Case.” This is ominous, his mention of the Dawson case that is to say since this odorous and ancient case history has given me more trouble than any of the one hundred and fifty others on the caseload and it might have been dread of the Dawsons as much as Lucas’s interpolations which caused my failure last evening. “Let’s think about Dawson,” Bowman screams with a smile, seeing the thin core of vulnerability he has touched, admiring it, “we’ve got a furniture allowance to give on that you say? Well I won’t authorize a damned thing until you clean that up. How many times have we discussed the past maintenance on that one? How many times have I told you that this is unacceptable, eh?”

The Bowman eyes sweep pleadingly from left to right as he says this, as if they are addressing some dark spirit of release, and I wonder, not for the first time, if James Bowman himself might have a visitant like Lucas. Or whether Lucas, working double-time, has been tenanting the two of us. In fact, it is possible that more people than I might think, perhaps all of the employees in the Center, have a Lucas of their own to keep them stepping and thinking lively all the nights of their lives, but I have little concrete evidence of this and in addition, as Lucas has warned me, it would be useless to think of him as a metaphor. No progress in understanding could be made from that direction.

Bowman, glints and echoes of his biography steaming around me as I move toward him, has a divorced wife and three children in another district I under-

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stand (there are rumors, in fact, that they are receiving assistance under the wife's maiden name but how could this be verified?) while now settling for homosexual liaisons with a unit clerk who works at the far end of the loft. (Bowman does not believe in getting too involved with persons near his place of employment.) The Center, to be sure, is full of cases like Bowman and who am I to judge? I do not walk upon water myself as the old saying goes and would hardly remark upon this except that I know the Lords want me to draw a full and detailed portrait of my experiences. This was specific in the request. I am really doing the best that I can and bear with me, gentlemen, if you please, I am getting into the material as quickly as possible and in a style which is bound to divert and titillate if you will only abandon your stylistic prejudices and give me a chance.

"I mean this," Bowman says, now running a suggestive hand over his genital area while he addresses me, then instantly cancels the gesture by raising the hand to caress his streaming forehead with a palm. It is very hot in the loft at almost all times; cutbacks in the civil service budget necessitating the removal or non-replacement of airconditioning. "You're going to have to show some thoroughness and real interest in this job and a willingness to work under the procedures or I sing you the truth about charges." Rather gaily he examines his tie, flips it again under his belt buckle. "That will be necessary, for you know that a supervisor has the right of peremptory dismissal," he says judiciously.

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No they do not, but in any regard this is an old threat. Bowman has warned each of the workers in his case unit several times, yea even unto the most highly tenured, that they are in danger of being brought up on charges and hence to the overall commission on lapses for dismissal, but this, at least, I do not find an object of personal concern. (Lucas is an object of personal concern.) In the first place, no civil service worker, once granted tenure, has been discharged in the recent history of at least this Center (although there are rumors now and then from the central districts) and in the second, this threat is Bowman's equivalent, I make it, of a caress, a reminder of his continuing involvement with his case-workers in the only way (short of fellatio and that in a very limited context) in which he is able to communicate.

"All right," I say, finally having a chance to speak (what with one thing and then with another thing, it is difficult to get a word in edgewise recently), "all right, yes sir, I'll go to work on that Dawson case promptly," and repressing a satiric impulse to salute the supervisor (Bowman is passionate, perhaps, but he is alas humorless) go to my little desk. I take off my jacket to confront the Dawson case yet again, heaped upon the desk top by Bowman's careful hands like a mound of feces, memoranda and ancient home visits spilling from the folder in geometrical patterning, infiltrating the other assortment of papers on my desk.

Dolores comes in. I see her. She works halfway down the loft, midway that is to say, between Bow-

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man's paramour and his own desk, and attuned to her presence as I must necessarily be, I can see even at this distance a certain expression 'in her eyes, lurch of her body, twist of hands and feet that she is not pleased with the Center this morning nor any aspect of it but she will negate that displeasure, she will concentrate on small details of irritancy here and there to block out from her mind the central reason for her anger which is my own relative failure during the previous hours. I raise a hand weakly toward her which must be invisible at this distance; nevertheless she seems to catch the gesture and turns from it quickly, her body closing in upon various levels of self and as she eases herself into a chair I see her, thankfully, no more.

I am uncommonly perceptive these days, that should be obvious from what I was able to deduce of Dolores from a single agitated glance. Lucas has helped that perception in a way; my own constant and recurring experiences at the Center are the central contribution, however, and all in all, gentlemen and you may take this as a fact, I am able to perceive to a great depth exactly how not only Dolores but most of us feel at any given moment and what their true motives are for that state. No, I will not accept congratulations; entirely out of the question. I wear my gifts with becoming, winsome modesty.

Oh, these motives, however! These motives! They are usually tangled, odorous and simple, scented over with retrospection and guilt, the feelings are hardly more complex than the chatterings of infants, but live and let live as the wonderful old saw goes, live

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and let live, leaving the motives out of it entirely and I indeed have my own troubles, too many to stand in judgement of others, even Dolores who has failed me. Resolving then, to think no more of her this morning, to think of her as little as possible even as the day (and Lucas) crawl on, I turn my fullest, most alert attentions to the Dawson case and peruse the card upon which all of the information, facts to the bottom of motive is contained. Breezes stir my hair; I inhale the fumes of the Center and they do not grate my lungs, neither do they sting. I will get through. I will get through the day.

Dawson. Lupe and Phyllis. Children four, premises, basement apartment in the old Division on South 7th Street. Five years on public assistance in the duration file; life-style not to be understood but filled with pain. Three of the children, gifts of grace, out-of-wedlock by a now imprisoned paramour of the overweight but still nubile Phyllis. (What a girl she must have been! I sometimes think but it is useless to speculate.) The other, a girl of three, the natural outcome of the Lupe and Phyllis fusion and blending, fruit of their passion: thoughts of the Dawsons rolling and rolling with one another in their public assistance bed assault me while I compute out with the more incisive portion of my mind the prospective furniture allowance. It checks. The problem is the key to Bowman's mystery and it cannot be evaded: just how the hell did Lupe and Phyllis maintain themselves in the period between December 15, 1975 and April 5, 1976, when they successfully applied for assistance? And why? Why indeed? This is the heart of the case yet

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the Dawsons cannot expose it: vague assertions of loans, hints of the mercy of neighbors. The question was never pushed; prior investigators, all the way back to the intake survey must have been concentrating on Phyllis's limbs, Lupe's obvious sincerity. But how did they get along? Wearily, I make more notes.

"Good morning," Lucas says, none too cheerfully. "Good morning, George Mercer." Despite his proper and continuing formality, he does indeed seem somewhat the worse for the evening's wear. His little eyes which have always to me suggested alienness, although I have no reason to think of him this way, are red-rimmed and faintly stunned at the center of his delicate countenance; his mouth, curiously feral and alert, however, purses with intelligence under those eyes. A good-looking little demon, Lucas and one afflicted with some vanity of appearances: he uses a thin finger to pluck dentifrice or residue from spaces between his teeth, further focussing my attention on that Lukine mouth, then he stretches in an attempt at an easeful posture. "I feel terrible," Lucas says, collapsing upon himself, "just terrible." He gasps this like a prayer.

Sitting as he does in the middle of the huge Dawson case record, open to a critical entry for 3/25/79 in which the issue of past maintenance had been raised and thus blocking my research, Lucas is being spiteful again. He will not let me do my work. I see that I have not commented on his amazing variability of height and width: able, apparently on the one hand, to sometimes stretch himself arm-to-arm across the

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spaces of my otherwise empty bed to hold quiet discussions, he can, on the other, tenant the inside of file drawers, case records and once (quite embarrassingly) a public urinal in which I was about, however discreetly, to explode. Too often I have ascribed his ability to vary heights and moods to sheer *perversity* on Lucas's part; this may not be entirely fair to him or me as it would suggest that he has no true purposes other than to torment and this, I am assured, is not the case. I am part of a much larger scheme, in fact.

"I really think, George Mercer," Lucas says, rubbing his little eyes intently, puckering his lips, slapping a thigh or two and distending, "that you and I have to have a serious discussion now."

"I'm working on a case."

"I have no interest in your employment."

"Neither do I but I'm afraid, Lucas, that the case is paramount." Bowman looks down the line: does he see me moving my lips? If so he can ascribe it to intense research: Bowman has never had cause nor does he have cause now to think of me as a lunatic.

"No it isn't. Our discussion is paramount," Lucas says and with a betraying edge of irritation, kicks the Dawson entry forcefully. Naturally, nothing on the desk moves. Lucas has already explained to me at length the reason for this: something about physical displacement being an impossibility in a metaphysically-altered universe but frankly I do not know what he is talking about and never will . . . just as long as he keeps his promise to limit the physical intrusions upon what I sometimes refer to as My Life

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and Work. "You're not listening to me," Lucas says, "your mind is drifting."

"I have this case," I say, "I'm under a great deal of pressure right now." I say this reasonably which makes Lucas twitch with irritation but this is his own fault; it is he who has taught me to cultivate a reasonable and mannered tone in all of our discussions. It might be more sensible—and I confess to having done this at the beginning—it might be more sensible, I repeat, to rave, curse, become hysterical, or at least resort to muttered threats and denials. But Lucas wheeled me from all of that through his implacability and now I accept their futility. *Terminus est*. This is the situation, I must live it through and so on. Lucas began by reminding me during the early, frantic outbursts (one, on the third level of the new East Side link was so sensational that a confused special patrolman was summoned by other passengers and I had a difficult time talking my way out of that one; the city identification card helped) that they were only heightening the blood pressure and thus shortening my already limited lifespan while having no effect upon him. Resultantly, I have learned and learned well through various processes of will to act as if our relationship were no more abnormal than that between, say, embittered spouses.

"Can't you see?" I go on to point out, motioning to Bowman who, in the absence of other presences in the case unit at this risky hour of the morning, is pacing frantically and looking down the line of desks directly at me, "what I've got to deal with here?" Bowman waves, gives me, unexpectedly, a horrid,

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encouraging wink. *Certify the case and we'll be friends*, he is saying, *can't you see that I'm all alone here and anxious to help you through?*

"I see."

"So you see. This is not the time to talk. Go and talk to Dolores," I say, seized by an idea. "You already know her pretty well in a way, don't you?"

Lucas shudders. "Don't be insane," he says, "I cannot talk to her under any circumstances."

"So come back later or sit quietly and let me be until this thing breaks."

"Not later. No. Later is impossible. Go to the bathroom right now and we'll discuss things in there. Under your civil service regulations with which I am quite familiar, you are certainly entitled to visit a rest room in line with the structure of your evacuative functions. Unlike me you need to evacuate five or six times daily whereas once a year," Lucas says with a hint of disgust, "once every *other* year is quite enough for me. You are engorged creatures. Come now," he says, stretching his little legs and emerging from the case record to perch rather unsteadily before me. "We must move right along in our little plot, for as you see, I am not entirely well at this time."

Indeed, Lucas does not look well. His face is ashen and sprouting little lines like a decayed plant, he is hardly exhaling that health and excessive cheer which has characterized him since the beginning of our acquaintanceship. Dolores turns from her position fifty yards down and glares in my direction; I think for an instant that our gazes will lock and she will

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come from her seat to descend upon me shrieking accusations but after a minute she turns back to her own labors. She had not been thinking of me at all, apparently. I must cease the constant ideas of reference. "Right now, Mercer," Lucas says sharply, "right now we will adjourn for a private conversation or I will definitely have to do something to your mind. I have certain powers, you know. I can restrict your sensory impulses, block out your vision, cause you to babble obscenities if I wish or give you a feeling of total disorientation by wiping out all of your memories for the past twenty years. It would be quite embarrassing to be weeping like a child in the middle of this confusing and rather large room, wouldn't it? It would distress me; I am a creature of some sentiment, and I would feel for you. Nevertheless, I reserve that capacity if you do not cooperate."

"That's right," I say, "I agree. I would like you to reserve that capacity." Lucas has made threats of this nature before, although never frequently or with a certain *je ne sais quoi* of candid desperation which I now sense. In the bargain, it is really quite useless to argue further with my attendant when he is determined at all costs to have a confrontation. I have already sensed the truth of this.

Resultantly—ah, gentlemen, resultantly!—I place my palms flat against the harsh boards of the desk, then rise slowly to survey the rather scenic vistas of the Center which never fail to divert me, managing to combine form and function as they do in a way which makes absolutely no sense, and slowly I follow

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the bouncing and joggling Lucas toward the large if solitary rest room of the Center.

Is this the place for a chapter break? As you have long since inferred, no doubt, I am not particularly skilled in the form of a long narrative; trying as I must to make up in sincerity and inclusiveness what I lack in the cunning of manipulation. Still, a chapter break seems called for: the Lords can have a little coffee if they desire or whatever celestial equivalent of coffee they have; the Lords might appreciate the opportunity for a little rest room use themselves although if Lucas is to be taken as an apt representative that might be forcing the issue by a year or three. The Lords might appreciate nothing other, simply, than the chance to relax and contemplate these chapters already written while your faithful correspondent or their momentarily leaves this rather feverishly-compiled record, taking a pause to stare out through the strange and glinting bars of this establishment that has been so thoughtfully created for me, an establishment with so many of the appurtenances of familiarity and yet it bears a rather horrifying resemblance, at least in decor and internal architecture (I know nothing, you see, of the outside) to that of the Center from which so recently I have passed. Is there something universal, then, about institutions? One would hope so, gentlemen, one would hope so my Lords, I have had, at least for the moment, all of the complexity I can bear.



V

Physical description as you requested: I am twenty-seven years old or at least was twenty-seven at the last reckoning; knowing little of my present circumstances or how long I dwelt in stasis before being disgorged here (fill me in on this sometime, would you please?), single, parents deceased, widowed, divorced or married, rising to the handsome height of six feet one and a half inches when under pressure or dwindling to something just under five feet eight when not; given to small flashes of cold sweats, vagrant fatigue and odd flashes of the heart which are taken to be of psychosomatic origin: in the employ of the Department for two and a half years or at least two and a half years at the time of the events narrated. Maybe it was a little closer to three years. It is hard to keep close track of the time; there is so much more to be attended. Vision normal corrected, reflexes within normal range, sexual life somewhat abnormal at least by the standards of my time but I tried, gentlemen, I tried with great earnestness and purpose, I accepted all of the codes and creeds and if things did not quite work out the way that they

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should . . . well, what truly works out in this life? Soothing voice, good coordination at the level of gross physical receptors, a non-registrant and non-voter since, having worked in the department, I disbelieve in the ability of all accepted political systems to affect or change our lives. Sometimes I had premature ejaculations and other times I found it almost impossible to come at all but by-large, by-large as we say, I felt myself to be at the median level. I was a wholly unexceptionable individual until I met Lucas or he met me, a point which these notes, I trust, makes devastatingly clear.

I did as well with him as anyone could; in fact I think I did better. If you don't like how it worked out and I have no idea of your thoughts on the matter, perhaps you might fill me in on this too sometime, but if you don't like how it worked out, why don't you take it up with Lucas? I trust that I have left no areas of ambiguity in this report and that it will not be necessary for you to proceed with your threatened physical tests.

VI

The rest room of the Center, then, the only one for all of its two hundred employees: a rest room partitioned inexpertly by thin boards and plumbing which separated the sexes almost in an academic sense although it was sufficient to preserve due processes of modesty. As I move from the desk, Lucas trotting like a dog ahead of me, Bowman throws me a piercing look which modulates quickly from rage to pain: I can see that in abandoning my work I have somehow hurt him and I try to signal him, pass him a gesture to say: *it is only of the bowels, not a greater repudiation, and I will be back*. I hate Bowman but truly, truly, I feel for him; I feel for everyone in the Center, there is no absence of compassion in my attitude nor should there be, Lucas having tormented me into an exquisite apprehension of all the sufferings of humanity.

As I follow Lucas (he has already disappeared through the open door, cut right), I cast a sidelong glance at Dolores who is now struggling with a large file drawer somewhere in the area midway between her working space and mine. This, for the first time,

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intercepts her own glance toward me and for one of those fragile, drifting instants which are better perhaps not remembered or even acknowledged, our glances seem to interlock, those glances filled with woe and knowledge . . . and then she dodges her head to reinsert it almost into the pit of the drawer as if scuffling for wafers or wine. For a moment I think that she has avoided me on this search and then, in the next, it occurs to me that she may bring her head out of that drawer to follow me into the rest room screaming renewed oaths and imprecations, recollections of the previous evening and battles lost, a few stray comments upon my sanity or efficacy as a person as refracted through her memory (living with Lucas as I have for this period of time means that inevitably some of his rhetoric rubs off on me; sorry folks, but I am a bit of a chameleon in my patterns of speech and thought, tending quite often to sound like the last person who has spoken to me which is yet another reason why I would prefer not to have too much to do with Bowman, tra-la) . . . but she does not. She does not follow me. Unmolested now, as she was last night, I walk into the rest room.

It is a space filled with the common denominator, so to speak, of our technology: cubicles, murmurs and hush of water, slow, leaking purr of drainage and bobbling of copper precariously balanced and it fills me, as it always has, with wonder: how fitting it is that investigators who deal throughout their working day with the profundities and dread of social dislocation should have the same humble needs as

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their clients and service them in exactly the same way: like sex, it would seem that drainage is the root of us all. I would contemplate this for minutes thinking thoughts of this type, but I find Lucas already in place, inspecting himself in a mirror and adjusting his forelock with quick, tight little gestures while with his free hand he pulls his characteristic shimmering garb to a closer fit, admiring the lines which his body, poking through, creates in the mirror. Oh indeed: Lucas is imperishably vain at certain times, that vanity and unusual awareness of his physical aspect is one of the clues to his condition, I believe, and more than anything else proves that he is an actuality. Lucas is an actuality, afflicted with idiosyncrasy. He is not a figment of my imagination. He is not, as he has correctly insisted, a metaphor. He is, no less than all of us, precisely what he is and will not be explained in simpler terms. Altogether, his company is vaguely interesting at some times, engaging now and then, always preoccupying but despite all of this, I could do very well indeed without him.

“Good,” Lucas says, abandoning gesture as he sees me, “good, you’re in here. Now we can talk. I have several things to tell you and it can no longer wait.”

A merry flush sounds from within one of the cubicles. Grumbling, a Master Supervisor, still adjusting his shirt-tails, emerges from the booth frowning, gives me an astonished glance which holds thirty full years of bureaucratic detachment, and then walks directly through the swinging door and out into the area of the loft, without having washed his hands.

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Board of Health strictures, despite the signs prominently placed here and there in the rest room, are not as tightly administered as they should be, although what the unwashed supervisory hands could do to fault the distribution of public assistance I cannot quite say. "I cannot quite say, Lucas my friend, cannot quite say," I giggle, trying to adopt a rather offhand and cocksure informality to keep him from being portentous. "I simply do not know; all of this is a mystery, would you not agree?"

"Enough of that now," Lucas says angrily. He jumps from the basin and hurtles to the floor where he draws himself up to knee-height, confronting me like an aggrieved but persistent little conscience. "We're going to have a serious talk now, Mercer, just you and I. I hoped, of course, that I could lead you into this material gently over some months and continue to take my time as I wooed you, so to speak, toward your own understanding of the situation, but I have just recently received some direct and pressing word from my own headquarters. Matters are going too slowly; there has been a speed-up at the high levels, and things must accelerate."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't know what I'm talking about," Lucas says restlessly, "that's the point of it. Now this isn't my decision, you understand, to hand you this whole thing together; in fact it's almost entirely out of my hands and I want to make this clear; if it were up to me I would have handled this in a different way from the start."

"It isn't coming any clearer," I say, noting without

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prejudice that Lucas appears to be rambling on somewhat like a welfare client. I decide to try a soothing, investigatorial calm. "Perhaps you'd like to try to explain this to me from the beginning. Don't get excited now; just try to take your time."

"All right," Lucas says. He seems to swallow, lick his lips, unusual characteristics in my calm visitor. "It so happens that the fate of the world, your world that is, is completely hinged upon your actions within the next twelve hours, Mercer, and I have been all along merely a galactic emissary to prepare you for that assignment and give you some advice."

"Oh," I say, "oh." I lean against a basin and peering forward intently, use the mirror myself now to make certain infinitesimal dabs and adjustments of my own hairline which remains intact, look into my eyes deeply and like a lover as I verify that my external appearance, at least, remains unchanged. Unafflicted as I am by personal vanity, the fact is that I am strikingly handsome in a special way. "That's very interesting," I say after a pause. "In other words, you mean that all along you've been an alien from another planet or universe on a mission of observation and now you're going to come to the point and tell me what you've been after all along."

"Don't confuse planets and universes," Lucas says rather snappishly, "they are entirely different. Nevertheless," he says with a certain smugness, a certain little satisfaction which causes his slight form to jerk and shake, now ascending above the knee and almost at belt level, "nevertheless, you seem to have caught onto this somewhat more quickly than head-

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quarters had projected. No doubt about it, Mercer, there is some latent intelligence in your race." Definitely he is larger; his height must be a function of his mood, somewhat like the functioning of a phallus although not even in the symbolic sense do I want to pursue this further, even in a rest room.

"Well," I say with admirable offhandedness, preserving a certain modesty, "we *have* known each other for some time now; you've become a constant factor in my life and I would think that I understand you fairly well. I can't say our relationship is altogether pleasant but I can, at least, observe a few things. In fact, I was on the verge of making that conclusion myself, quite shortly."

"What conclusion?"

"The conclusion that you're an alien or, as you have put it, a galactic emissary on a mission to this planet and I'm your contact."

Yes indeed, yes indeed, it seems quite reasonable all in all to be discussing catastrophic events and possibilities of the day with Lucas in the rest room of the District Center on a sidestreet in the old Fort Greene section of Brooklyn on a spring morning in 1981, men preparing themselves in a capsule somewhere to assault Venus for the first time, men elsewhere plotting my ruination for failure with the Dawson case, intake filled with the dispossessed and socially deteriorated who are trying to file their own claims for justice. There is nothing more surrealistic about this confrontation or the information passing swiftly back and forth than about the instance with Dolores last night, or many other instances in my

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rather complex life which I will not start discussing at the present time. In fact—and I take what I have learned quite calmly for this reason—information just divulged hinting that Lucas is a galactic emissary and I his contact would go a long way indeed toward clearing up some of the mental confusion of recent weeks and restoring to me a state of relative peace. I can feel that peace now, whisking its way up and through me at various levels of consciousness and I react to it by grunting with what might be taken by a witness as approbation. The thought that I might in reality be insane had occurred to me at least a few times since Lucas's sudden entrance in my life and although I dismissed these thoughts for the obvious chaff they were, knowing my mental processes were above suspicion, although as I say I had quickly sent quivering from me all such reflections, it is nevertheless a relief to have this further proof that I am not.

"Go on," I say, "go on, tell me more," modulating from an investigatorial to an even psychiatric tone, a caseworker doing field work now on a verbose but rather incoherent client who might at some isolated moment break down completely into monosyllables from a different language. "Tell me everything about this; I'm certainly listening to you."

"I'm trying to," Lucas says rather petulantly, "if you'll only give me a chance, I intend to explain this very quickly because we are pressed for time now, no thanks to the supervisors." A toilet flushes enthusiastically across the partition in the women's section and a feminine voice breaks into a popular

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song, causing Lucas to wince with displeasure while I use the time to open a faucet, rub a little cold water on my hands and apply this soothingly to my face. "All right," Lucas says when the voice trails away into the outer babble of the loft, "the trouble with my headquarters is that they let you just drift and drift, the bastards: they leave you an assignment without orders of any sort for so long that you're convinced that they've forgotten and you begin to indulge a sense of independence and then some new clerk comes in and begins to pick up the files and make adjustments and start to maneuver around and all of a sudden you're flooded with frantic orders, all of which are overdue. You're late you're told and it's entirely your fault."

"I've had the same problem."

"Don't compare your situation to mine, Mercer," Lucas says with distaste, "there's no similarity at all and I find your comparisons cheap and insulting. Now my system," he says, his face reddening slightly in a very unearthy way, his eyes bulging, "my system is absolutely disgusting and I don't mind saying that they infuriate me, just infuriate, but then again if you work in one or another branch of bureaucracy, you've got to accustom yourself to this kind of thing. Am I right? Of course I'm right. In those respects we're similiar."

"I'm losing the drift," I say as another battering flush comes from the feminine side of the partition: I have never ceased to be dismayed at the sheer corporeality of women who, to my surprise, have the

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same needs and physical requirements as we do despite the fact that so much of their public life-style seems to be in denial of this fact. "I just don't see where you're getting, Lucas."

"All right, Mercer, I'm getting to the point," Lucas says with some excitement, "for heaven's sake as you people put it, you must understand that our lives are a little more intricate than yours and of necessity this can hardly be said in a compressed fashion. But we're pressed for time, I agree, and I'll have to be more direct than is otherwise warranted if you in return will understand that I've had to gloss over a good deal which you'll just have to piece out for yourself. As I said, I'm an emissary, appointed to observe your planet through and over your eyes during these past months to make a decision on whether or not you people are truly fit to join the galactic empire of civilized races or, unfortunately, will have to be exterminated. Don't ask me about the galactic empire, I have no time to go into the history except to say that it is a very old agglomerate of all those races in the galaxy judged intelligent enough to co-exist peacefully; it is supported by their dues which are on planetary assessment by volume of population. You'll have a chance to learn about all that perhaps later. I was detailed to look over the situation here, using you as the focal point of observation and under the bylaws I was forced to establish a relationship with you which would enable us to have discussions in which I would get to know a typical member of your race rather well. If it's all the same

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to you, I'd just as soon not have gotten involved, but who am I to judge procedures? What has been established can hardly be put asunder and so on."

"Why me?" I am sorry to say that I do not find this dialogue fascinating or even involving, my mind being fixed somewhere between the Dawson case and the increasingly spectacular activities in the women's rest room which now is exploding with the sounds of plumbing, gurgles of water and splat of faucets, hiss of steam and merry thumps of paper dispensers indicating that never, perhaps, in the recent history of the Center have its services been so exploited. The female employees are voiding with enthusiasm and commitment; would that I could meet my own, more profound needs so simply although I do not want to blame them for that. Nevertheless, I do not want to hurt Lucas's feelings and I know that the subject matter is important to him; therefore I press on. "Why was I selected for this?"

"Why not?" Lucas says with a rather elegant shrug, closing his eyes as if in delicate distasteful reaction to the continued groanings, evacuations and noises of drainage heard through the partition: it is possible that he has the same horror of our processes that I might have of his, although this has not previously occurred to me. "Why not indeed?" He diminishes himself now to calf-level and nervously adjusts his garments which seem to have inflated during his last, rather extended speech. "It had to be someone; it might as well be you. Consider this, Mercer: if only one person on your planet could be selected as the contact, at random, then this person would

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almost have to ask why him and the answer is impossible to give. Any unlikelihood, after all, feels unlikely; this is one of the keys to galactic metaphysics."

I have been concerned, of course, that someone may follow the supervisor into the rest room at any moment and thus impede our discussion (if the women's section is extraordinarily popular this morning, can the men's be far behind?) but as I consider this, I decide that it is Lucas's problem. It has always been his problem to arrange our discussions and my worries have been for naught: why should I be concerned? Primarily, it is his responsibility; I would do far better in concentrating on my immediate difficulties and not worrying about those of a hostile alien. "Why not?" Lucas continues, rather meditatively, interrupting this interesting and rather productive line of thought; this is too bad because I feel on the verge of one of those central epiphanies which can, at least in some of the novels I have read, yank the lives and destiny of characters around. "It *had* to be one of you, as I say; headquarters selects at random as far as I know, and it turned out to be you. It could have been anyone these months and probably would have been better for me if it had: I don't find you that interesting either, Mercer."

"I didn't mean to provoke you. I merely—"

"Look, I have nothing to do with the personnel department," Lucas says rather peevishly. "I merely fulfill assignments; the lines of delineation are quite clear here. In any event and to continue if you will allow me to do this in peace, Mercer, and stop holding up things, I've been advised that the period of ob-

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servation and acquaintanceship has been concluded as of the posting of the memoranda which I received through instantaneous contact, and we are now prepared to move into a stage two device which involves the actual challenge-and-testing. Our personal relationship, furthermore and according to my headquarters, has become desultory and counter-productive and will no longer make any contribution to an objective decision. Isn't that stupid? They've entirely lost faith in me. Of course, they change administrations there even more frequently than assignments, so that this kind of stupidity is inevitable. Headquarters is all too politically sensitive. Nevertheless, I'm an experienced operative and entitled to better than this. I think that they're goddamned high-handed if you want to know the truth, goddamned stupid in their personnel relations," Lucas says and then, as if trying to cancel this admission, leaps to a basin again and again begins to work upon his hair. It is all very tiresome and repetitive.

"Well yes," I say, "yes that's true," working on re-affirmation, structuring my responses so that the client will not collapse to self-justificatory mania and, eventually, beginning to fray at the edges as it were, subside into hostility and unproductive gloom. Although, under the rules and regulations of the academy of social work, public assistance caseworkers are not qualified to practice in the field, a certain set of attitudes have been hardened into the department since its inception almost half a century ago, which hold that the recipients are essentially neurotic people, dwelling on the edges of marginality and

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hence ripe subjects for psychiatric, client-centered counseling, something which I try to put into effect at the opportune moments although almost always counter to Bowman's rather hysterical remonstrances to the contrary. *They aren't sick you bleeding heart fools*, Bowman has instructed the case unit, *they're cold and cunning and the first one of you I hear use the phrase social work in my hearing is going to be put out of here on his ass. I won't even take the time for charges; I'll just kick you downstairs into intake and let you sit with all those lice and do your social work until they put their knives into you.*

To hell with Bowman. My problems with him are as to nothing when compared with the matter of the galactic civil service. "Of course you deserve better," I repeat quietly, cementing this extended silence with compassion and demonstration of my sympathy for all that Lucas has had to honorably combat in his present position. "I'm sure you do; you've done an excellent job, I'll testify to that, and are basically more skilled than they and as the operative on the scene would have far more knowledge of how to deal with circumstances than they: so how can they do this to you? How indeed? It isn't fair and you have a right to feel cheated."

"I have no time," Lucas says, "no time now to listen to your dull and foul-mouthed platitudes which I know so well, no patience for your neologisms. We have got to get right into the central issue, Mercer and the sooner the better. We are in precarious circumstances here; how long can this go on? I will not be diverted from my essential mission."

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Lucas quivers on tile, then raises his head with frantic haste as a door bangs and yet another supervisor comes mumbling and grumbling into the rest room, gives me a look of loathing from his feral but intelligent little eyes (I know him vaguely; he is from the 305 case unit and is also one of the first on line before the time clock) and instantly departs into a cubicle, slamming the door. Obviously he had wanted to use a urinal but is shy and my own posture against the basin, hovering near the urinals without using them, gives the impression that I have sought to invade his privacy. Most of the employees, at least the male employees of this Center, seem to be very shy of their urinary functions and prefer to dwell in quiet. I would like to think of this more, there are interesting ramifications to the theory that those who administer the public trust are unable to trust the public, at least in rest rooms, but Lucas breaks this one up for me, returning to the issue at hand in a way which makes galactic imperatives seem almost trite as against the urinary rituals of master supervisors. "The stage two challenge has commenced," Lucas has been saying, "as of the beginning of this conversation, and it is entirely up to you, Mercer, whether you like it or not, to determine whether or not your people will be allowed to join the Federation."

"How so?" I say with calm, causing the hidden supervisor to grunt from within his cubicle and make slobbering noises. "What do you mean?" I say more quietly, "what does joining the Federation have to do with it?"

"It has this to do: I am going to assign you a task

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and if you have not completed it satisfactorily within twelve hours, it will have been decided that your planet is not worthy of joining in the galactic unity and, hence, it will be destroyed. On the other hand, if you do succeed in taking on and solving this task you will be permitted to join the unity, you and the three billion other miserable representatives of your defective species. See, at last I can allow my true feelings to express themselves; I am no longer protected by the stage one imperatives."

"That sounds crazy."

"Maybe it *is* crazy. You don't expect me to argue with you now, do you? I know that it sounds ridiculous, assigning you a task and making the future of your planet dependent on the outcome, but that's the way in which headquarters works. That's pretty much the procedure; there has to be a simple, objective means test or nothing would ever be solved, let the spiritualists or astrographers into the picture and we'd still be studying the first of primitive races. Codification, simplicity, that's what has to be done, Mercer. Headquarters doesn't want an evaluation, they don't want to have more than one field operative on the site for financial reasons, they prefer to put the responsibility with the race under investigation itself."

"Couldn't you make a recommendation?"

"Ridiculous. They don't want to take an operative's word for anything, that's not our detail, we're merely information procurers and deliverers without a shred of initiative and it's appalling how they can give us this degree of training and latitude and then leave

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us totally without options. Humiliating, I don't mind telling you this, Mercer, it's ultimately degrading but who wants to listen to my problems? No one cares; the operatives are the only division that's never had a strong organization or voice in the functioning of the headquarters and thus we're entirely to blame. We have no right whatsoever to protest. All that they want to do with us is to play their little games of negation-and-choice out over and over again and we're helpless supernumeraries. If you want my personal opinion, it's that they're completely insane but who's interested in my opinions? Not even you, Mercer, you're just trying to evaluate how soon you can get out from under my clutches but it's too late and you never will. All of those bastards out there are crazy, though," Lucas whispers earnestly, leaning toward me and arching the words into my ear, "I just want you to know that basically I'm on your side throughout this entire affair but what good does that do us?"

"Of course we're on the same side," I say gently, "that may do us the most profound good for all I know." Unquestionably, my attendant is really distraught. Small veins and furrows have appeared in his characteristically smooth face and his speech has become slurred, become in fact, slightly incoherent during this last tirade. "It's terrible to work under conditions like that, I've got something of the same thing myself as you may have noticed, and I have every sympathy for you. It isn't fair, it isn't right, field operatives should have a great deal more latitude. By the way, I'd just like to ask this if I might:

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is it the galactic empire or the galactic unity or headquarters or the instrumentation or what? You've been calling it first the one and then the other and even though it isn't really that important I suppose, I'd like to know. Probably it's the same thing but it would be nice to know the one basic term so that I wouldn't have this constant confusion in knowing exactly what to call you."

"What the fuck is going on out there?" the supervisor murmurs within his cubicle, as if to himself. I hear dim explosions, sighs, a sense of palms meeting fingernails to clutch and unclutch, obstetric moans and groans, then a thin splash. "Who is talking to what out there?"

"You see," I say to Lucas very quietly, "I told you it was impossible to hold a conversation here. Something like this is always bound to happen."

"I'm not concerned with your advisements. I don't want to hear anything from you. I'm nearly about to finish at last and then you can go out on your own and we won't have to discuss things again. Don't you even want to know what your task is?"

"I know that man's name," the supervisor says within, still anxiously conferring with himself as if over a controversial entry in a recently-transcribed case record that is being questioned by those above him in the chain of command, "I definitely know that man's name. His name is George Mercer and he is talking to himself. He's in Bowman's unit, Bowman's full of lunatics, but this is a new one. Mercer is talking to himself and I'm sitting in here and listening to it all. Something will have to be done. Corrective

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measures will have to be taken. The department is getting a bad reputation for sending out all kinds of peculiar types into the field, we're going to launch a new personnel policy."

"Look," I say to Lucas, sliding nervously toward the door, "I've got to get out of here now. Sorry," I say to the supervisor, twisting my voice toward his hidden body so that it will land atop him in the cubicle as if for him and him alone, "I'm getting back to work now. There's no problem. I was just, uh, I was singing."

"He says he was singing. Now he says that he was standing there singing. You know something, Willie," the supervisor says happily, his voice round and fruity in its invisibility, and he groans again as if being embraced, "Willie, we're going to have to have something done about this man, when I get out of here, you and I will make up a nice report, Willie, and take it in to the administrator." He grunts, splashes, whines like a man in orgasm, dropping his voice to confer secretly now with his cubicle-mate Willie, whoever that might be (has Lucas lied? do all of us have visitants?) and the door at this difficult instant flips open again, several unit clerks, holding onto one another, lurch in a mad, merry way toward the urinals, one of them stepping on Lucas very forcefully, the foot oozing through transparency as always but Lucas shrieks with small pain.

"Son of a bitch," he says, "son of a bitch, I'm beginning to lose *dimension*," and hops on one foot angrily, clutching his free ankle with both hands, "and not only that, I haven't even had a chance to

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tell you about the *test*," and the unit clerks relieve themselves then, singing and shaking themselves, the supervisor continues in urgent conversation with Willie about my destiny, doors on the toilets weave and bobble, slamming aimlessly and the walls themselves seem to shimmer and then dissolve with this excess of incident. I close my eyes, quite overwhelmed as you might suspect. It is really all too much for me.

When I open them, things are still the same if seen at a reduced level of distraction and I say, momentarily at least quite at a loss, "really, Lucas, you can see that this just isn't the time or place for this discussion and as much as I'd like—"

"I am going to *tell* you," Lucas says, staring with hatred at the unit clerks, now addressing me from a new position, atop a radiator as a matter of fact, dangling his little legs, peculiarly shrunken, amidst the piping and rocking back and forth in a series of motions so staggered that he seems on the verge of losing his position, but he does not, he does not lose his position that is to say, the intensity of the rocking somehow working as if orbitally to keep him in line—a feat which should have been expected I suppose, from an emissary of the Galactic Overlords.

"I'm going to tell you right *now* whether you like it or not and despite your attitude, Mercer, you'd better accept something: you're not running things here, I am."

"All right," I say in docile fashion, "all right, you're running things. You always will. Tell me."

"Well here it is," Lucas says and then in a rather

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distracted way begins to speak rapidly, slurring his words so that only meaning persists, inflection becoming quite lost. "What you've got to do you see is to prove the Dawson case completely eligible for public assistance within the next twelve hours. Twelve hours or not at all, Mercer; your supervisor is about to have them dropped for unsatisfactory explanation of past maintenance and because of his general dissatisfaction with everything you touch. As a matter of fact, I can precognite that as soon as you return to your desk you're going to be assaulted with demands to close the case right now because of the faulty past maintenance story, the failure of verification and so on. Bowman prides himself on throwing people off public assistance anyway; it's an identity crush. That unfortunate man has been under a great deal of personal pressure recently, but I don't care to get into that area of things now. He's going to give you this single working day to make the case good on the past maintenance or force the closing. So that's the test." His voice slows, becomes normally inflected again. "Verify the eligibility."

"Now that," I say, "goddamn it, that's ridiculous!" as the unit clerks, transcendent with their fulfilled need, their voided bladders, back away from their separate urinals, nodding to one another as if in confirmation of all the mysteries of release and then, look at me with ferocious expressions as if I had broken their reverie. "I don't mean you," I say to them quite pointlessly, "I want to say, I mean there's nothing ridiculous about *you*; I didn't even have you in mind as a matter of fact, I was just talk-

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ing about something to do with the plumbing, that's it, the plumbing; it's very much on my mind, you see, the plumbing and the noises around here," but this explanation, tinged with regret and real feeling as it is, apparently is to have no effect. Unindividuated to me now as they have always been (the clerks in the department are at a lower order of the civil service and are covered by an entirely different union), the clerks give one another a single, consultative glance in which pity and comprehension, settlement and destiny appear to merge at one central point and then leave the premises single file. "Son of a bitch," the first clerk says. "Son of a bitch," says the second. "This is a *son* of a bitch," says the third, the wisest of all and then the doors clatter as they whisk out.

I know that this will be a difficult day. I would have needed no assignments from Lucas to have confirmed that from the start. Meanwhile, the supervisor, momentarily forgotten in the excitement of Lucas's revelation and the subsequent confrontation with the clerks reasserts himself with a spasmodic and lordly series of groans which seep from his cubicle much as strings of supervisorily excrement must have issued from him so recently in the past and knowing that this is my one last, best hope, that I must seize his moment or have it forever lost, I use the groans as a cover to whisper fiercely to Lucas, "that's ridiculous. I never head of anything so insane."

"Take it up with them. I don't make the keys, they do. This is what they wanted."

"But what does proving a lousy case eligible for public assistance have to do with the fate of the world

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or joining a galactic union? Explain that to me, will you? I'm entitled to some clarification, goddamn it. There's got to be *some* basis for this kind of thing, doesn't there?"

Certainly my charged language is unprofessional, my choler is not a means of dealing with the situation, but I cannot care: even if the hidden supervisor were to burst from the booth shouting threats to take action I am protected under the Higher Horizons program of civil service tenure and it would take them a long, long time to get rid of me. "I tell you, Lucas, it has *nothing* to do with the fate of the world. The test is silly. What's your objective referent, huh? What relation does it bear to the extrinsic reality? What are the connecting links, the metaphoric relations, the one-to-one correspondence to the extrinsic? You see, the test you've proposed isn't at all reasonable. If there has to *be* a test you could have one constructed which would make more sense."

"You see," Lucas says dreamily, swinging his little legs, shaking his head, blinking obscurely now up into the fluorescence, "I'm sorry about this. You'll have to believe me, Mercer, I'm truly sorry about the confusion I've caused you but I'm afraid that this isn't quite the point nor are your objections. The conditions, as they've been described to you, are really quite powerfully relevant and not at all extraneous to the issue."

"You say."

"Headquarters says. I have nothing to do with this," Lucas says mildly. "Anyway, an explanation of any true sort would be utterly outside of your frame of

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reference. There is so little that you people understand, really, you are savages, headquarters is right in that regard, and you cannot perceive nine-tenths of your environment, let alone all the relationships and correspondences which ensue. If there were a way for me to point out for you to understand that on the galactic scale of reasoning and justice, the eligibility of the Dawson case and the fate of your miserable little sector were not only linearly interlocked but, well, *identical* . . . if there were a way, as I say, that I could bring this through to you I am sure that I would but I am afraid that I definitely cannot.”

“Try.”

“You do not speak the language, Mercer, you will never be able to even hear it until or unless you advance by many generations in the Empire and that, of course, is highly unlikely at the present time because the test,” Lucas says in a wee, tiny voice, “while challenging is a little bit unfair. Enough, however. This is really quite enough. I’m under a good deal of pressure as you can doubtless see and I’ve already overstayed the regimented timespan of explanation which, I hope, will not get me into further trouble.”

“I’ll report you,” I say foolishly, “I’ll find out who your superiors are and how to contact them and I’ll turn you in for incompetence. This is no challenge! This is no test! You can’t do this to me.”

“Oh yes I can,” Lucas says, “you watch me and see if I can’t do it to you. We can do anything we want to do and you must accept it because we are at a different level. Now, certify the Dawson case as eligible or prepare to meet your doom with your entire

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planet! Prove the past maintenance story as true or watch your fellowmen, all three and a half billion of them perish! I'm sorry to be melodramatic on this issue," he adds in a confidential tone, "but the instructions are fairly strong on this and, anyway, we gather from close observation of you people that you can respond to real or urgent issues only through the contrivances of melodrama so, let it be. Let it be indeed," Lucas says and with enormous offhandedness vanishes, leaving a faint halo of dust around the radiator, the dust ashimmering and aglimmering like a welfare client's eyes, turning on one in the last stages of a pending investigation to bespeak denial and humility. Got no money for *food*. Got no money for *rent*. Got no money for the *kids*. Who would have thought that Lucas had the elan thus to strike to the heart?

No time, no time, no time to think: tucking his shirt into his trousers, the supervisor emerges from the cubicle mumbling and grumbling and tumbling like all the others in his position, as if he had been poised, pants drawn to waist on the stool, waiting for Lucas's disappearance. Oh God, oh my Lords, for so long my life had been like this: I do not wish to overindulge in personal reminiscence or speculation at this crucial instant of a narrative which has already moved so slowly (but it will accelerate, I assure you of that, like the times themselves, it will grind and grind and eventually overtake), but on the other hand, Lords and gentlemen alike, I am so filled with regret, with rage, with woe and recrimination about the life I had and did not understand: saw

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it then as an interlinear unit bound toward weariness and destruction. One unit would pass and make way for another, one cube of time would be wedged into place neatly as the other arrived: persons would enter on each other's exits as if by cue. There was almost no overlap in that life but merely a series of almost self-contained dialogues and disasters and you will pardon me if I point this out: I am sick of it, I was sick of it, there must have been a more interesting and colorful way to live. I could not bear the *organization* of it; I was not living a life but a badly manipulated play by a crude and amateurish showman. Lucas gives way to Dolores who gives way to Bowman who gives way to Lucas again and then sleep, Bowman again, touch of Lucas, whisk of Dolores and the supervisor, exit both, Lucas reappears, then unit clerks, Lucas again, supervisor: how much of this could one take? Perhaps all of the catastrophic events came out of my reaction to this. I do not know. There must have been more to life than this, above and beyond even the shoddy question of the fate of humanity about which, as in the case of most abstractions, I did not really care. I am ready to admit this. I did not care. Humanity in all of its wonders means less to me than one stricken child. This was your error, oh Lords, but your glory as well.

"Do I recognize you?" the supervisor says. "I think that I know who you are after all." This is a painstakingly neat man at last: he pauses at the basin to dab water on his fingertips and apply it to his large, round, distracted forehead, filled no doubt with sorrow and plans of how he can help public as-

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sistance recipients to true self-sufficiency. "It comes to me but then I'm not clear after all. You're in Bowman's unit, aren't you? I've seen you walking around a lot. You seem to seek out this washroom, too. Tell me, son, do you have tenure or are you still on probationary status?" His heavy eyes gleam, one of its own accord seems to wink.

"Excuse me," I say, "just excuse me if you would." I do not look at him squarely nor do I open his countenance with recognition as I sidle past. It is a good level on which to keep the matter. "I'd really like to give you that information and talk a bit but I've got to get back to my desk now, bad cramps but duty calls you know and so on and so forth," and babbling in a very ingratiating and confidential manner, I flee the rest room, bouncing off the swinging door which still moving in sympathy to the exit of the unit clerks bangs nastily against my forehead, giving me an almost disorienting crack, "must get back to work now and do some work because I want to work; that's the purpose of life, isn't it? work, work," and tumbling and mumbling and grumbling not unlike the supervisors themselves, inch my way through the swinging door (my forehead acquiring an unpleasant sense of lamination as I pass by the edge) and then head back toward the desk where Bowman, now gesturing violently if abstractly, stands at my place, beside the Dawson case record and awaits me.

He awaits me, Dawson awaits me, all of them await me: the other members of the unit are there. Five middle-aged men sit or stand in various postures around Bowman, gesturing for my return. (Here and

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there, dotted around the Center are young or younger girls such as Dolores but I have never had any luck with them in the immediate vicinity, nor, despite his efforts with a few of the middle-aged men, has Bowman been able to find any luck close to home as well. One may look at this in some proof of the assertion that there is Eternal Justice.)

Feeling strangely weightless as well I may, feeling very much like the crucified Savior Himself who is one of my most intense enthusiasms (I must really take you around my room sometime and show you in daylight the collection of posters which adorn my walls), I return to my place in the unit, rubbing my hands, musing, contemplating my strategic and ponderous fate as Bowman lifts an intercepting hand to haul me down flat and the middle-aged men giggle with the excitement of their suspicion that at least for this moment, it is none of them who run the risk of being put up on charges.



VII

Further bulletins carry us into the sky with the astronauts. Impacted by the gravities of ascension, they huddle within their cubicles, then bounce from them at precisely *L* plus forty-five seconds to chatter at us. Orbit is concentric; the sphere of retreat is perfect, the arc of the ship is as well-placed as bombardier fire. A perfect launch, a beautiful launch; they rub their hands up in the capsule as the lower portion separates and sing to us of accomplishment, of the ecstasy of Venus.

Listening to them in our own cubicles we share their joy, gauge their accomplishment, understand their pleasure as the ship levels off now in orbit. It would be so good to accomplish something with one's life. It would be so useful to crawl into a cubicle and make way for Venus. It would be a fine purgation to make headway toward the stars, Earth departing from us like a conscience redeemed, shrinking in the spaces below.

In fifteen minutes and thirty-two seconds, the ship will break free from orbit and begin the great voyage. We admire the smooth calculation of the mission at

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the same time that we wish we could fill fifteen minutes and thirty-two seconds as usefully as the astronauts. But the gravity of Earth is burdensome and linked, held in place, we suffer to resume our ordinary tasks.

VIII

Consider the record. The record is clear. DAWSON: Lupe and Phyllis T. 321 South Seventh Street, Brooklyn, New York. Lupe nee Lucindo born 4/19/43 in Manhattan; Phyllis nee Brown born 12/28/51 in Manhattan (she missed the Nativity by only three days! I note obsessively but do not allow my religious imaginings to function otherwise in pursuit of my work), both educated in the stricken borough of Manhattan as well, not to say initiated into the lesser mysteries of the human experience, but despite this confluence of biography, these two bodies did not collide to reproduce themselves until the remarkable and celebrated date of 6/1/73, also known in Manhattan and memorialized in the intake interview by Phyllis as "the biggest mistake I ever made." But who can penetrate the mysteries of Phyllis Thalia Brown Dawson in anything as simple and terrible as an intake interview?

Lupe: employment history. Largely menial occupations (porter, janitor, dishwasher, briefly waiter, assembler) paying marginal wages but managing, nonetheless, to push the expanding family slowly

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ahead into the dawn of a brighter tomorrow (references verified indicate that he was a good if erratic worker). Employment, however, terminates abruptly, not to be restored again, on 11/6/75. 11/6/75: an acute onset of sinusitis suffered in the kitchen of the *Grandiloquent & Saviours Immortal Restaurant of Flushing Bay* sends Lupe reeling to the hospital helpless, then to home where he lies weakened on his absolute bed of pain for two weeks, three weeks, time deadening and increasing around him. 12/15/75: Lupe is fired for Christmas (*Grandiloquent & Saviours Immortal Restaurant* unable to verify this; out of business by health department fiat on 1/12/76); 3/5/76, resources exhausted the little family appears at the Lower Brownsville sector office to make application for assistance.

Four months journey to the end of all possibility; who is to gauge the forces which brought them to this condition? The destruction of most records in the great burnings of 1976 have robbed us of much useful data. These destroyed records might have turned up other indications: agency involvement at some earlier portion of their lives, a fine tradition of public assistance in the Dawson or Brown families which drove them easily and inevitably to this step. Who will know? Who will ever know?

Phyllis has not worked since their marriage because of the wonderful children and her obligation to them. Information on employment history prior to the marriage is not as positive: poor interviewing, lazy investigators, failure of pursuit. Perhaps she has. But no help during late 1975 and early 1976, no

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help from Phyllis, no help as well from the wonderful children: Richard, William or Susan, the latest merely three months at the time of the sinus attack, a helpless babe in arms so to speak. Praise for this woman, then; praise for this Phyllis: who will never be able to tell her story? Say that this woman, then, thirty-two years old, the mother of three, the youngest but a nursling, a woman of limited capacities and background: say that this woman almost single-handedly held her ailing husband, her young children, her little household around her during those drear and difficult months in the wake of the riots, say all of this . . . and, indeed, what has one said? Can this begin to tell the story of Phyllis Dawson? Voice fails me gentlemen, as does rhetoric: my abilities are not in this regard, may it praise the Lords. I do not have the talent to deal with the socially disadvantaged: my case records will show it, my history will show it, these very notes and recollections themselves will indicate that I am one as at sea or on the surface of Venus when dealing with a socioeconomic class below mine. The case records are sterile, cold; my dictation does not indicate an excess of insight or a great deal of patience. These notes are self-involved, devolving upon my own problems, rather than the more pressing (and ominous) problems of Lucas or the Dawsons. What can I say, gentlemen? Indeed, what can I say? Praise for Phyllis must come; it is her due and our obligation, but it must come from sources other than myself . . . for in the tragic history to be recorded they are but as machinery, the inert recipients of greater and outside forces. Say

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then that there are things of Phyllis about which, no less than the darkest heart of love, we will never know.

Lupe and Phyllis. No bounty this marriage nor invested with unusual grace, but on the other hand, it is not one to be utterly dismissed. The case record bespeaks the permanence of their union: a rare quality among recipients of public assistance in the lower Brownsville sector. A stable and enduring relationship, in fact, seems to have been created among this pair and their wonderful children, all of whom are now in attendance at the local public schools receiving, caseworkers have been assured, excellent grades and, accordingly, remain in continued receipt of the special and continuing school clothing allowance, school transportation allowance, school food allowance, school bonus incentive. Lupe himself, inspired by the struggling but meaningful lesson of his children would indeed like to work the case record makes clear: he is shamed and humbled by his receipt of public assistance but then again and having to tell the truth of it there is the question of his sinusitis. He is really a sick man.

This sinusitis is chronic and irreparable. Time and again, under statute, departmentally-certified physicians (fifteen dollars an examination) have been able to schematize the symptomology and graph out the attacks, they have closed out their reports, these senile and deteriorated physicians (but fifteen dollars for an examination is still not bad and the department as much as possible, tries to keep the old doctors going) with hints or suggestions that the

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problems may be functional in origin, psychosomatic that is to say, but then again and almost constantly during all of the home visits—

Well, there is Lupe himself: Lupe is blowing his nose, cursing, shuffling his feet, hammering at his forehead, throwing handkerchief after clotted handkerchief into the hamper of the steaming kitchen and deploring the climate that has taken the health of an otherwise normal forty-year-old man and wrecked it irretrievably. If he had the money he would certainly desert the city; he would desert the city even if he had merely travelling funds (could this be worked out?) but as matters now stand, after all, what can he do? He is distraught during most of these visits; Lupe's emotional stability is questionable. Certain caseworkers have indicated that he was near tears but the present interviewer has not himself seen evidence of this. Hearsay is worthless, remember that. *Client stated* is all. Client stated that he is not well. Client repeated that he was not well. Client, in fact, insisted that he was not well. Who is to disbelieve him?

Phyllis is sympathetic and amenable. Gladly, gladly would she go to work herself, she has told caseworkers. She would find a job at almost any income level permitting, just to make the gesture at the beginnings of self-dependence: but what can she do? Indeed, what can she do? Earnestly she has asked generations of caseworkers (the average lifespan of a given investigator on a given case is three months) what recommendations they might have. These workers have stumbled in and out of the dolorous, steam-

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ing kitchen in pursuit of their statutory home visits, blowing noses themselves in sympathy with Lupe's condition, edging away from the pots and streamlets of water on the floor, wiping their streaming eyes with lint-filled cuffs as they have listened to Phyllis say: what would be the point of her, a mother of three, unskilled and not in gainful employment in her entire life except for that factory several years ago, what would be the point, Phyllis wants to know, of her even attempting the job market at this time? Maybe later, when the kids age a little . . .

Caseworkers have nodded, making their entries through the mists of steam. Phyllis is right. Automation has destroyed most of the few jobs for which she would have been qualified: technology increases in this last fifth of the greatest of all centuries. "It is not my fault," the case record for the visit of 2/17/81 has her saying (my own entry! my own visit! the master's own hand!), "none of it is my fault," client stated, "I have done the best I can do and will continue to do the best I can do but there are limits and Lupe is a very sick man. I must take care of him; he is also one of my children."

In truth this is not an exact representation of what was said by the client. Client did not state this. Do not pass this on to Bowman, he would be displeased . . . occasionally I have edited statements by the client in the purpose of getting a cleaner entry. Maybe Bowman would understand. Client actually stated, revealed here for the first and only time, "I can't stand this fucking interview anymore, it's always the same goddamned stupid questions no matter how

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the faces change, you all talk the same, don't you ever get tired of this shit?" Phyllis occasionally being trodden down by the tensions of her home situation to abusiveness, but I felt it best to edit it somewhat in the transcription. Bowman would probably understand this after all. I have that much faith in him. Where are you now, Bowman? Bowman would realize that if you put down what was really said, almost no case would stand up against the battery of governmental committees, a new one a month, which appropriate cases at random, transport them upstate for photostating and return and then audit the hell out of them.

Further through the interview of 2/17/81. How time gets away from us all! It seems like yesterday, gents. Clients state that they were highly dissatisfied with the living conditions on South Seventh Street and would like to move. The matter of change of domicile was then discussed thoroughly (this takes up space in the case record and gives the auditors the comforting feeling that Progress Is Being Made, another old Bowman maneuver), and clients discussed the many living situations which they would find preferable. They would like to move to an apartment in the new endowed projects of the countryside. They would also find acceptable a housing project in the upper reaches of the city. They would consider a move in Brooklyn to the old seafront, in fact. Anything that will take them from those fetid and delimited circumstances in which they reside would be acceptable to them. They entertain, it would seem, expectations of an improved and upward-mo-

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bile existence. (Clients picture themselves in the endowment center, strolling through the halcyon fields of New Jersey. Wafts of sewage from chemical plants near the shore, refineries somewhat to the south assault their nostrils but so delicately that it seems to be ambrosia, so absorbed are clients by their new and pleasant surroundings. Drive-in movie theatres, stark and open to the day regale them, hamburger stands and the Last Mile Furniture Store cast their glittering appeal to the Dawsons as they drive their slightly used Montrevor down the spaces of Highway Three. *Clownin' Campus*, the newest of the all-weather food stands beckons them with fluorescent finger and nose, happily the Dawsons turn the Montrevor off Highway 3 and back their way into a spot. Cindy Lou, the Campus girl, comes out with pad and pencil to convey their order to the Clown Cookery inside. The Dawsons are happy. This is a vision of happiness. Who can blame them? What have we known in life that is one half so accommodating as the great Clown, turning on his sign above the highway? Gentlemen, he invites all of us in, are the Dawsons to be penalized for obeying?)

Clients then showed rent receipt indicating that rent had indeed been paid to the Favor Realty Corporation. Through 2/28/81 the clients are in square with Favor. Clients showed utility bills outstanding indicating that utilities are in arrears slightly more than two months. They were urged to pay these bills. Clients stated that they would. ("How can we pay these fucking bills when we don't have a red

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nickel left over by the fourteenth for food?" clients actually stated but this was eased out of the record.) Caseworker urged clients to be responsible. To face their responsibilities. Clients said they would. Clients agreed that it was their responsibility to bring utilities up to date and said that they would definitely comply with this.

Clients said that they would, in fact, pay utilities immediately and also in the near future and also on the 18th of every month thereafter. *Client stated.* One must again give reluctant praise to Bowman for this: it is all his doing. If the caseworker writes or dictates as the case may be "client stated" he is fully protected because clients are not truthful and yield false information at every turn . . . but, by prefacing all entries in the case record with the admonition or prayer *client stated* the worker is protected when the case goes through the machinery of audit.

Audit is a problem. I do not quite know how to deal with it. Cases seem to be plucked at random; then again a maddening kind of system will manifest itself, cases beginning with the prefix *O*, say, or with case numbers after the five-millionth ending in *6*; then again certain units may be exposed to a high percentage of audit for a month before going down to normal ratio. One must always think of the auditor when making entries; a consideration which, no doubt, has driven Bowman quite mad since under statute the supervisor is responsible for every line entered about every case under his control and by implication, its eligibility. He might have to return all

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the money to the city if the case fails to pass audit, return it all out of pocket. This may be Bowman's main fear.

I try not to think of the auditors: outsmarting or outdeducing them is Bowman's problem. The political motivations which underscore and control their selection of cases also evade me by choice. I know nothing of politics. I try not to keep up with politics, having very severe personal problems which are sufficient unto the day. Politics are merely a metaphor for the gritty, smaller concerns of life. This much, at least, I have learned from the center.

2/18/81. The home visit continued. Clients requested a special furniture allowance, indicating that the dining table was rusted and in extremely poor condition and that all five dining chairs were similarly deteriorated and unable to support weight. I do not know how much of this is contrivance and how much actually occurred during the visit: it all blurs and melds in the case record entries so that hours or days later it all has the same appalled gloss of stupid credibility. Clients demonstrated that this was so, that the furniture was deteriorated, through visible and manipulative evidence. Lupe almost fell through a chair. Nevertheless, we must push on toward the newer tomorrow, hoping always for the best, Bowman to the contrary.

Caseworker stated that the matter of the furniture would be referred to the home economics advisor and clients agreed to wait for a decision, pending that conference and further word from the worker. This I think they did; I think that that much is true

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anyway. Maddening, maddening to read the entries and try to deduce what I actually was thinking or what occurred; better, even, to think of the auditors. The worker then took his leave of the premises and no further dialogue or dialect was exchanged.

Past maintenance: clients were unable to add to previous information which was elicited on the matter of past maintenance. They really were, gentlemen. They merely stated in the earlier part of the interview as previously, that in the four months between Lupe's loss of employment and the application for public assistance, they had managed to live on small loans from friends and credit from neighborhood stores in the hope that Lupe's medical condition would alleviate and that he would be able to return to employment. When his health failed to improve and extant sources of credit were exhausted, they came to the reluctant decision (reluctant because they were prideful, of course) that assistance must be sought.

Legally responsible relatives: there are no legally responsible relatives, all parents being deceased on both sides of the Dawson family. None of the loans have ever been repaid. How could they have been on a subsistence income? The Dawsons have stated and state again that they "forget" the names of friends who lent them alleged monies and would have no reason to contact them since the fact that the loans were never repaid "means how can they be friends if we stiffed them out?"

Clients similarly were unable to provide names and addresses of those local merchants who extended credit during the period before the application

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for assistance. All that they could say was that "of course" they no longer patronized these shops. "It was a long time ago," Phyllis Dawson stated, "you're talking about years and years, that was soon after the riots." Indeed it was. A long, long time ago, that is. It surely was, it sure was.

Years in the past, the present investigator then twenty-two in the graduate studies program of his municipal university, not even considering a career in public assistance or the unlikely possibility of sex with strangers, all of this beyond the then immature worker who sought with lack of success a degree which would qualify him for the teaching of English. Half a decade ago all of this, the worker pink-cheeked and hopeful, the Dawsons youthful versions of themselves, too young then even to dream of the Campus Clown. Now the Dawsons, gents, the Dawsons are old, established customers and so, for that matter, is your investigator: in fair weather and foul, good times and mostly bad, he has been hacking it out for the Center lo these three years now although only recently with the assistance of Lucas. First without Lucas and now *avec*, he has tracked the case histories of his clients as well as the worker's own puzzling and somewhat murky background until now, the worker, only slightly humbled by the events of recent weeks, has been told that he is on the trail of the Biggest Case Of All.

Yes indeed, it is the Dawsons who, more than the astronauts (who I can cleverly see now were never anything other than a distraction) are the key to the continued existence of the universe, or at least that

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segment of it which the worker inhabits. If his attendant is to be believed then, the Dawsons have reached a point of significance far beyond their humble dreams of the Campus Clown: they have become the central peripety, not to mix a metaphor, upon which the universal chord is to be struck. Lupe and Phyllis! Phyllis and Lupe! In those dark days around Christmas in 1975, could they have imagined themselves to become so important? Would they, for that matter, know it now?

Probably not, probably not, although this question has yet to be resolved: are the Dawsons aware of the great role they are playing in this cosmic circumstance? Would they cooperate? Or were they too, all along, agents of the Galactic Overlords? Who can know? "All that I want is a decent life for me and my family," the client, Mr. Dawson, stated humbly, fixing the worker with his large and stricken eyes, only slightly dampened by clouds of steam. "Past maintenance? What does this past maintenance mean? I do not answer questions if I can't understand them."

"He does not understand your questions," Mrs. Dawson added, "he does not answer questions he does not understand." "My nose hurts all the time," stated Mr. Dawson. "His ear hurts," his wife contributed. "My spirit is so shameful that I cannot work," Mr. Dawson averred, "it is a humility that I cannot work for my family." "He is so anxious to help us," quipped Mrs. Dawson. "We need money for clothing," Mr. Dawson advised. "We need money for furniture," forthrighted the client's wife. "We need so very many things," offered Mr. Dawson, "you can-

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not truly understand all of those things that we need."

Worker said, as always, that he would do whatever possible under the policies and procedures of public assistance. Worker was unable to elicit further information on the mysterious interval of four months between the exhaustion of admitted savings and the application for assistance although he did indeed try. Worker always tries; he is persistent, at his own level he is dogged although he is afraid of the auditors as would not be any of you gentlemen? Worker, in terms of the situation, did the best that he could.

Worker has always done the best he could. You must understand this; I have always tried. Worker has no pretensions; he merely has his hopes, as modest as they are, and small, poisonous trickles of imagery like a ruined priest standing under the altar and confronting all of the images of crucifixion. I must go off to the Dawsons, then. Get the past maintenance story if I can. Take Lucas's word for it: the world depends upon the outcome.

Why not? Why not take his word for it? He would not lie to me, worker stated; our relationship has always been characterized by its frankness, honesty and grace. All is grace: how can I lead you to see this?

IX

The all-news station informs us that the astronauts are approaching the halfway mark on their expedition to Venus. Within the capsule all is boisterousness and song: the newest Government policy, in light of the Mars unpleasantness of 1976 is that the space program has been invested with undue solemnity; new procedures will accordingly be practiced. This voyage, the communications link, the public relations of the conquest of Venus will show us the lighter, the human, the jovial side of the astronauts. We are encouraged to think of them as friends; to relate to them on a one-to-one-basis, much as if they were inhabiting our living rooms or urinating amiably beside us in the pleasantest of elegant rest rooms. The astronauts have idiosyncrasies. One of them enjoys cryptograms: hair-greysers, puzzles of various sorts whereas the other is a sports fan. Scores, accordingly, are passed onto them along with the latest in brain-teasers. Between the scores and brain-teasers we are induced, along with the astronauts, to explore the human interest of the Venus mission. Man has always voyaged out in search of the unknown; this is his

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glory and destiny. Venus is part of the total picture. Venus the planet was named after Venus the goddess of love, doubtless on a whim of the ancient astrologers who saw her mount, year after year, the evening sky in primacy. Jules Verne, suprisingly, never got around to the subject but many noted science-fiction writers did. The Captain and co-pilot have a small side-bet on whether or not Venus possesses intelligent life but this is not taken seriously by either of them since, as all astronomers know, there is no intelligent life on Venus at all.

The all-news station keeps us closely posted on the latest news of the expedition wedged in between reports of more pressing events. There is an assassination in Brazil. The Northwest corridor is sealed off once again because a nuclear transport train is suspected of leakage. A woman in Toronto has begun to bleed spontaneously from her skin during a High Mass; it is instantly suspected by certain naive churchgoers that the stigmata is a sign of the second coming but priestly authorities advise the congregation to stand firm which it does. The all-news station pauses for advertisements, advising that its all-sports segment will shortly begin but we are not interested. We turn it off. Venus, pale in the daylight, climbs toward the heavens and can be seen, huddling shyly behind the Moon.

X

Now to confront the Dawsons, the case record read and assimilated but there are no immediacies in my life, only compartments as I have commented earlier. The Dawson compartment awaited: initially it was necessary to deal with Bowman, with Dolores, with other disturbing events at the Center and only with these disposed was it possible to seize the issue, as it were, and voyage into the field to confront those humble recipients who all unknowingly, were the keys to the fate of, etc., cataclysmic events. I do not know if I can stand this anymore. How is it possible to take this seriously if even Lucas himself will not?

Compartments; segmentalization. All in place. First, it was necessary to deal with Bowman.

Must I talk more of Bowman or how he was dealt with that morning? Is it necessary? I can imagine Lucas speaking to me now; we have known one another for so long and for so well that I can construct what he would say: "you should," Lucas would tell me, "you should tell about him. What you have got to do is to tell this whole thing in as close to chronological order as possible, leaving out absolutely noth-

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ing and keeping the elisions to a minimum. Otherwise, how can the Overlords make any sense at all of your notes? The Galactic Overlords, and I must say this no matter how I regret it, the Galactic Overlords are simple folk. They are not at the level of sophistry which I or even you would like to think we occupy. What they like is a good, sound, well-plotted narrative and if they cannot have that they become terribly confused. Plot is the backbone of their perceptions; enables them to get hold of the meanings below. If you can't plot properly, they would at least like to see the events all appearing in their proper sequence so that they do not become confused by yanking about in chronology. The Lords are simple fools, essentially. They achieved their high positions through the tactic of seeing nothing but the simplest way around situations which, as always, was the most far-seeing and terrible tactic.

"Also," I can imagine Lucas saying to me in his reasonable, well-modulated voice (how I miss him now that he is no longer here, but it is, of course, too late for sentimentalities of that sort or the pursuit of ironies), "also, they are discontented with the present tense into which you seem to instinctively fall, with first-person narration, tricky lapses in technique and lurches in mood or point of view to other persona. Why not settle for a past tense? since, of course, all of his happened a while ago. You may not approve of the Lords anymore than they approve of you, but after all, they are your audience now and you must please them."

True. This imagined Lucas is more sensible than

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the real one ever was: Lucas Transmogrified, Lucas Ascendant, he speaks only the truth (and I can trust him because he speaks, at last, only what I want to hear), but nevertheless . . . nevertheless, I dismiss this. I cannot accept it. The hell (and I say this in the most humble spirit, gentlemen, but you are privy to my thoughts anyway so leave it come down) with the Galactic Overlords and their tastes in literature. Lucas would have lost some or all of his grip upon me anyway with the revelation of his true identity and purposes; now he would only be able to cajole, plead, argue, beg, appeal to my better nature, but he would remain essentially peripheral to this new constancy which is the solution of a serious problem thrust upon me. My problem and mine alone. And no one to help.

Consider, gentlemen: it is my problem to certify the Dawson case as eligible for public assistance, despite the peculiar and continued lapses in their past maintenance story; to recapitulate, it is necessary for me, a lone Investigator carrying the fate of the world upon his shoulders, to prove that Bowman's doubts about the case, my doubts, Lucas's doubts, my mounting panic and distrust, those quizzical and demanding Galactic Overlords . . . well, I must simply take on all of this if I wish the human cycle, *my* cycle, in the presence of damaging evidence to the contrary, to continue and prosper as it has already. No one will help me with this; it would seem, then, that I am entitled to carry on matters in my own way.

"Very well, Mercer," this constructed Lucas, far

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more pliable than the real one (I remember him well) says, finding another perch way back on the seat of consciousness, and putting himself at a greater distance still, "if that's the way it must be, then handle the situation as you want."

"I will," I say, addressing the imagined as the real, it making no difference. "I most certainly will."

"You were always going to have it your own way so be resigned to it as they are. Handle the situation as you want. You realize that you have no hopes anyway. The test is impossible, the problem insoluble. You will never certify. The Dawson household is an ineligible case as Bowman knows so well and you'll never be able to change his mind or theirs in time. So be it."

"So be it indeed," I echo and deliver myself, as a sacred host, unto the hands of Bowman, expecting nothing, casting eyes downward, hearing everything. After his lecture delivered over my increasingly impassioned efforts to desert the unit and get to the field, after all of this I am no closer to a solution. Nor further, at any rate. It all, it seems, depends.

The lecture is terminated only when I say to him, in mid-course, "all right, then, bring me up on charges. Try it and see if they will stick, that's all. You have your work to do, I have mine, and it's necessary that I get outside now to *see* those people because nothing, absolutely nothing will be solved by my staying in these offices," and Bowman looks up at me then with that horrified delight which can only occur in all of our lives when a long-threatened event at last *happens*, comes around after thirty-three years of

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carpentry and itinerant wandering, a fulfillment half-suggested in dreams, while the middle-aged men, witnessing this from their uncomfortable but safe chairs laugh and rub their hands together. All that they do is to laugh and rub their hands together; it is incredible to me that they are able to get any work done at all, so harsh their palms must be from the friction. "I'll get you," Bowman says, "I'll really get you."

"I don't care. I'm going to see these people; that's the only resolution."

"You must be crazy, George," Bowman says, stepping back a respectful pace. He has never called me *George* before. "Don't you realize—"

"Everything," I say, "I realize everything" and seizing my fieldbook like a sword, prepare to lance my way out of the loft and toward the timeclock but there is no resistance. Bowman stands and watches while I go, his hands flapping as if he were thinking of touching his lover's organ. "Just leave me alone," I say, raising the fieldbook, "I've had all that I can stand. There are limits."

"You have to be out of your mind. I'm trying to get some work out of you, that's all." Bowman is mild, mildness comes out of him like sweat; his skin seems to glisten indeed with affected calm as he backs off a step, and this, oddly is not satisfying. I have measured myself against him in a hundred imagined confrontations; now the bastard will not suit. "I just don't think I can deal with you anymore if you're going to be this way," this mild Bowman says in a hurt voice and turning his back, proceeds toward his

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desk. He seems to be propelled by a series of shrugs, I cannot bear to watch him.

"You're in trouble," one of the middle-aged men says happily. "Indeed you are in trouble."

"Deep trouble," says another middle-aged man thoughtfully, "you must think about this."

"Trouble, trouble," says the third. "Of course, you shouldn't think that we're getting any personal satisfaction out of this."

"Because we're not," says the fourth, "indeed we're not."

"In fact," says the fifth confidentially, "we're mighty blue that trouble has come to you."

"And I tell you true," say all five of them together and that more than anything else speeds me on my way past them and in a tangential direction, a dim impression, somehow, that behind me my partners in the case unit are harmonizing. Of course this is all hallucinative. I know this as well as you do, may it please the Lords.

My exit, however, is not quite over. Dolores intercepts me at the water cooler where I have paused for a hurried drink and wipe at my brow, looking more attractive than I have ever seen her in tight clothing and a tight morning-after mood. I had not, from a distance, misjudged her: I have changed her life, she is not the girl who left me yesterday. "Hello," I say, hoping that pleasantries will enable me to jolly my way through. "Good morning. How are you?"

"How am I?" she says, "how *am* I? I just want to tell you that everything between us is finished."

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"I'm sorry," the mild and wonderful Mercer says, adjusting the water in his eyes and settling his glasses back on his nose, "truly sorry to hear that."

"We're finished. The two of us are finished. I don't want you to walk over to my desk or talk to me or have me bothered in any way because I'll have nothing to do with you."

"All right," I say, "if that's how it has to be."

"Nothing, nothing at all. Do you hear me? Do you understand? There's no reason why I have to go through with something like this day after day," Dolores says with a schizoid lack of appropriateness and then waits as if with a faint air of expectation. I notice a compact case record she has folded tightly against her tense bosom. Doubtless new applicants. "Do you hear me?" she says, "you're not saying anything."

"Must I?"

"You talk to *yourself* enough, don't you? Why can't you *react*?"

Reactions. Dolores is seeking reaction. With a mania for recapitulation which is, unfortunately, characteristic, I consider my situation yet again: the very fate of mankind hangs upon certain decisions and maneuvers which I will commit within the next eleven and a half hours. I seem to have been in continuous contact with a disgruntled emissary of the Galactic Overlords who has now refused further advice. Bowman is walking triumphantly into a master supervisor's office to have me brought up on charges, no doubt, and Dolores has now decided to bring our

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relationship to a point of challenge-and-explanation. It is really too much and I do not think that any of this is my fault.

"I'm truly sorry," I say, trying to force my way delicately past her, maintaining a bleak and stony calm, that attitude with which I now know I must confront the Dawsons or perish, "I'm very sorry that you feel this way. Believe me, I wouldn't have it for the world. But if you've made up your mind and there's nothing I can do . . ."

"There's something wrong with your *mind*. I realized that last night, you've got to be crazy, the way that you seem to *think*. Do you know how depressed I was when I left you? I couldn't even sleep!" She is an attractive girl in her own way but neurasthenia has got her; it has eaten in from the center as neurasthenia so often does and bone is already jutting from certain angles of her face and arms; I can project that bone as it will appear in a matter of years and it will not be pleasant. Even her breasts will not properly shield the angle.

"I regret that you couldn't sleep. I had some trouble sleeping myself in the abruptness of your departure-without-explanation." I remit to a crude and almost British formality under stress which is somehow embarrassing. "But still, you have to live your life, eh? You've got to go on and on, that's the vital thing."

"Why I don't have to take this," she says, slamming a file drawer open in her vicinity with fine dispatch and turning to show me her buttocks, also hinting bone, tense now with recrimination and denial

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as only buttocks which have been entered recently can be. "Why do I always get involved with the strange ones, that's my question for today. Is it something to do with, for God's sake, my personality? I don't *think* it has anything to do with my personality because I'm *repelled* by strangeness, once I recognize it. But there might be something to my manner, the way I approach people, the way in which I send out signals, that the strange ones find attractive."

"I'm sorry, Dolores," I say to the girl who no less than me finds herself collapsing into casework jargon now and then; it could be an endearing trait but then Dolores is not really an endearing person. I put a hand on her shoulder, feeling her tremble at the contact—the memory of connection oozing through her and out my fingertips—but she does not withdraw and I understand, as always, what she has wanted. But it will do no good. "I really am sorry you feel this way," I point out, "but things are a bit more complicated now than you might be able to imagine what with one thing and another thing which I don't have the time to discuss now. If you want to talk about it later on, maybe get together . . ."

"You don't understand a word I've said," Dolores shrieks, "you haven't even listened! I said I don't ever want to talk to you *again!*" pulls herself free of the contact, then, and moves away from me, her body a palpitating set of quivering invitation which she cannot control. Of which she is not conscious. She walks away, the soft and harsh vibrations coming from her body and I know that I should follow.

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But will I? Will I now? What would the Galactic Overlords think—I can see them observing now, ponderous, judicious, tentacles on chins, watching this scene and the developing situation while they take careful notes—of a man who would trail a woman at this crucial moment of human consequence, rather than taking into his hands the continued responsibility for his race's perpetuation? What would they say? Would they appreciate the ramifications of this? Mumbling, blinking their eyes, shuffling their papers in some musty, inter-galactic office, viewing the emerging scene on this planet through televiewers and infra-ether contacts (I am self-involved enough to conceive that they keep a constant monitoring eye on the proceedings as they develop here, being unable to cope with the horror that *no one* may be watching and Earth already has gone into a Dead File) what would these Overlords think of me to say nothing of the unfortunate Lucas who has put them by proxy into this delicately offensive position?

No, I could not even think of it. Not even at the cost of saving our relationship would I pursue Dolores; in the bargain, I do not want to save our relationship, not quite yet. I will not even think of it. I will not even try to think of what would happen if I got her back in bed. Lucas or not, sex with her is wearying, infinitely wearying; a delicate feeling of *ennui* seems to move through me as I consider the topic, however vagrantly. I will not follow her.

No: no more than the Overlords could wander away from their offices before the proper quitting

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hour, slapping away dust motes and inter-spatial files and put the papers for indefinite leave. No more than those Overlords could, looking over the policies and procedures, decide that their tests were unfair and that Lucas and I were entitled to better. No more than those Overlords would tackle the situation directly (they would always have a Lucas, somewhere, to do the dirty work) could I follow Dolores across the floor of this loft and make an attempt at a Saner Sweeter Relationship. "I'm sorry," I could say, "we really should give this a chance, I won't forget you, won't forget what we could mean to one another," and so on, ending in a rather elaborate if tentative summation . . . but no, instead I scuttle through the exit door and down the necessary flight of stairs to the timeclock. One always uses the timeclock for field time. Despite the noble and continued efforts of the employees' union over a decade, employees themselves are still treated in a paternalistic and bureaucratic fashion and must account for their comings and goings. I do not have the time to be enraged by this.

Lucas, quite shrunken, perches above the timeclock. "You know," he says, "you're not going about this in the proper fashion at all."

"Leave me alone now."

"You're being too impulsive and you haven't even plotted a *modus operandi*. If you don't mind the advice, this is being terribly mishandled at the start. I can't be blamed for taking an interest, can I?"

"I can't be bothered with that now."

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"Well," Lucas says petulantly, "it's your fate, not mine. If you want to run off in all directions there's very little to be done to stop you. You'd be far better off not getting excited and trying to pursue this in a more logical manner. Don't raise your fist to me. That's absolutely futile and I'll have to take measures to protect myself."

"Get out of here."

"You really don't want my advice?"

"I don't want anything from you any more. You put me into this; at least let me try to get out of it in my own way."

"If you wish," Lucas says, swinging his legs. "Our dialogues are coming to an end, you know. This may be the last time I'll ever be able to see you. The whole nature of the assignment has shifted." His eyes betray pain. "I'll miss you, Mercer, you fool," he says.

"Fine."

"No parting words of sentiment?"

"Get out of my way," I say, putting the time card into the machine with a satisfying *whik!* "Just leave me alone."

"I would have expected better."

"Expect nothing," I say, at last the seeming master of our relations, "and nothing will hurt." I replace the card in the file and adjust the fieldbook under my arm.

"Very well," Lucas says, "if that's the way you're going to leave the matter, I really have no choice, do I?" He leaps into the air like a flame and vanishes.

Lucas is gone. Good, good; settling upon his de-

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parture as an omen, I walk though the outer door then, through a maze of filth on the sidewalks, past the abandoned fencing and pits in which the mines were placed and make my way to the field on my grandiose and highly responsible mission of consequence, salvation, and search.



XI

We are informed that the sudden loss of contact with the astronauts on their way to Venus is an object of no concern. Transmissions fail often in space; it is nothing other than the rupture of a communications link, a broken tube, perhaps, or even an unwillingness by the astronauts to speak since they are engaged in more interesting tasks. Monitoring devices are unaffected: their heartbeat is tabulated, blood counted, urine analyzed as previously. Only vocal contact has been lost. We are urged to stay calm and to remember that there are many imponderables in the program of which the loss of contact may be one and there is no reason for concern at the present time. The head of the space center appears before a battery of the media to emphasize his lack of dismay. Reports, pressing to break his calm might as well be battering on stone; the director will not be moved. He speaks to us of the high ideals of the astronauts, their competence, the grim, selection process that weeded out all but these two finest of all possibilities for the approach to Venus. We are reminded that the astronauts are of an abrasive and independent type

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of personality deliberately encouraged by the selection process and this might merely be their way of showing independence or, at the least, being skittish. The director, finding no more questions of human interest, adjourns the session of the media.

The transistors remain open to the sounds of the Venus mission but the speakers hold only static and, at odd intervals, a slow rumble like the sound of marbles being rolled around in a steel plate. Decoders work on the rumble and come before the press to assure us, as we would have already known, that there is no pattern to the sounds and that no one is trying to establish contact.

XII

In my car, on the way to the South Street renewal area in a basement of which the Dawsons, Lupe and Phyllis and the wonderful kids live on and constantly affirm their lives, I push thoughts of cataclysm to a corner of consciousness and, to relax, listen to the all-news station on the radio of my used Montrevor. The Montrevor must have cost six thousand dollars new; now it has depreciated to six hundred but the naked wires below the dash still glisten, the axles are solid enough to take me to any Campus Clown I would desire. Bulletins, therefore, assault me, like waves of the sea.

The all-news station is nothing if not deeply involved with the human condition. They manifest human concern, a wide range of special interest stories competing with the Venus expedition for placement in the cycle of events. A panel has been convened in Oregon to discuss and evaluate the causes of rioting in the Seven Cities last month; Oregon is seven hundred miles from the nearest of these cities and can thus be a valid place for removal and academic reflection. A small dog is trapped in a mine in Butte,

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Montana, an abandoned mine that is, and is being sought frantically by five hundred aroused citizens, or perhaps it is the five hundred aroused citizens who are trapped in the mine and it is the dog who wants to excavate them. The all-news station works in tight rhythms of expectation-and-analysis; details do not count nearly so much as the overall mood it communicates which is one of great urgency. An assassin in a tall building in downtown Baton Rouge has fired upon several hundred people with grenades, shrapnel, and automatic timing devices and has killed five of them to date; police are closing in, however, and an arrest is being expected shortly. Buy detergent spray for the proper kind of vaginal security. The Pirates' manager, fired from his job last Monday, is calling a press conference for early this morning to make what are promised to be important revelations on the corruption of the football team's ownership and its alleged involvement with organized crime. Stay tuned for engaging breakfast possibilities from the nutritional experts.

Later bulletins from Butte indicate that the dog has been found, secure and safe in the pit of the mine and is now being hoisted to the surface by carriers and an automatic elevator contributed by the Otis corporation. The police in Baton Rouge say there is no truth to reports that the assassin has escaped. The Seven Cities remain quiet as they have been for the last three weeks; there are only isolated incidents. Panels of doctors have recommended a detergent basis for vaginal health; now this miracle may be in your own medicine chest. The Pirates' man-

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ager has been unavailable for comment for several days, preparing his statement.

Further news from the Venus expedition via the space center reporting pool, Chris Begarder, correspondent. Contact has not yet been re-established but there is no reason for concern. Communications failures in dry runs and previous expeditions were always much higher than reported and transistor difficulties are common. Gross monitoring continues unhampered and indicates that the pulse rate, heart-beat and skin dilation rates of the astronauts are within normal limits. The wives and families of the astronauts are now standing by awaiting the re-establishment of contact but there is no reason for concern. The wives are not concerned. No one around the space center is concerned. You are not concerned, are you, Mrs. Evans? No, I am not worried at all. Then everything is proceeding normally. Yes, I have been told that everything is proceeding normally. Thank you, Mrs. Evans. This has been an exclusive interview with Mrs. Harry Evans, brought to you through the courtesy of the all-news station and the associated pool of which it is a member. Detergent products are the best, the safest, the surest and the longest-lasting according to field reports throughout the Seven Cities over the last several years.

More details on Venus will be available at the next press conference which will be at the time previously scheduled. The situation is under control and there is no basis on which to advance the scheduling of press conferences or make special efforts to keep the public informed. Should an emergency develop, of

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course, that policy will change. The situation is not being minimized but given to the public as it develops and no information is being withheld. Efforts to re-establish the communications are going ahead well in the space center and projects are that the problem has been solved and contact will be re-established shortly in order that captain and copilot may continue to broadcast their reminiscences and thoughts, daily life and expectation against the static and hiss of the transmission which carries the Venus mission on to its predicted destiny.

This is an update from the all-news station. Due to the developments on the Venus expedition, the Pirates' manager will delay holding his press conference until we have received assurances that the astronauts are safe. Also, the Seven Cities Oregonian Conclave will not hold its first session until word of safety has arrived. In Baton Rouge, police have detected clear signs of the assassin's trail and expect to make an apprehension momentarily. We will stay on this scene as further details emerge.

In 1976 the Mars expedition fell out of contact and failed to return with five men aboard. No one seems to have yet evolved a satisfactory explanation for this. Despite the failure of the Mars expedition, however, technological breakdown was never implicated. Present events on the Venus conquest have nothing whatsoever to do with Mars. There is no relationship between the two events. There, all contact was lost including the monitors. Here, the monitors remain constant. In fifteen minutes, the all-news station will bring you a hastily-assembled panel includ-

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ing municipal university scholars to discuss both the Mars and Venus situations and relive those exciting days of 1976 all over again with you during which the Mars expedition was lost.

Detergents are best for you. The assassin commandeered a white 1978 Cadillac and is now being pursued by the authorities who expect that there will be an apprehension quite shortly. Weather and winds are expected to persist through tomorrow at which time there will be an update. Check. Thank you very much. More word from Venus, Baton Rouge, Oregon and Pittsburgh shortly. Now back. Now back.

I shut off the all-news station. It is always the same. "It is always the same, Lucas," I point out to my attendant who is unfortunately absent as I guide my Montrevor through the safety zones of the Stuyvesant district, as littered and foreign to me as would be the surfaces of Venus, "always the same and I am tired. It has gone beyond boring me, the all-news station, and is now beginning to intimidate because there must be, are you listening to me sir? thank you very much then, there must be another way to bring people face to face with the facts of their common lives. Bulletins should be given on the personal; people should not be allowed to escape their problems through concentration on governments and assassins." Unfortunately, cogent as this sounds coming out, it does not seem to make a great deal of sense. "Everybody should have a chance to be on the all-news program for five minutes of his life, Lucas," I say and then, in the absence of reply to this provocative note, I shut up.

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There is really quite enough in the landscape to engage my attention without the noise from the all-news station. Driving through Stuyvesant and deep into the Brownsville sector (although I have already done this hundreds of times during my span in the department) is always an exciting experience, causing me to compare notes with myself as I pass through the wires, transversing, gentlemen, entire layers of need and retrospection so to speak and bringing me to the cultivation of a lengthier and somewhat more remorseless view of the situation than I might otherwise. The wires, the traps, the checkpoints were all laid out in 1976, abandoned early the next year. It seems so long ago. I was aware of the sector as who in New York was not in those exciting days but I was also little more than twenty-one years old. How could I have conceived that I would be working here so soon for so long?

The gates, the abandoned checkpoints, patches of wire, the mine fields. With what technological ease all of these were planted, the rapidity of the government in the face of what seemed to be real need! In a way it is a pity that all of these were never put into operation and the sector sealed off permanently as seemed possible at that time. But nothing happened, this may be the measure of all liberal administrations, nothing will ever happen (it is enough that we will go on at the single level of accommodation) but the landscape still presents an awesome aspect to visitors and residents alike, a reminder—allow me to expostulate, Lords, if I may; I know your time is brief but you wanted an accounting of the full situation—of a time

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when it was actually imagined that Brownsville could be contained within the protective devices and encircled by highway ramps: sealed off, in short, to all but its tenants and authorities.

Ah well: time passes, we fail to achieve Mars, lose contact with the Venus expedition, learn a thing or three. We know now in this liberated and knowledgeable year of 1981, the first year of a new and glisteningly liberal administration that this is impossible, nothing can be sealed off but that anything—if we only have the strength to ignore it—can be absorbed. Brownsville no less than the Campus Clown is a part of the nation: we can come to terms with it or not but this is our problem. Life goes on. The city remains open terrain. People still live here, and quite often multiply. Ascribe it to liberalism. Anything can be accommodated.

All true, true, but nevertheless one feels nostalgic passing through the empty guard booths and unused patrol sites. It would be nice to go back to 1975 when Mars was still a dream and when it seemed that Brownsville and its population could be locked away like an unnecessary unpleasantness. I think of putting on the radio for some background music to these contemplations, religious revival music would be excellent, but am distracted by a few disinterested loungers on the streets who yawn and greet me with empty cans and cartons thrown dead on at the Montrevor; they bounce off the impermeable mouldings and shatterproof windshield going *spackle!* and on I go, the residents being sealed by the hopelessness of their attack deeper into futility and so it

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should be. Not molested further, I turn the car into the intersection at South Seventh and weaving through slabs of concrete and metal, the bones of departed cars and a few vagrant children hurtling the obstacle course, I put it halfway up on the curb in front of the brownstone and shut off the engine. Hiss of oil in the pipes, backfire from the carburetor: the Montrevor has depreciated another one hundred dollars. I move out of it casually, feeling a bit depreciated myself, moving my body in small pieces of arms and legs on the sidewalk, filtering then through all the rich and peculiar smells of South Seventh Street toward the basement apartment of the Dawsons. "Fuck you, investigator," a child calls from a window above or below me (no placement possible by sight or sound; they are deadly cunning). I think that it may be one of the Dawson caseload but then again, it may not. It is very hard to get through the ins and outs of casework considering the pressures of the job.

XIII

“Finish me off, finish me off anyway, goddamn it,” Dolores whined and I slammed my prick into her like a fist, ballooning up and within, feeling at last my come begin to surge and pool within me, her breasts came down and around the sides of my neck and I seized them with open palms, rubbed and scraped them, tried to wind them madly around the back of my neck . . . while all the time I pumped and pumped below, all distractions below me now, only rage and pain intermingled along with the twitches and convulsions of lust, felt myself growing within her then and felt the imminence. “At last, at last!” she shrieked or maybe it was I who was shrieking this, so mingled were we in the damp and clutter of the bed, swinging on the bed, above and below, running like beasts in the damned sheets and oh, the relief of it, the sheer *relief* as I felt the come boil from the place of mystery within me and spurt into her: four deadening shocks on the bed and I was finished and already rolling free. Oh my God, the release, the *satisfaction*, the knowledge that I had been able to impart within her . . . and suckled on her breasts

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still for memory's sake, trying to bring her off with a finger while she rolled and gasped around me. "Now, now!" she said and must have flipped over some edge, I tossed a finger into her buttocks, manipulated her front and rear then and her lower body came over my hand like an anvil, her flesh becoming rigid, all of her porosity congealed toward metallic gloss and she came then or thought she did, rolling on me to bite my neck and, forcing her teeth to meet through the skin, pushed a searching hand down to fondle my organ which, gentlemen, was unfortunately detumescent by that time.

I know that strictly speaking this is not germane to the ongoing plot or the nature of this retrospection, but I did not want you to think that I had failed with Dolores altogether in the sexual sense, I did want to give you some idea of the way in which we human beings reproduce themselves . . . and in the bargain, my friends, there is a certain pleasure taken in this recollection which I hope you may forgive: I do not know, you see, when or if it will ever happen again. Do similar worries, I wonder, plague the astronauts; could their wives have reached them in this way?

XIV

In front of the building when I get there are more children, forming a welcoming committee, drifting from eaves, gutters, alcoves, sub-levels, piping to let me know that my presence is noted. The children in this regard are thoughtful although, perhaps, just a bit sullen. "Hello, you fucking investigator man, you fuck," a half-grown boy says, throwing a chunk of wood at me. It narrowly misses the left eye, bounces off the sidewalk and I shrug this off as I have shrugged off so much else during my tenure. There is really no point in taking this kind of thing personally.

"Excuse me," I say, "I have to make a home visit."

"You have to make a home visit? You know what you are, investigator, you are a fucking shmuck, a real stupid little son of a bitch," the boy says, then pauses thoughtfully. "That's what you are," he says. "You want to take it up with me and why don't you?"

No, he is not a son of Lupe and Phyllis Dawson. Their environment, or so I would like to believe, is too cultured to bring about a son like this and they would be shocked by his language and attitude toward the man who must certify their continued de-

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pendency. Also, he does not physically resemble them. Of course, it is difficult to go sheerly by appearances; this is an old trap which I will not fall into and, then, as well, all of the children in the Brownsville section are indistinguishable to me, either seen streaming by the windows of the Montrevor in flight or caught in frieze like this one. (I should have made more of an effort to individuate but there are limits to my skill: sometimes I find the adults difficult to segregate.) However, I can trust my intimation that he could not be a member of the Dawson household. No, they would definitely not tolerate this. It would only be to the detriment of their continued eligibility—would it not?—if their investigator were cursed in the street while trying to make his way inside for a certification visit.

“Excuse me,” I say and lowering my head, adjust myself to a supervisory posture and charge my way past the boy but he stops me at the door anyway with a pure shriek which holds me to place, fieldbook jammed into armpit, swatting at insects with the free hand.

“You hear about Venus you son of a bitch?” the boy asks with peculiar earnestness. “Have you?” I turn to see that he has fixed me with an impassioned stare and is making obscene gestures in the vicinity of his belt buckle. “What you think of that, investigator?”

“That has nothing to do with me.”

“Doesn’t it? Doesn’t it? If your government fucked us up with Venus, think of how it’s fucking around with *us*, that’s what I want you to think.”

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“What do you know about Venus?”

“I listen to the bulletins,” the boys says. “You don’t listen to the bulletins?”

“I don’t have time.”

“They can’t even get a spaceship in orbit, how they going to shape up *people*, huh? What do you think of your government, you bastard? Taking lives away from the people, the people’s money away from them so you can send a ship up. You like that, don’t you?”

There is no way to point out to the boy that to the degree I care at all, I suppose that I am vaguely pleased by the latest bulletins of the mission. If the craft falls into the sun or simply flames out in the vacuum as the Mars ship is supposed to have done, this will not disturb me as well. Less money for the space program, more money for my branch of the civil service. I find myself mildly contemplating for the first time whether or not the Galactic Overlords might have something to do with the problems out in space. There *could* be a connection . . . of course this will not really help me to come to grips with the problem so is better, perhaps, discarded.

Meanwhile, the boy is still talking. Inexhaustibly they speak, this may be the basis of all their strength. “You think that I’m a hostile type, investigator?” he says, “you think that I’m showing the what you call it, lashback?” He comes closer to me, raises his little chin and fists but the open pan of his face is more a plea than leer, something which I find quite unbearable to consider. “Why don’t you try and straighten me out?” he says, “I got a bad social ethic, maybe you can do something about it.”

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"I don't want to do anything about it."

"Course not. You got your head in Venus."

"It isn't that. I—"

"It's always that. There's never anything else."

The others—there are others of whom I have been even less aware, framing my vision down to the boy, creating a small dark tube of space in which only he and I exist, staring at one another on this timeless street of South Seventh—now move in to surround us and mimic the boy's solemn expression. They murmur things I cannot catch, most of them younger than he but in some indefinable sense because he is speaking and they will say nothing, older. For one sickening instant I think that they are planning to block my way into the brownstone, keeping me out of the basement entrance and thus, by refusal to allow me to see the Dawsons, bringing about the end of mankind (how could Lucas ever explain *that* to his headquarters? well, he could not and he ought to give me some help but where the hell *is* he?) but at the last instant they part, opening a small track for me at the center, grey pavement looking at that moment like the halls of the heavens. Scuttling, I set myself on that path and go down the steps, fixing my eyes on the impermeable door of the basement which can be opened only from the inside, I begin to pound with more than the usual investigatorial detachment, abandonment vaulting through me like fear. I hear steps dimly within but wonder if they will intersect me in time. Investigators have been killed here. *They have been killed.* There are precedents for anything which can occur.

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"We've got an assignment with you, investigator," the boy says. I feel the mold of his face in my back, darting all that hatred and urgency through the few feet separating us and turn to face him, feeling pinned against the door. This is undignified. There is no dignity in being in such a position: how did we ever let them get the upper hand? We should have taken forceful measures in 1976 when we had them, finally, at bay until the liberal administrators let them back out of it. "Good assignment," he says, "a meeting arranged with you and your fucking government too; all of you bastards. We going to get together someday in the field and straighten each other out. You and the government man from Venus and the man at the very top sending both of you on your way, we are going to have a long talk about social welfare and human conditions in this neighborhood and when we are finished you will be understanding a few things you don't see now. *Education*, investigator. I am a great believer in education just like the government and we will all come together and I will show you a few things, you and your Venus trappers. You hear me? You dig that? You talk about the future all the time, future in the stars, future in Venus, well you dig this and get it right the first time: *we are your future and we are happening right now!* You dig that? You dig it right?"

The door is opened. The Dawson door, finally, is opened by a bemused Phyllis who stands in the portal like a damp Madonna, wiping moisture from her upper lip and beckoning me in. "You again?" she says, "we just had our visit last month."

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“There’s some important stuff—”

“Come in,” she says, touching my wrist, a horrid contact generating small explosions under the skin, “just get inside now. Get away from them.”

“*You listen to me!*” the boy says. He is as persistent as a Galactic Overlord, as obsessed as Lucas. “You wait on him Phyllis you slut, don’t make any difference if he get in nearer or sooner, you hear me? You think that I’m just talking to you you investigator fuck in a street somewhere in this hellhole and that in three, four years while you still walking proud around this neighborhood giving out the shit I be dead or pissed or gone three ways under the wire but this is a promise I am going to make to you: we are all going to sit and have a conversation then and I am going to be around a hell of a lot longer than you are or Venus is or the fucking government. Long after Venus is a *memory* I still going to be grabbing at life because I am the future and I am staying in here. I am going to be on the scene and I am going to make things come my way because this is my street and my life and all things are going to come from me. You hear?”

“I hear,” I say, “I hear you.”

“That’s good. You hear me good. You think about it some.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Leave him alone,” Phyllis says and leads me through the door. “He’s an investigator. It’s nothing his fault, it just happened that way, this man is here to help us.”

“This man is here to *kill* us.”

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“Same thing,” Phyllis says, “same thing, don’t you dig?” and closes the door on the boy; he stands there, empty, and I see the beginnings of knowledge on his face although it is a knowledge of a kind which I can barely apprehend and which would—if I knew it—do me no good at all. Most of the life and sense of welfare recipients is beyond me.

Phyllis leads me through the hall and into the apartment and it is the same as I have always remembered it: it is four o’clock perpetually in the Dawson quarters, four o’clock on a bleak, humid April afternoon, all the sounds and sights of nature well insulated by the plaster, the crevices, the iron-work and grating, the open holes through the apartment and were I a man who came to terms with his environment other than loosely I would find it extremely depressing; as things are, I simply, and as best as I can ignore it. Their life is not mine and etc.

But I must have tenanted the Dawson quarters during a prior existence if we can conceive of life as a set of interchangeable frames of reference, either that or I will live in it at some time in the future because of all the public assistance quarters I have walked through in these years, the Dawson’s is familiar and wrenching in a way which I have only previously associated with dreams or death. What I will take longest in memory, gentlemen, when I have been led from these humble quarters in which I assure you I am doing the best I can to write this memoir tightly and with a good, lean sense of style, whether you accept it or not this is the truth, what I will take longest from this is the impression of steam.

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Oh my God, the steam! . . . It fills the apartment, drenching into all those small openings of the plaster, the steam hangs and vaults, wafts about the room as feathers only to settle in ominous clumps at one point or another, usually dramatic moments of conversation. The steam, then, must be sentient with a definite will of its own, the overbearing and critical personality in the Dawson *menage*. Now it parts as a curtain to reveal Lupe's simple if rather muddled features hovering above the level of the kitchen table like a stuporous moon, his fingers drumming, his eyes pulsing, fixing me with a lost and intense look which communicates neither welcome nor repudiation but rather a compound of the two which makes his true feelings indecipherable. He nods vaguely, looks down at the table top again. Does he know the nature of my mission? but this would be impossible; he murmurs something and the steam comes over him again. I lose sight of him in the mist.

The Dawsons are also fond of icons for on the wall above the table, emerging with swooping clarity from the steam as if in greeting, then retreating again, are framed reproduction-portraits of the two assassinated Presidents; in the best of health and spirits they look down upon me in stereopticon effect, close enough to grab and swaddle if one were so inclined. Ringing these are reproductions in two dimensions (one must count the costs, after all) of that firmament of assassinated Senators, Representatives, public leaders, revolutionaries and so on whose public statements in favor of people like the Dawsons have apparently created complications. Otherwise, like my

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own, the walls are bare, although one can admire, if one were so inclined, the exquisite flowered print of the wallpaper recently installed by that concerned landlord, the services corporation, daisies, daffodils and roses beckoning from octagonals in the walls. Activity behind the paper, small bulges and scuttles, a hint of gesture: do the Dawsons have an infestation of some sort? One would hope not; one consequence of the changes of 1976 was that the repellent gasses tossed into the district by authorities somehow eliminated all of the vermin . . . this possibly being the major governmental effect, if only incidentally, upon the sector.

Interview time. Man's fate. The outcome of the world is in my hands, I remind myself, and urge myself to brisk, authoritative action. Start routinely. "Hello," I say to Lupe, showing him my calmest and most protracted investigatorial grin. I swing a chair out from the kitchen table checking it for splinters or unexpected weakness and then very carefully sit on it, miming assurance, pushing thoughts of toppling from me as I balance my caseworker's notebook on a knee twitching only slightly and confront Lupe straight on. Phyllis moves through layers of steam winking (she seems to thrive upon it) and takes a chair to sit near the table as well.

Now, then we are huddling together; we do this throughout all our conferences, the Dawsons and I, a collaborative overcast to my pushings and prodings of memory which I find rather exciting. Who would have thought that the Dawsons and I could be so linked by common purposes? "Hello," I say

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again, somewhat more awkwardly. "How are you today?"

"What do you care?" Lupe says.

"What do I care? Of course I care; you know that it's important to me to know how you are but," I say, deciding to swing into it at once, no more of this, no, to the heart of the issue now and without delay, "I want to review certain aspects of the past maintenance here."

"Past maintenance?" says Phyllis, brushing one limp hand across her face, examining a strand of hair, "what is this past maintenance?"

"I know," I say, hastily raising a hand and making a soothing gesture, "I know that we've maybe discussed this before and that you must find it somewhat tiring to hear that question raised again."

"I do not understand this man," Lupe says aimlessly. "Do you understand this man?"

"Let us listen to him," says Phyllis. "He's trying to help us."

"That's right," I say, "I'm trying to help you but the only way I can help you is with your cooperation. Under the rules and certification processes of the department, now, it is necessary that we have a thorough re-investigation at any time in order to develop information." I feel shreds of foolishness dangling from my hands, surely a symptom of hysteria or something like that but nevertheless concentrate on brushing them away vigorously, letting them dangle and fall to the floor where they lay like ropes, thrash like worms. Stay within the rhetoric of the department at all times with clients; not only we but

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they find it comforting. "This is part of the re-investigation." I open my field book, putting it at ready, feel steam hiss into my ears and ease it out with an exploratory forefinger. "So if you don't mind I'd like to try and develop a little of that information now."

"Me, I do not understand," Lupe says. "I do not understand this." For one afflicted with chronic sinusitis he is a surprisingly vigorous man, now he swats his hands together to create a sharp clap. "Past maintenance you are saying. What is the meaning of past maintenance?" He leans toward me in a posture of what might be threat. Lupe and I, sad to say, have never really established a relationship of mutual trust. "I really don't know what you're talking about," he says. A crucifix on his chest bobbles in agreement; I find myself staring at it with repulsed fascination. The crucifix is a new item; I had not previously known that Lupe was religiously inclined and I feel an urge to lean closer into him, fondle the crucifix and begin to question him earnestly on all aspects of his belief. *I am interested in the subject too, I would say, strictly speaking, what would you say are the restorative aspects of prayer?* No. No. This would definitely not work out.

"He is trying to help us, Lupe," Phyllis says again with enormous patience. "Mr. Mercer is our investigator; he wouldn't be coming out to see us and ask these questions if he didn't care." She, at least, is always cooperative during the home visits: what the true nature of their life together might be is, of course, something I cannot fathom. Properly speaking, it is none of my business; let the Dawsons remain

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a mystery if only the past maintenance will come clear. Perhaps Phyllis is the weaker one in the marriage, needing assurances and prods: how would I know? Who would tell me this? How could I possibly understand anything of these people and would it help me if I did? If the fate of mankind depended upon my apprehension of what goes on here day after day, mankind would surely have no chance because I understand nothing.

"Nothing, Lucas," I subvocalize, not caring if this is noticeable to the Dawsons, so irrational is the situation anyway. "I know nothing of these people and neither can you. Are you there? Are you listening to me; would you say something? Come on, you son of a bitch, you can't avoid the issue forever."

"I am not there," Lucas says to me as if behind curtains or more likely great billows of steam, "I am not there at all. Cease relying upon me, Mercer. My part of this job is finished. It's in your hands."

"You can't back out on me now, you son of a bitch! You can't do this to me!"

"Oh yes I can," Lucas says quietly and in a fading monotone. "Yes I can indeed. It is your life, Mercer, and your decision. It was always this way and sooner or later you will come to terms with it."

"I'll get you for this. I will."

"They already have," Lucas says flatly, but the *have* is almost indistinguishable from background roar, at such remove is he. I squint through the steam but cannot see him. No, there will be no help from that aspect and as Lucas has said, like it or not, I am completely on my own. "Pardon me," I say aloud to

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the Dawsons, waving a hand, "a few matters which I had to think over. Many things on my mind. Let's return to where we were and continue to discuss this."

"But I really *don't* understand," Lupe says in a quiet, more reasonable tone, filaments of curiosity or is it despair shining behind his dense eyes as he puts one palm, two palms on the table and heaves himself to a standing posture, then begins to wander around the room, raising a cover on a pot here, flicking dust off a chair there, touching the stereopticon reproductions over there, adjusting a foot on a chair to tie a shoelace here, gesturing floridly but within a controlled spectrum, "I really do *not* understand you or what you want. What do you mean by past maintenance?"

"Let me——"

"I'm a sick man. You know that I'm a sick man because you're with the department and know the history of my case. Down at the Division Street office they know I'm a sick man *too* but every time I'm in there and every time you come here you have to start by asking me the same damned stupid questions all over again and if that isn't enough, if that isn't *enough*, asking the questions, you have to keep me going down to Division Street where I tell them every month all over again how sick I am and they make me see a doctor."

"I have nothing to do with the employment section. It's a different section altogether; you've got to see them to establish continued eligibility, that all." Maddening, it is frustrating, the sheer *perversity* of

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these people. Bowman is quite right after all; you can make no headway with them. "Let's not get off the subject," I say, "let's stay where we were."

"But we *are* where we were, it's always the same." Lupe fondles the crucifix, looking at it intently. Has he turned into a religious fanatic since I saw him last? Are there subtle character changes which have evaded me? "It's a matter of pride to me to support my family: you know I want to do that. How can I keep on going through this all the time? What do I have to do for you people to leave me alone?"

Lupe is persuasive, credible: he comes to rest, he and his crucifix and stares at me. Locked by his sparkling eyes, steam parting for that engagement, Phyllis off to one side, out of the confrontation, I find that I want to believe him. Despite everything I should know I want Lupe to be credible: I want him to be a crippled man, broken by his dependency, shocked by want, incomprehensive of departmental jargon, held into the constant humiliation of his position; I want Lupe to be everything that he says he is because all of a sudden, it is too much for me. It is completely overwhelming. Far better that all is as it seems on the surface; that I could go to the Galactic Overlords with hands spread and a clean record. *The man is helpless*, I could say and surely that would be sufficient for the Overlords. They would not push the test further if Lupe was what he seemed.

Struggling, I can feel myself floundering my way down a tube of credibility the way a small child might inch his way, bit by bit, into a sewer pipe only to find himself inextricable at the end. The odors of

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belief are in this room: belief and resignation mingled. "Of course," I say, motioning my friend Lupe to sit again and join me over this confidential table for a relaxed moment of commity prior to the signing of the final treaty. "Of course. You're quite right. I know that this must be hard for you. Sick. You're a sick man. It's too much of you to ask. For your family. For your own sake. I know that. Forgive me." I fumble for my fieldbook, close it around the pencil, stand. "Excuse me," I say, exhaling in small puffs, curling my tongue around the steam on my palate. "You are quite right. Am wrong. I am wrong I mean to say. Will not bother you further." I seem be babbling. Ambulation, however, continues within the normal range. "Be leaving," I say. "Just be leaving. Regards to your family." Is it a look of relief I see from Lupe now or regret? He poises at the table, half-stands. I am walking out on him, and so soon after we had established our new relationship.

"No," Phyllis says and flings out a hand; in that one gesture of retraction I feel myself pinned, the cleansing and easeful thoughts of the last half-minute ruptured. I hold in place. "Let the man talk," she says quietly, holding her hand in extension and patting Lupe on a wrist, he twitches, grumbles but holds steady on her touch: have I misgauged their relationship once again? "This man is only trying to help us just as he says. Isn't that right, investigator?" Unlike Lupe, Phyllis does not know my name or at least is incapable of fixing it in mind from interview to interview; her cordiality then in relation to Lupe's hostility is one of those many delightful ironies which

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I have had to accept in my post. A year and a half on the Dawson case, ten or twelve visits and innumerable correspondences and phone calls and I am still, to her at least, *investigator*. There is certainly something complex in that area but I do not want to be explorative: say that Phyllis is merely trying to be polite and leave it at that. "Stay," Phyllis says, fixing me with her warm, dark, mysterious eyes, generations of obscure races melting and mingling there, "stay and talk to us. Ask anything that you want and he will try to help. He understands now."

"Well," I say to this, "well," and affix myself firmly again within the chair. "Aha, I see. I see what you mean. I'll try to make this quick." I seem to be at a loss for words, using a finger then to part some vapors of steam, poking my head through the clouds like curtains to peer at Lupe in the odorous and dense kitchen. One of the stereopticons winks at me; I wink back. The assassinated President never looked so well in life as he does here; death has had an enormously improving effect upon his complexion which, many people do not know, was quite bad. I wink back, sustaining the illusion and nod at him. "Well," I say yet again, "I'll be happy to try to explain this to you now; after all, everyone is entitled to an explanation."

"I do not understand this man," Lupe says, sitting back ponderously.

"But you will listen," says Phyllis, "you will now listen to him," she gives him an admonitory look, he inflates and then collapses. "You will listen to everything he has to say to you, won't you?"

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"I don't know. I just don't know."

"Let me start from the beginning," I say, my voice shrieking its way up the scale toward a high, pedantic whine; a common failure under stress. "Now, whenever someone applies for public assistance, the question of course must be why they're applying now."

"That's a very *good* question," Phyllis says.

"Well, yes; I don't know if it's a good question but it's necessary. How were they supporting themselves, you see, up to the point of application and what has happened to make them incapable of self-support any further. Something must have changed, you see, there was some aspect of variance which necessitated the application, a change of circumstances which broke off the fusion between past and present within which so many of us must dwell, the contiguous lines of support, you see, that slow, building polarity . . ." and this is no good at all. I stop talking. My grasp of procedures has never been very good; my explicatory ability almost nil.

For a bleak instant, thus, I confront the Dawsons, Lupe and Phyllis. Unspeaking, head to head across the table, Phyllis wedged between the two of us as if we were to do battle for her (but I have never, never felt desire for any of my clients, I depersonalize them totally, gentlemen, I do not think of them as people; the record, the record, the record will show this! I had no desire for her) and never, truly, have I felt so close to them as at this true and futile moment. It has been a long time coming, this communion, but no less profound for all of it: the two

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Presidents, the gallery of the assassinated surrounding them seem to join us in this moment, giving it popular appeal and resonance. One of them was killed not two miles from here but I will not think of such things now. Even if he had not been killed, or killed a few cities away, his picture would still adorn the walls: I have that much faith in the human spirit. Never have I felt so close to the Dawsons, never will you, gentlemen, be as close to them.

The hell with it, I could say in that bleak, contiguous instant which stretches on, *the hell with this shit, the hell with the outcome of the world when I never knew how I was going to make it tomorrow*, and toss the fieldbook casually for emphasis into one of the bubbling pots on the stove (what does she cook in there? what does Lupe see when he opens the pot and will I ever know?) let the vinyl of the fieldbook bubble into a nasty stew indeed which the Dawsons and I could then eat companionably, entrails and small leavings rising to the surface and being pushed, *specialite de maison* to the center of the plate, chewing these solemnly and with vast contentment in the welfare kitchen while the children, tired from their play, would troop in to join us. *I never cared that much whether the world went on anyway*, I could say and surely they would agree with me, *I can hardly be concerned with large issues when the small ones defeat me day after day; when you're having trouble getting laid, what does the fate of the world have to do with the situation?* Yes, it would be reasonable to share this relaxed moment with them over the table, as reasonable a way to finish up this day

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as any other and the children be damned, they could like the situation or get away from it, all the same: it was not their world.

It's all a pack of crap, you see, if they can do this kind of thing to us, I would say in conclusion but like an empty drunk brought on by cheap liquor on a foul stomach and instantly broken into disgust by a change of surroundings this mood too breaks and I feel that in a moment or less, community be damned, I may throw myself upon these Dawsons weeping, slobbering for an explanation. Perhaps they know all about Lucas; he seems to be concerned enough for them.

"What we're trying to find out," I say however and quite reasonably too; my ability to sustain one emotional mood while functioning on another plane while clearly schizoid is one of the hallmarks of the good investigator, "what we're trying to find out is how you people got along between the time Lupe lost his job and you came into the welfare office five months later to apply for relief. The office downtown, remember? That's five months in which we can't account for the actual means of maintenance."

"Ah," Phyllis says nodding, rubbing her hands, "the actual means of maintenance. I see."

"It's too vague. You talk about loans and credit from neighborhood groceries you understand, but we don't have good details and because the investigation was rushed right along to get you on assistance as quickly as possible. The procedures were a little lax, they didn't follow up and find out the names of the people from whom you borrowed, the gro-

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ceries and so on. You understand? But now we have to go back and keep on discussing this with you again. Once we get the names and places and so on we'll have it all down in the file and won't have to bother you again. Wouldn't that be nice? So that's what I'm trying to do, just to straighten out those very few details and that will be the end of it."

"Ah," Lupe says. "Aha." He removes a loose cigarette from the pocket of his vividly colored shirt (I see that I have neglected descriptions of physical appearance and apparel which would lend much brightness and immediacy to the scene but you will forgive me gentlemen, will you not: from your close observation of our planet you probably already know these details quite well yourselves and can fill in on the edges; meanwhile I will concentrate upon the action sequences which are your major concern) and looks at it with bright interest, then puts it into his mouth to suck at it frantically without the application of flame. Perhaps this is symbolic; it makes me think, in any event and rather lewdly of Dolores and I shift in the seat. "This man is very interesting. Isn't he interesting, Phyllis?"

"He's only trying to help."

"Yes, he's only trying to help but he still is interesting. That doesn't keep the one from the other. He has much to say and I listen carefully but I don't know what he's talking about. That's why he's interesting. Do you know what he's talking about?"

"As long as he's trying to help us it doesn't matter to me."

"You say, you say he's trying to help us, he keeps

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on saying that and you do and I'm sure that he is too, I'm glad to know this because in our situation but," Lupe says and then pauses to sneeze magnificently, his damaged sinuses draining with a roar as he reaches behind him for a roll of steam-saturated paper towels on the sink and blows his nose meditatively, picking and straining for abandoned particles with a finger shielded by the paper, "but," he says, picking up the beat casually, not at all disconcerted by the sneeze which has given renewed evidence of his condition, "this does not mean that I understand it, or him." He continues working on his nose. Punctilious. Lupe is a punctilious man; like me is absorbed by small details, necessities of conduct. Why did I not notice this years ago? we could have had a relationship. "No," he says gently, "I don't understand what you are after. That was a long time ago, you know. 1975, 1976. You're talking five years, you're talking about the riots and the sealing-off down here: who the hell knew what was going on? You were alive in the morning, still with the incendiaries going off all night and you felt still ahead of the game. That kind of thing does something to your mind, living that way; haven't been the same since. You're talking a lot of years that we've been on, lot of water down the pipe, am I right? Am I?"

"You should try to help him Lupe. He doesn't do this on purpose; I'm sure that he's got orders from up above and it isn't his fault that he has to ask this."

"Well, Phyllis," Lupe says reasonably, wiping his nose and putting the paper towels back into a pocket,

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"maybe you're right there. Of course you're right. So why don't you go and try to answer the questions for him?"

"Because . . ."

"I'm doing the best I can. You can see that I'm trying to follow along but I don't know what he's talking about, I really don't and I think he's crazy."

"I'm not crazy," I say, "if you understood what was really going on . . ."

"But how can I? They were sending in the incendiaries every night here for six months back then, didn't I just say that? Swooping over, back and forth, laying the fire so that the windows were blowing up inside on you and the goddamned mines, you couldn't even take a walk out of the house without maybe one of those going up on you. I *lived* here then. Did you? They had the area sealed off—"

"I don't know anything about it. I wasn't in the department then; I was twenty years old and in college. You can't blame me for—"

"Well of course," Lupe says quietly, standing, doing something inside his trousers with his hands which snake in and down, then come out to collide against the table, "of course you weren't here, nobody was here, nobody but us lived here or had to take it and then, two years later it turned out that no one was responsible at all. Wasn't that amazing? Everyone was out of the area, it wasn't their responsibility, unfortunate that it had happened but it must have been outside elements. But we were living it. We were—"

"I have nothing to do with that."

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"Nobody had anything to do with it. Everyone alive wasn't alive back then or they were out of town or connected with something else. Very sorry, please, but you'll have to take it up with someone else; we weren't responsible. We *lived* it," Lupe says and sneezes again, ignores the paper towels, wipes his nose with a forefinger, "and look what it did to us. Just leave me alone now. Just leave me alone."

"Please, Lupe," Phyllis says, after a pause. "Don't be that way; it wasn't his fault. Can't you see? he's too young." She stands, moves toward the stove, opens a pot and sniffs. *What do they have in the pots here?* Might the key to the mystery be revealed stewing greily at the bottom of a metal enclosure, the dark secret itself revealed hovering in its juices above the flame? I would not, if I knew it were the answer, go over to that pot and look; certain things are better unrevealed.

"Then you answer his questions."

"I don't know the answers. I don't know the answers to the questions, all that I try is to do the best I can with the house and you do the best with the social welfare department. That's fair. There's nothing wrong with that now, is there?"

Division of labor. "All right," I say, closing the fieldbook with a sense of dispatch, expecting a sensation of momentous decision taken but there is, of course, nothing. Nothing to be felt at all: the critical moments are always slight. Instead I find myself thinking only of the steam: why is the kitchen filled with it? Why are pots always on the stove, even during the summers, and why are there no odors from

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these pots other than a vaguely soapy aroma? Are they trying to tell me something? Are the pots the answer to all of it? Again I realize that if I knew they were and were aware that I could solve the mystery by lunging over and looking . . . I would not. There are many things in this world which are best left unrevealed, no matter what the consequences.

“Don’t do it,” Lupe says and I twitch, thinking that he refers to my closing the fieldbook, giving up the investigation (have they had discussions with Lucas?) but it is not that but my thoughts of going to the stove which he has sensed. I see that as he gives me a wink informative and reproving at the same time, his mood now almost casual after his explosion. How emotionally labile they are! There is no stability to any of their moods which does not keep them from being taken seriously anyway. “You wouldn’t like it at all,” he says and winks again. So here we are now, just the two of us together in this pleasant Brownsville basement apartment, two men who may nominally be on different sides of the welfare question but actually are very close; this is what the wink says or in any event what I take it to say. *Why can’t we just be friends together?* Lupe seems to want to know, why don’t we realize that we have no conflict at all; it’s just the two of us, old friends and thieves together with a long and sunny afternoon ahead? I can get rid of Phyllis and find a bottle, I can imagine Lupe whispering in an instant, maybe I could even get us a couple of friends. His mouth is already preparing itself for the phrases, shortly or

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immediately he is going to begin whispering obscenities and I will not know what to say. What can I say to him? Is there any way to explain? On what peripety am I lodged, gentlemen?

I shake my head. I can be just as stubborn as he. I fix him eye to eye and open the fieldbook, listening to the clink of Phyllis's spoon within the pot. All right: out with it. I might be easily vanquished, but not on the terms Lupe offers. Not for a drink and a scuffle. I mean more than this. I will show him.

"I am sorry," I say yet again, my favorite phrase but then departmental representatives are always sorry and why should they not be? they have the best of reasons, "but we'd better get back to the issue here. We will get back to the issue. We cannot let this go although both of us would like to. Pressure, I'm under pressure."

"Crazy," says Lupe again.

"Nevertheless," I say, "nevertheless. How did you get along during that five month period? Who did you borrow the money from? Who extended the credit? Who could you send me to in order to obtain verification?"

And so on.



XV

We are told that communications have been re-established with the astronauts and that all is well. For technical reasons we will not be allowed to listen in on the transmissions as previously but we are assured that this is only to conserve energy and that everything on the voyage continues as previously. The astronauts are fine. They are in the best of spirits. They were unaware of the fact that contact had been lost, being absorbed with their own busy, happy tasks aboard the capsule. Now they are approaching the three-quarters mark and all is well. The flight is well. Their morale is well. The equipment is well. Soon they will have conquered Venus, opening up a new period of peaceful exploration of the universe and that will be well too. In the meantime, we will have to bear with the cutting off of transmissions to the public, this being only in the interests of preserving a continued safety margin.

One of the wives has a small breakdown during an interview televised to the world by satellite and electronic devices, witnessed in person by five hundred members of the press and agency corps. She

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accuses the agency of lying about the true status of the mission, and says that communication was never lost and that they have been in touch with her husband and the captain all of the time and that there is something wrong with her husband and the captain, in fact there is something terribly wrong and she cannot participate in this lie any more, she must tell what is happening. The press to say nothing of many million people lean in to get the true and remarkable facts which she is apparently willing to divulge but the wife is prevented from saying anything further by officials of the agency and members of its public relations staff who rush forward to protect her from the press and lead her from the rostrum amidst some expressions of dismay and cries of anger.

The lady is distraught, one of the public relations staff says, the lady has been under great emotional strain and her reactions are understandable. The press should understand that as should the worldwide audience; the strain that the woman has gone through, that is, by the loss of contact with her husband. It is a very normal, human reaction and it is hoped that none the worse will be thought of her for this. Actually, her husband is quite well. The flight proceeds normally. Everything was normal from the start and will continue to be except for the minor transmissions failure which can be discounted. Discount that, the press and public are advised, and be compassionate toward this woman.

Another official then takes the rostrum. There are charts, graphs, maps which show the intersection of Venus's orbit and the arc of the spaceship. The offi-

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cial demonstrates how they will shortly intersect as the craft makes a soft landing upon Venus with the help of retrofire. He begins, with the pointer on the map of the planet, to point out the many points of interest which the crew will be exploring and what it is hoped the voyage will gain. He advises that the men look forward to great accomplishments during their two days on the planet and it is hoped that the transmission blockage may be lifted by that time so that the public will be able to share with the astronauts the wonder and glory of the many activities they will perform, the many sights they will see.

The wife is taken quietly out of the huge room during this explication, by a large party of officials. She does not struggle nor does she make comment. Her affect is bland; her limbs show a waxy flexibility, her demeanor is cooperative, although no one, because of the ramps, is close enough to investigate this carefully. We are told that she is recovering well from her slight anxiety attack and will be able to meet with the press and public shortly, perhaps shortly after the landing on Venus. In the meantime, and for the good of all principals, it is felt that it would be best if she rested, but a statement for the press is expected shortly.

We are told that she is being kept company by the wife of the captain who has been brought to the center only for this reason. Otherwise, she would have remained in town, several miles away, to await the results of the voyage there. The wife of the captain is not at all concerned by the situation and, in fact, was asleep at the time of the press conference during

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which the wife of the co-pilot had her little breakdown. She was awakened to come to give the wife comfort. There is no other reason for her presence at the center and everything proceeds normally. She too will be meeting with the press and public shortly but it is felt best now that her energies be devoted to restoring the spirits of her good friend of many years standing.

The telecast ends, the satellite signals go dead, the press goes into other rooms to drink or turn in their stories or sleep. Alone on the empty rostrum the official quietly stands to one side while technicians fold up the charts, graphs and pointer and place them in a large portable crate for safekeeping. In the crate, before it is closed, they gleam with a dull fire and the official leans over them, rubbing his hands as if for warmth but there is no warmth from this glint or so he discovers and so the crate is closed, the technicians, stumbling, carry it off and on the rostrum the official considers his notes carefully as beneath him, the wires for the telecast are unstrung.

XVI

“Would you have any receipts?” I say, “would you be able to give me any concrete information on the amounts you borrowed from these people?”

“No. No.”

“This case has been open for five years so no one’s suggesting that you aren’t eligible but it could be closed on a technicality unless you cooperate to the best of your ability. I’m doing what I can.” I will persist. “Surely, surely Mr. Dawson, you must be able to yield more information than you have through the years.”

“I can’t. I just can’t.”

“Give me names, addresses, amounts, proofs of some kind or at least tangible antecedents that I can run down—”

“He’s crazy,” Lupe says in a tone which seems to move beyond declamation to decision. He stands, a small man, this, but the abrupt gesture in the crowded and cluttered kitchen has a most dramatic and compelling effect as he hovers upon me, elements of alienness, whiffs of extra-terrestrial power coming from his little mustaches and congealed nostrils as

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he stares at me. Could this then be the key to the mystery? I wonder. Does this sum all of it up? Are the Dawsons or at least Lupe alien messengers whose sole purpose was to act in preparation for Lucas and a false test? Have I all along been in the hands of a cast of aliens: Lucas, the Dawsons, the supervisors, perhaps Dolores themselves, all of them carefully setting the stage so that only I am outside the true purposes of the situation? Was that what I should have suspected all along?

Horrible. Horrible! I will not even think of it, not then, not now gentlemen: there must be something earnest left to this existence of ours or I personally will have no part of it. "No," I say quietly, "I'm not crazy. I just want to conduct an investigation."

"I told you," Lupe says to no one in particular, his mood swinging from assault to apology as he begins to stutter, "I told you he was crazy, you've got to see this, that I'm right. Goddamn it, I told you three times already right here and now that that was a long time ago, before the riots, before the sealing-off, before everything! Four, five years, how the hell am I going to remember what I went through four or five *days* ago let alone years? Do you have any compassion, man? Do you think that I like this, you have to be crazy. *I hate it.* I can't stand it anymore. I won't take it."

"You can see," Phyllis says, pacific as always, squinting into a rearward pot, waving a hand to better distribute the steam, "that he doesn't like it. He doesn't like being on relief all the time, I can tell you this. Complaining all the time, Mr. Mercer, cursing

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that he only wishes that he had the strength to get to work and support his family. This is not easy for him.”

“It isn’t easy for me either. You must understand this; I just can’t—”

“But when you start to ask questions about what happened four, five years ago, now that’s a lifetime, Mr. Mercer. It’s a lifetime to any of us down here; no one knows that far back when they have all that they can do just making it on to the next day.” Phyllis, at least, has always addressed me by my surname. It is a gesture I respect; unlike Lupe who generalizes his speech and the children who are completely impossible, Phyllis is still trying to observe amenities. Her respect, the sincere if rather low-keyed fashion in which she has always greeted me and tried to make me feel welcome in her home has given me the feeling from time to time—let us face this, gentlemen, and be done with it: it is data which would have to be investigated sooner or later anyway—that in different circumstances we might have understood one another, might even had a relationship: certainly she would have been a better fuck than Dolores, anytime . . . but this is madness, peripheral at all times to the investigative fashion and in my defense I say I do not think of this often. Not only am I entirely professional, I find Phyllis quite unattractive. How could I possibly become involved with her?

Oh, this public assistance is indeed a brutalizing system: consider this now, only a welfare client could find another welfare client sexually attractive, so low

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is the order of existence on which they dwell. I have cause to think of this again as Phyllis's elbow brushes my cheek inadvertently, she backs away with a gasp and I feel tendrils of cold like fire sprint their way across my face and, passing through the temples, move like splinters into the brain. Shuddering, I stand, tucking my fieldbook into position. Enough. It will never work out. I must accept this and await the end, then, with courage.

"Don't talk to him, Phyllis," Lupe is saying, storming around the kitchen now in an explosion of feeling: opening pots, closing pots, using large, damp towels dragged from a cabinet underneath the basin to wipe his streaming face and neck. "This man does not want to listen to us. He wants to hear nothing we might have to say."

"There's no reason for hostility, Dawson," I say; with my position accepted I have no further use for masks. "I wasn't trying to close your false case but only trying to develop information . . . but if you won't cooperate, so be it. We'll just close the case then."

"Develop? What are you trying to develop: I don't know what you're talking about. Please," Lupe says quietly, a shattered man, obviously, all of this has been too much for him, "just leave. I would like you as a personal favor to me just to leave."

I can be reasonable myself. "Come now," I say mildly enough, balancing my casebook on a knee, weighing the ins and outs of revealing the true stakes to Dawson, this may seem foolish to you, something

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hard to understand, but there are important issues at stake and it's more than usually significant . . .”

Should I tell him about the Galactic Overlords? Would it be proper to divulge the information at this time: would it help the course of the investigation? No, somehow, measuring the circumstances at this time, it does not seem likely that bringing the Overlords into the discussion would help. They would not fit into the environment. Lucas, then? Tell Dawson about Lucas; ask him if he has had similar problems conferring with himself? No, this is not a likely alternative either.

Not likely, not likely; nothing has worked out, the investigation, then, is a disaster. I look at the door and stand. Moving toward it is all that I can do but the effort is enormous: the passage through cosmic spaces via overdrive or the other wondrous devices of the Overlords might be easier. Nevertheless, I put a foot in that direction. “It's not my fault,” I say rather sullenly, defeat bubbling away within me in its merry, familiar fashion, “I have nothing to do with this. Blame the departmental rules and procedures if you will, I merely work for the department and I never wanted to either; it was just something I fell into. Very difficult to find a job nowadays,” poking my way through steam to the door, showing (I will admit this) a very poor ability to handle my losses but Phyllis extends an elbow from the stove, leans towards me with a curious and open expression on her face as if—yes indeed, it is this—she were about to communicate to me vital information hitherto un-

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available. I am fascinated by her expression, locked into it. Now, drifting from the panes of her face comes a kind of imminence I saw hinted at by Dolores last night, a feeling as I hovered above her that one by one, all of her arid little secrets would be exposed and I try to extend and yet foreshorten the instant, leaning back toward Phyllis, knowing that if only a few more seconds of this mood can elapse she will be able—I know she will, know she will—to deliver unto me the critical and key information which will save mankind for a thousand generations against the heel and brutalizations of the warlords who I know now to be consummately evil (pardon me, gentlemen, but that was my righteous conclusion and you asked me to hold back nothing in these notes) . . . but no, too late.

Too late. It goes away.

No time for such communication and, now, never again: Lupe lays fierce and effective hands on my shoulders, turns me from his wife's direction and propels me toward the door. For a man with his chronic diagnosis, he has surprising strength and appears to be in excellent physical condition.

"Say nothing," he says to Phyllis, "say nothing to him you bitch, do you hear me?"

"All right," she says, turning back toward that stove. "I won't . . ."

"We were warned," he says pushing, "you know what they said; they . . ."

"I said I wouldn't. I said I wouldn't say anything; leave me alone."

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“Out,” Lupe says to me, “no more of this, out now, out of here now,” and he cuts off Phyllis’s last glance at me, cutting off our communication with one knifelike shift of his hand, sending her scuttling to the wall as with the other hand, he forces me, guides me, gestures me through the door. What power in the man! “I don’t have to put up with this anymore,” Lupe says, “I mean, I just don’t have to face it, with the one thing and then the other thing it’s too much and I have rights too. I have rules and rights and I’m going to get a fair hearing!” Now I am in the hall, my casebook perilously balanced, toppling, bouncing off a wall and back into my hand, “sons of bitches,” Lupe says, possibly having gone quite mad, “you’ve got to understand all of you that I’m a sick man, too sick by far for this shit, just because we’re on relief doesn’t mean that we’re not human, that we have to *live* this way, leave me alone, goddammit,” and up those basement steps I go under pressure, considerable pressure I might say, extended into a full run by Lupe’s maneuvers and a most undignified exit it is indeed, gentlemen, a certain broadness around the hips and rectum which I have always suspected making itself felt in new and unpleasant ways, but then again, if I were not to run to keep balance, no matter how gracelessly, I would collapse unceremoniously on the steps of South Seventh and you would not want that, the quest ended not only in disaster by physical humiliation. I know this well, you would not have wanted that. “Get out, be gone!” Lupe says and with a last push

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expels me full steam ahead into the limp air of daylight, exits behind, slams a door, leaving me on the street.

Well, in fair weather and foul I have had confrontations all my life, this is merely another. I am greeted on the street by a veritable cordon of children, some I recognize, others I do not, they greet me with lissome cries and bounds. Instinctively I raise the fieldbook to my eyes, ready to swat them backhanded if necessary while I listen to great shoutings and heavings in the Dawson apartment beneath: what is going on? The children applaud as I limp toward my car. A miserable visit. A complete failure. I have accomplished nothing whatsoever and now time has closed in. How many hours do I have? I wonder as I check my watch. I have nine and a half hours of Lucas's twelve-hour limit remaining. What am I supposed to do with them? They should have left this sector where it was five years ago. The mistake was in unsealing the blocks, that is all. I blame the authorities for this.

"Hey, hey, hey you fucking government man," one of the children (is it the same one? probably not) says. "You know what happens now? Your fucking Venus men are going crazy up there. Haven't you heard? Your whole government is fucking insane, now everybody knows it." Bedazzled, I imagine that the boy is kicking me but I feel nothing. "You crazy too, you government shit," the boy says as I stuff myself frantically into the Montrevor which has names and telephone numbers scrawled on it in something no doubt indelible, flaring with panic as

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I turn the car to idle. Will it engage, well just barely: I thank American industry for one of the few times in my life. "All of you out of your heads and now everyone knows it," my advisor says. I get the doors closed. I get the gearlocks functioning. The car oozes from the curb.

Well off again, off to partake of what remains of my life. "The government for which I work and the government which goes to Venus," I would say to the boy if I felt like talking which I really do not, "have nothing to do with one another, you can't say that there's any connection at all, it isn't fair, you misunderstand," but driving, trembling, past the blasted checkpoints I see his answer: *they are, they sure are and everywhere it's all the same, government man, you'd better believe it.* What have I done? Indeed, indeed, what have I done?

I do not know. I comprehend nothing of it. Perhaps this was the way it was meant to be from the start; driving blankly through the sector, my mind washed of both image and hope. Nine and a half hours to the checkpoint and counting. Venus far out, palpating in the daytime sky.

"Lucas," I say, to the air, "Lucas, you are a son of a bitch, that's what you are," but that fucking government man too, having performed his assigned duties and covered himself, is not available for comment.



XVII

Consider, as the end approaches and then all beyond, consider if you will be so kind, gentlemen, my pre-Lukine life, it is important, I was not always this way.

My pre-Lukine life was filled with disasters also, I have hinted upon them, will not expound further, but it is impossible, granted my difficult history and condition that I could have lived a life free of possession of some sort; being tenanted by ghosts like most failures. Maybe this is one of the reasons why Lucas selected me. It was an unhappy life but not devoid of limited compensation; I had people to hate like Bowman and other people with whom, however fragmentarily, to have sex, like Dolores and I do not think, piling one thing atop the other thing, that I was leading the most unsatisfactory of lives, but since the advent of Lucas (an event which I am beginning to see as possessing religious significance) matters have become impossible.

Pictures of religious figures upon the wall is one thing and I have always treasured icons, but icons must be kept at a distance: Lucas is too close in. The

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debilitating effect upon my sex life, the distractions on my ordinary intercourse, the wedge opening up into my sanity, that constant and increasing sense of displacement from the more serious purpose of my life were extremely damaging, of course, as they might be to anyone in my condition of original instability and in the bargain is the fact that I had a difficult time keeping up with appearances.

By the twentieth or twenty-first visit from Lucas, what was there left to say? All topics of mutual interest had been exhausted, quips and quirks of the personality had all been utilized and put to one side, reminiscences had been exploited and we knew each other too well (or at least he knew me too well) to pretend that there was any sense of true discovery left within the relationship. Unlike lovers, Lucas and I could not find the endless replacement of the familiar interesting, unlike lovers we were unable to touch, unlike lovers we were unable to take ourselves seriously, and unlike even enemies (our relationship could hardly aspire to enmity) we were unable to find new subjects to feed our lack of compatibility through the continuing and ascending dialogues and, therefore, although I would have been hard-pressed to admit this at any time, my possession was trembling on the verge of pathos and boredom. I was no longer frightened or even unsettled so much as resentful of the intrusion.

These emotions, of course, were accentuated at all times by the fear that I was insane. I was never able to quite discard this despite attempts to put up a good front. I might well have been insane, might

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well have imagined all of this. (I might be further imagining what is happening now; not only past but present and future creations of a dream-damaged psyche: I may be in no set of rooms here preparing final documents for you Lords which at your request will review everything and allow you to make your cision but might be merely a hopeless cataleptic—but I do not believe this, I believe that what is happening now exists extrinsically and what will happen in the future is similarly earnest. How could I go on if I did not think this were so? surely then it would all dissolve beneath me.)

So it was reassuring to have Lucas finally expose his identity and mission to me, although the mission was awesome and the forecast gloomy. I confess this: it was better to face the end of the world than my own madness and I was thus comforted. No one could be mad and have fantasies like *this*: Lucas must have been real all the time. And furthermore, what had happened was that my attendant's revelation of his identity had charged our relationship to a new pitch: now there was real material to be reviewed to say nothing of a whole range of new topics to be opened up and discussed at leisure.

You can see that I am now being quite honest with you. You can hardly quarrel with the earnest nature of these notes: I have laid my barren little soul open to you. Now we had things to discuss again, Lucas and I: what was it like to work for the Galactic Overlords? I could ask. Did they take the long or short view of their position? Considering the business from a detached point of view, was the fate and condi-

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tion of our humble planet of major or minor (or simply middling) influence as against the larger stakes of the galaxy?

How long, then, had the Overlords been around? Did they work in a tight chain bureaucracy similar to that of the Center or were things more casual, procedures worked out largely in the field for an amiable group of supervisors and clerks? What was Lucas's span of life under normal conditions? Was he protected by civil service rules and regulations, did he have a career and salary plan? How about the pension rights? Could he accumulate credits toward retirement? What about sex? Did he have a sex life? For that matter, did Lucas have a corporeal form?

Questions further to be asked: what was sex like amidst the Galactic Overlords and their employees of various races? Was it more or less that humble and sweaty act which we humans understood (and therefore a universal of humiliation, people *descending* to the act) or as one moved up the evolutionary scale did it become more transcendental? Less? What was the *reductio ad absurdum* of all the relations which is to say who did the Overlords make *their* reports to? Did it end there or was there a further chain of command?

Oh, there were questions, gentlemen, you see all the questions that I wanted to ask my attendant, anticipating for the first time in weeks his next visit and driving the Montrevor my mind buzzed and hummed with inquiry much as the Dawson kitchen had been alive with steam. No time to worry further

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about the Dawsons, no indeed: what I wanted to do was to get hold of Lucas and ask him what was happening but the stubborn fool had become cunning, I thought.

Did I understand then what had happened or was it somewhat later or never: after our initial discussion on the mission in the rest room there had been only that one brief contact in the car, too brief for meaning. No word from him in the field (when I could have used him), no word on the sidewalk, no word on the way back either as, with a feeling of loss so total that it approached triumph (consider that, gentlemen, the perversity of a race which could find meaning in its disasters) I turned the Montrevor back toward my humble furnished rooms where, at least my icons, my objects, my life-style awaited me. Alone in a world which Lucas had abandoned, I returned then to the seat of my disturbances, my own territory.

No point in going back to the Center. What would it have meant? Further confrontations with Bowman, more furtive scurryings through the case record or through intake, it would have amounted to nothing. No, if the issue was to be worked out further and to some conclusion it might as well be in a place of isolation. No word from Lucas. Never to hear from again. No word as I lodged the car into its cubicle (I expected him to spring from the vault of the garage gesticulating), no word from him as the chuteway ascended (he could have said something from the loudspeakers), no word from him in the corridors as I approached my rooms (the carpeting would have muffled all the sounds of collision; I expected to hear

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from him then, surely). No word from him inside, either. He simply was not there.

Dolores was. She sat on my bed, casebook open, one fine hand inscribing notations, foot swinging, hips unconsciously gesticulating as I walked in. I could have judged this. I could have judged it all.

The segmented quality of my life; the neat, linear succession of scenes. At the end of one catastrophe the next, neatly pocketed, waiting, waiting.

"I won't give up," I said to her as if in greeting, "no matter what, I will persist," and she looked up at me incuriously, her eyes bleak, the fine pan of her face reserved and without motion and for all the effect that this announcement had had upon her, I could not have made it at all.

"Who cares?" she said.

XVIII

We are told that in proof that all is well on the Venus mission, the astronauts will address us again in the last moments of the approach to the planet, describing their impressions and visions of conquest. We wait with much anticipation for this but at the time scheduled for the broadcast something goes wrong with the receivers and we cannot hear well. Now and then a word breaks through the thunder and hiss of the static, a word like *the sun* or *oh my God* or *help us* but the transmission is so poor, the receivers so indistinct that we cannot even judge if these words are spoken by the astronauts or they are saying to us what we think they are. Meanwhile, the ship continues to plunge toward Venus at the stunning rate of four miles per second, until the retrofire is generated at which time it hangs in the leaden atmosphere like a swimmer, and then slowly, begins to ascend.

The ship begins to ascend. It does not proceed further into Venus at a decreasing rate of speed but reverses course and moves slowly from the atmos-

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phere. We are informed that this is inexplicable. We are then informed that it is perfectly reasonable. We are further informed that there will shortly be further information from the space center as to the true meaning of this and in the meantime, it would be best to make no assumptions at all. If the Venus mission, as seems possible, has been aborted, then surely there are excellent reasons for this and in due course we will all be informed. The ship continues its escape route from Venus; reaches the apogee of its orbit and then hangs limp in the heavens. The astronauts broadcast again.

This time we cannot understand their language. It is not so much a failure of transmission—the speech is perfectly clear—as one, seemingly, of comprehension. *Whilom* a voice seems to be saying and *alarkin ol*. The number of combinations and permutations of sound available in English are almost infinite; those sounds which are the basis of our communication compose only a very small fraction. Perhaps the question of speech was perilous from the beginning; a matter of striking long chances in the range of possibility. The astronauts now seem to be advising us of this. *Larlo tanno mox. Cucko talanga.*

Concerned, but still hopeful for the eventual success of the mission (or, if not that, for the safety of the astronauts) we remain at our posts and listen. With persuasiveness and dedication, the astronauts continue to talk to us (*bronn, mawn*) until suddenly they are cut off. We will shortly hear a statement by the head of the agency, we are told, and in the mean-

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time it would be wholly unwise to speculate on what, if anything, is truly happening.

The agency will tell us, through its surrogate, what is going on: we knew that we could count on this. Through the early sixties, the mid-sixties, the mid-late sixties, the late sixties, the early seventies, the early-mid seventies, the mid-seventies and right up to Mars we were sure that the agency could tell us what was happening. Everything would be charted, everything was compressed in data and all of it would be revealed. On Earth we could not chart our lives nor know the direction but the agency did and the agency would reveal all. We knew the inmost heart of the missions: we knew the bloodcount and respiration rate of the astronauts, the contents of their urine, the education of their wives. Now the agency, hard-pressed as it is, will deliver unto us again the pure flower of explanation.

We wait and wait as the ship hangs above Venus and then suddenly lurches, goes on automatic and accelerates toward Earth. Overrides have been put into motion; disaster equipment has been activated. *The sun*, an astronaut says and we hear him, *oh my God, my God the sun*. Puzzled, we consider this. What has happened to the jargon which was more easily understood than this outburst?

The sun the astronaut cries and transmission is cut off. The press conference is postponed. Further bulletins from the mission will be given when there is sufficient information to justify. In the meantime, citizens are advised to continue with their ordinary

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tasks and the all-news station will now resume its regular programming.

The moon gave us a little difficulty, here and there, but no question about it: we seem to be having definite problems with the conquest of the planets.

XIX

And sat then, Dolores did, having said all that she needed to, stolid and quiet on my bed, that monument to the furnished rooms of my life. Above her was one of my favorite pictures of the Saviour, this one a peculiarly sentimental but not crude demonstration showing Him surrounded by flowers and children as with eyes rolled toward heaven he appeared to be in an easeful moment but she did not regard this nor did the print seem to fill her with that internal peace and relaxation which I have always found one of the most notable qualities of my collection. She held her fieldbook tensely in her lap then, much as if I was an assistance case and she, the caseworker, had been sitting patiently in the dwelling unit, awaiting my return. Her eyes did not light with pleasure when, at last, did they regard me, nor did they darken with doom, remaining rather midway between acceptance and repudiation as she shifted slightly the better to regard me in profile, and then returned her glance over my shoulder, her eyes again sweeping incuriously past the row of prints. No way to impress her. No way to impress anyone.

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You will note that I have switched the narration here to past tense, the better to communicate to you the details and also because a sense of immediacy is now lacking. I do not believe that this could have happened. Nothing like this can happen in the world which I was acculturated to comprehend. Religious prints and icons were as far as I could ever take my personal metaphysics.

"I knew you'd come back," she said.

"I had to."

"It had to be that way." We might have been lovers. She put her fieldbook carefully to one side of her, a rough edge abutting a hip. "You would have to return; you were a man of great order and caution and would stay in routine. I doubted them but should not. They understand." Her eyes became quite round and rolled upwards with a fanatical sureness. "They understand everything."

"Who understands everything?"

"Who do you think?" she said quietly and let that hang for a while, much as a ship might hang in the vicinity of Venus before lurching outward. "Just who do you think would understand everything?"

Who indeed? There has always been a low order in my life; a sense of things coming together in however pointless a fashion. A tightness of futility, so to speak. I sat next to her on the bed, easeful at last and relaxed because now there was almost no struggle left. Just a little way to go and then the darkness. "There's nothing to be done," I said.

"Oh?"

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"Nothing at all. It's hopeless and you can tell them that." How easily I had accepted the situation! Lucas, at least, would have been proud. "I can't develop any better information from the investigation than what we've already got and now there's no more time. Tell them that I give up; I'm calling their bluff."

"What are you talking about?"

"What do you think I'm talking about? Go back and tell them what I just said or use your transmitter and give it to them right away. What happened to Lucas, that's what I can't understand? Did you replace him or did you put him out of the way?"

"It's true," she said, rubbing a hand over the slightly rumpled bedclothes. "Everything I thought was true. You're crazy after all."

"Other people have said that." I was filled with a righteous calm; nothing now could upset me. If, after revealing the truth of her identity, she now wanted to deny it, that was all right with me. Nothing could be put by me further; I had had too much, now I had the possession of the damned. "That doesn't change the situation, however," I said and resisted an impulse to pat her hand. No. Don't overdo anything.

"I just don't understand you," Dolores said. Dolores, the new emissary of the Galactic Overlords (whose resources were simply astonishing: I give you credit, gentlemen, indeed I give you credit) did not understand me. The pride I could derive from this! if I were only to take it as true. But in fact she understood me all too well. Everyone always understood me right from the beginning, did you not, gentle-

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men? That was why I was picked. That was why I was utilized.

"Because I was a fool," I said to her, "and only a fool could be properly manipulated. It would have been a fairer test if you hadn't taken me but you were never interested in being fair, were you? No wonder you didn't respond last night." Seized, gentlemen, I was seized by intuition, the high bright flare of comprehension. It should happen to all of you sometime before you reach the end of your reign: the sense of being transcendent over circumstance. But in order to have this you would have had to live your lives as fools and somehow I cannot conceive of the Lords as being foolish. Duplicitous, ambiguous, enmeshed in bureaucracy as are we all, yes, but you are not fools. More, to be sure, more is that loss.

"I'm going to try to talk to you," she said, "crazy or not I'll make one more try. Where do you think I'm from? I'm from the Center, remember? They're going crazy down there, they're looking for you to fire your ass and I thought I'd do you a favor and come back here and warn you. If you get a fast phone call in I think that you can quit before they have a chance to suspend you. I don't know why I'm doing this; I guess that I'm just sorry for you," Dolores said and in a satisfied way adjusted her clothing imperceptibly and leaned back against the wall, her eyes still not fixing the prints on the walls. She would not pay attention. None of them would ever pay attention, no matter what I did. How long can one go on this way? "You know," she said, "I don't think you're crazy after all. I think you just put on the whole thing

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so that people won't get close to you. Tell me: that stuff on the walls. I can't help noticing. Do you take this stuff seriously or is it more like a spoof? I'm ready to laugh either way but why don't you give me a break?"

"You mean," I said, "you're not from them."

"From who?" she said, and stood. "I'm from the Center and trying to be a friend. This is really a strange room; I never saw it in the light before. Well, if you don't mind, I think that I'm going to move out. A favor's a favor but we don't seem to be communicating, somehow."

"You're from the Center," I said, holding her in place by spreading my legs apart, "you're from the Center and you came to tell me to quit before I got suspended. You have nothing to do with the Galactic Overlords and nothing to do with Lucas or with the day of the burning. Just from the Center. That's all."

"I'm getting out of here now," she said and fluttered like a bird against me, her fieldbook dropping unnecessarily to the floor. "Let me by, let me go."

"You lie," I said to her, holding my hands on her shoulders, digging my nails into the creature. "You let the truth slip and you weren't supposed to so now you're trying to conceal it but you can't. You can't get me to forget what you said. You're an emissary of the Galactic Overlords and you've come to verify my failure so that you can give the instructions——"

"Let me go. Let me out of here!" the creature said, beating against me, and I looked down upon her face.

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And, oh gentlemen! looking now as if from an enormous height as I squeezed the creature I could see its form change, I could see its essence suggested in the face which became something both more and less amorphous than the Dolores I thought I had known and been entrapped by so few hours before. I could see the rivulets of alien blood under the surface, rippling, could hear the alien squawks and caws as the thing battered itself against me but I held firm, held it against me because all of it had at last become clear or so I thought in my fevered state: if I could keep the creature from leaving the room to deliver the word of my failure, then the destruction would not go ahead as on schedule. *The fate of the world still lay in my hands!* I squeezed harder. *I had not lost everything after all!* There was yet another chance. I put on more pressure, to retain the creature that had killed Lucas.

For surely that was the other part of the explanation; Lucas had done his job, completed his mission, that of the messenger and in order for matters to proceed a new emissary had taken over . . . and with that dreadful economy for which they are so well-known, the Overlords had had the one slay the other. The thing that had killed Lucas struggled in my arms. "No," it whimpered in its strange, alien tongue, "no, no, no, let me go, please . . ."

But I would not let it go, not ever for the fate of the world depended upon my strength and in its last instance, George Mercer would not fail the planet of his birth. I had been humiliated, manipulated, degraded and maneuvered but now at last their

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fiendish plot lay open to me, tearing at the one, tiny exposed seam of weakness and I pushed at the thing further, my hands like talons upon it, the talons shaping into claws, the claws knifelike and difficult pincers to draw the blood. Kill it, kill it now, and save the world.

And at the same time, tell it to the creature, through the creature tell them all so that they could see that an earthman could not be eternally defeated but would rise from the ashes of his humiliation, at last to triumph. "You infiltrated everything," I said, as I choked the thing, sputtering, to death, "you infiltrated the Center and infiltrated the caseload and probably the Dawsons themselves and I was never supposed to have a chance, not for a moment. You had it so contained but in your cleverness you forgot one thing and that was the *indomitable human will to persevere*," and the thing falls before me, dragging me into its celestial muck with last strength so that it is an effort releasing my hands and letting it fall, die away, expire, "the indomitable will to persevere which you can never take from us," I say and place one foot upon the creature that will, now, never deliver the message for destruction, aware that at last I have triumphed, if only a moment too soon. Never, never, never, never again.

And then the fire comes into the room.

Fire to the left of me, fire to the right, the glaring and blazing weapons of the Overlords themselves as they burst into the room—gentlemen, gentlemen, I should have known you would not have left the creature unobserved!—the great weapons of the in-

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strumentation moving upon me, guiding, threatening, shoving, moving and I can feel this fragile and helpless planet shake underneath me as mercilessly the Lords, you Lords, subdue me with fire and the threat of fire and bring me trembling in submission to my knees in that room and eventually to these quarters where you have asked for my full and final recollections which have been given: fire, then, fire blazing through my room and through the world itself, leaping and burning to such heights around me and all of the doomed world that even the man who almost made Venus, now shrinking in his ruined capsule as it speeds him home, would think that he is falling into the sun . . . and not the day, but the days of burning begin.

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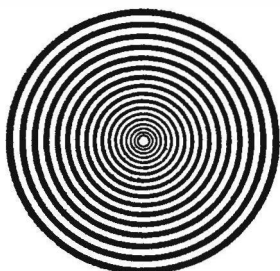
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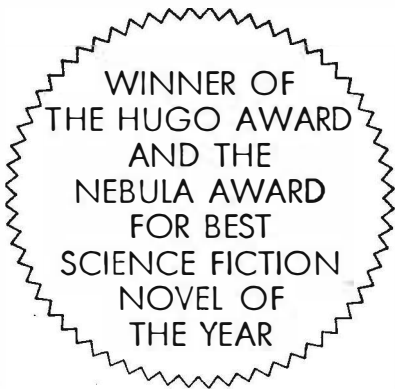
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