

EDEN MOTEL

by Nina Galen

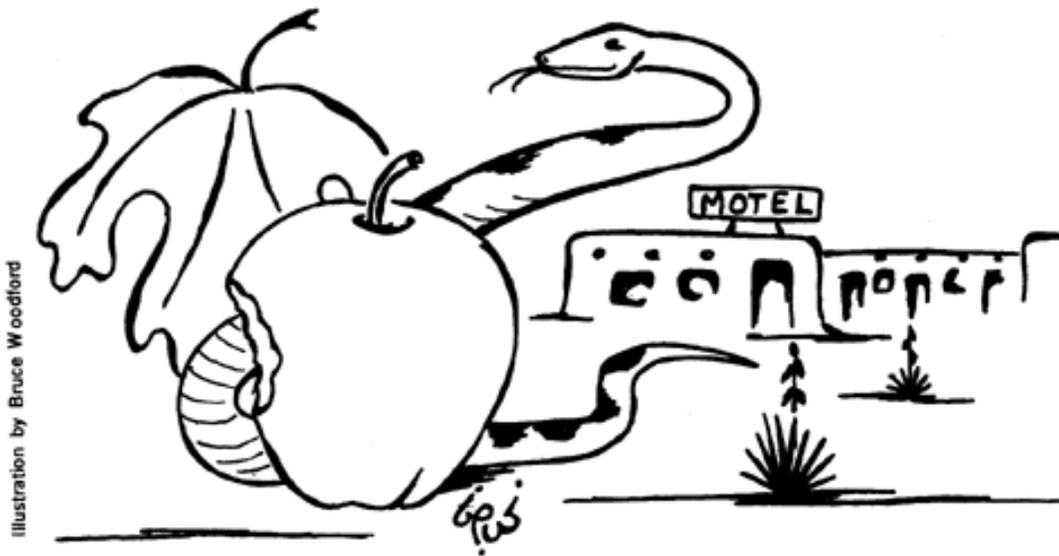


Illustration by Bruce Woodford

*To J, E, and P,
in appreciation.*

Chapter One

The leaves are gone yellow again. Eighth time in seven years. That's how long I'm here. Nothing much has happened, nothing much has changed.

Only those old trees shed their leaves, these old snakes shed their skins, this old gal changed her panties (smile). Then the leaves came back, snake skins never really gone anyways, panties dry off the line.

I've been here seven years tomorrow and know another year is back to back with this one. I know that when the yellow leaves fall, branches are still full inside of more leaves. Natural wonder. Those flashy new skins hold the same old snake. My panties most surely caught in eternal cycles of dirty/clean.

(Only I think *real* change is coming. A different kind of change.)

Desert News Briefs: After last week's rain a new erosion gully erupted. During last night's wind a dune got going, was last seen humping down the road direction Alamogordo. (Local dunes are of the fixed variety, thank goodness, or where would we stand?)

Fashion Note: The yellowleaves on the elms down by the drycreek clash awful with the siennabuttes. (See also Sportspage.)

Society Column: Those trees are not native to this region. When no one was looking, someone — the Curator? — planted them there in a straight and unnatural row. And my how they have grown. Snakes had their cages cleaned, noses bandaged. Curator says we are going to put them in glass aquariums to protect the noses from wire screenrub.

Weather: Burning days, freezing nights.

Bulletin: An accident down at the T-intersection last night. Diesel compact didn't yield to a dune traveling ten miles a century. The new name on the register is Randolph Smith, itinerant salesman connected to Holiday Inn. Except for him, all our rooms were empty last night. The Curator was resting, so Randy and I had a little chat. His car was totaled and he wanted a phone, but learned that there are no phones here. Was at first both incredulous and dismayed.

Randy Smith lives in Tucumcari. He was driving a diesel compact because he works for no salary, only commissions; his expenses come from his own pocket. When any Holiday Inn in four states has a vacant room after six p.m., he can sleep in it free. He said he never saw a motel like ours and I can believe it. He asked what a pretty girl like me (smile) was doing away out here. This shows he is a genuine trav. sales. because I'm not all that pretty. The black is pretty, they say. Maybe no one is ever fully satisfied.

My name is Marly, I'm the fulltime clerk. The motel contains a museum and a library of books arranged from the beginning to the present. The snakes stay behind the

reception desk where we can keep an eye on each other. I have read nearly one thousand books since coming here.

(I have read that Hottentot desert nomads use every part of a captured animal: meat, skin, blood and flesh. This lonely black girl does the same with these books: ideas, paragraphs and tales.)

Our motel is located off an alternate service road. We only get customers when the highway is under repair, the main service road overpass is washed out, drivers make two wrong minor decisions, and the Highway Dept. has borrowed back the FULL STOP AHEAD warning sign from down by the T-intersection. I asked the Curator how come we don't relocate; all we ever get are customers who have been in terrible accidents, even I didn't come here on my own. But he says we do okay. He likes plenty of time to work on the museum, his pet hobby. But this weekend might be busy. Randy says local road conditions are ideal for bringing in the crowds.

It's Saturday morning. Randolph Smith still lies sleeping, unless he left early. Many do sort of disappear from here without warning, Lord only knows where to. Mr. C. says he never expected I'd stay this long. Back when, I led a girl's wild life, drank, loved and popped pills, I was so unhappy. I'm not so unhappy any more, so I guess I found something.

You'll smile when I tell you the name of this place. Eden Motel (smile). Maybe driving through Arizona or New Mexico you have seen the wooden forts where Native Americans sell turquoise and silver jewelry, display old Indian feathers and photos of great, great grandpa chiefs or militiamen holding rifles, standing, squatting and sitting in rows. Well, this motel is supposed to be God's famous Garden.

(Mostly I only transcribe for Mr. C. Today I feel I must write everything down, urgently. My head feels strange, like a lunatic womb, full of crying, hallelujahs and singing. I hope today will bring many demanding guests, or my poor brain will deliver demons.)

Just now Randy Smith walked in looking for the Curator. I told him Mr. C. doesn't come to the office on Saturdays, it's his day of rest. Randy asked what I was writing and I told him I was making a diary to pass the time. "Tell me something about salesmanship to put in it," I said, switching on the tape recorder with my hidden foot.

He told me come to his room and he'd give me something real juicy to put in my diary (smile).

Randy is six feet two inches tall, rusty hair trimmed as if the barber once set a bowl upsidedown on his long head and cut around it. I guess late forties. He's not our first trav. sales., but maybe the first with no weak face. At every moment he is attentive and professional as a tiger. He looks honest and friendly, but maybe practices these in front of a tall mirror. I never was a perfect judge of character.

"Buy me," he says, looking perfectly artless.

I had him bring his face over to the light. His skin isn't smooth and creamy the

way mine is smooth and chocolate. Every bit of his face is a different color: skin tan and grey, salt-pepper whisker stubble, tiny red nose veins, freckles, rusty lashes, yellow bulges in the eye white from much driving, brown and yellow flecks in the green. When the shaft of windowlight pierced deep into the clear green plastic of his eyes I could see thoughts gearing around inside his head.

“You have to convince this buyer,” I told him. “Now, how do you folks go about that?”

“Well,” he said then, “the main thing in sellin is the close. You can fasten their attention, inflame their interest, but if you don’t know how to close the sale, then you’re wastin ever’body’s time, yours and theirs.”

“What’s the secret?”

“No secret. Just seven different closin techniques.” Bending down he looked in on the bandaged snakes. “They all got colds?”

“They allergic to bullshit,” I told him. “What techniques?”

He straightened up, started fiddling with the far corner of my shirt collar. “Well, there’s the assumptive close where you just *assume*, just *know*, the prospect is gonna buy, the one question being *when*.”

“Have to be mighty sure of yourself,” I said. “What if he or she says no anyway?”

“That’s the top secret of all: Always close on a resistance. The buyer ain’t expectin you to do that and you slip right in.”

“It’s startin to sound pretty good,” I said. “What was it you’re sellin mister? Motel furniture?”

“This.”

He yanked me against him, spun us around, sun hitting my eyes. “This what I’m off’rin on one-day free trial.” His lips were on me, hands all over, pressing me on what felt like eight inches of iron billybar in his pants. Only no gal or cat says yes so quick even to a deal like that, we know there’s smallprint, hidden costs. So my inflamed body struggled.

Feeling this he threw back his head laughing. Gold fillings shone in all his back teeth. “The lady’s got sales resistance. Wants me to slip right through when she ain’t lookin.” Chuckling and pressing he bent his knees so that the crowbar end jammed right in the soft V of my slacks.

Lord how irresolute I felt, bottom mouth shouting yeses, top one whispering noes. Then I heard voices outside.

“Someone’s coming,” I gasped.

“Don’t fight it,” he laughed. But his hands went sliding away like magnets down my thighs.

It’s a long walk from the T-intersection to the motel on a hot day. Four persons were arriving. One was an old, old woman, slow and steady, wasting no steps like she was getting to the end of her supply. Around her the others were shouting and complain-

ing, tossing up hands, walking backwards, sideways, tripping over stones, kicking rocks, squinting at the horizon, but the old lady set the pace.

From far one woman's voice drifted over. "You should be damn glad you're still alive."

Society Column: Among the arrivals that day were four New Yorkers: Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Rosen, Mrs. Rosen's mother, and their charming fortyish daughter, Linda.

"Jesus Christ," said Mrs. Rosen, getting her first good look at the motel.

I know what she meant, though I'm used to it by now. Seen every day, it loses whole layers of dilapidation, gains them back fast when strangers arrive. Shabbiest is the adobe wall painted over with trees and flowers, depicting the Garden of Eden. In the picture a giant Adam and Eve, hand in hand, stand waist high in shrubs. Any natural garden would be back better every year, but this one has only faded, cracked and peeled. Maybe back in colonial times that painting brought in the friars and *conquistadores*.

When he first came here, Mr. C. says, the museum had just one rusty sword, some petrified fruit, scrolls, and a Gutenberg Bible.

Inside the dim lobby the visitors paused to refocus their eyesight. Mrs. Rosen squinted in my direction, then her eyes opened wide and she bent forward and back, quick, like a parrot. "Oh my God, Sam, a *Schwartz*." She glanced in every corner, looking for the rest of my gang.

"It was your idea coming here," shrugged her husband, giving credit where it was due.

"What choice did we have? Well, anyway, we're not staying. Ask her where's the telephone. Tell her we have to report an accident."

"No phone," I told them. "No transportation either."

"Oh my God." Hitting themselves on the foreheads, they fell into lobby chairs.

"We're on our way to Farmington for our daughter Sandra's funeral," explained Mrs. Rosen.

"Rabbi Goldstein," croaked the crone, "was killed." She jabbed toward the wall with one finger, drew breath, "Down there." Her false teeth clacked out of control.

For a moment they sat looking at me, wistful as cockroaches.

"My bigshot son-in-law was driving," added the old lady, pointing at Mr. Rosen with obvious satisfaction.

"There was no road sign," he protested. "No warning at all you're coming up on a T-intersection at sixty miles an hour."

"I told you a dozen times to slow down," said his wife.

"Listen, we weren't the only ones. There's a bunch of wrecks down there," he told me. "We saw one diesel compact nearly hidden under a sandhill."

Dune's making good time, I thought to myself. Might clear the area by summer.

Their daughter Linda sat apart from them, shielding her eyes with her hand. Crying? From a corner of the room Randy Smith was watching her. What unacceptable

ideas were ticking around in that pale head?

The screen door darkened. A man was standing in the bright rectangle. "Hello?" He opened the door and stuck in his head. "Anybody home?"

"Rabbi Goldstein?"

"You were expecting maybe Lazarus?"

"My God, you're all right?"

"Just call me Sidney."

They crowded around him, almost touching him. "What a miracle. We thought you were dead."

"Knocked out. When I came to, you guys had already gone. I saw this motel in the distance and managed to crawl over here."

"You were lying there so pale. You never moved."

"Well, so what," shrugged the rabbi. "You *could* have taken the trouble to check my pulse, but, okay, it was a hot day, so don't worry about it."

"It's my fault," said Mrs. Rosen. "I should have told the girl to check." She turned to stare at her daughter who was facing another direction. Finished staring, Mrs. Rosen turned back toward the others. "Well," she said, "here's the problem. They have no phone and no car. The last gas station we saw was about twenty miles back."

"I don't know about you," said Mr. Rosen, "but I'm sitting down." He walked carefully toward his chair, as if afraid to trip. "Come on, Sid, sit over here." He patted the back of his wife's empty chair.

Mrs. Rosen looked annoyed. "Sam, I'm sitting there. Why don't you ask Linda to bring over a chair for the rabbi?"

"What? Oh, that's right. I forgot you were sitting here. Sorry, dear." He turned toward his daughter. "Linda, pull over a chair for Rabbi Goldstein."

His daughter didn't move.

"Don't disturb her," smiled the rabbi sympathetically. "I'll be fine right over here." He sat down on the sofa.

Rabbi Goldstein is a stocky, middle-sized man in his forties. Most of him is disappearing into yellow flab except his broken nose, ghetto knuckles, and wary bead eyes.

"Rabbi Goldstein was our elder daughter's rabbi," explained Mrs. Rosen to the air, but loud enough so that Randy and I could overhear.

"That and Zen."

"She came to me too late," said the rabbi. "The Zen had poisoned her soul."

An awkward silence followed these words.

"A *Godless, coldhearted philosophy*," continued Rabbi Goldstein more loudly, looking straight at Linda Rosen's back. "We wouldn't be on this sorry errand if..." He broke off suddenly. "What did you say, Linda?" He leaned forward to catch her dry voice.

"I said *bullshit*."

The rabbi sat back chuckling, as if he'd just proved something. Mr. Rosen pulled himself unsteadily to his feet and began staggering across the room toward his daughter, spotted fists raised.

"Sam, no," said the rabbi, holding up a hand. "Linda's overtired. She didn't mean anything. She'll settle down."

"She meant it all right," shouted Mrs. Rosen. "The mean, ungrateful..."

Linda didn't wait for her father to reach her. She jumped to her feet and headed outside.

"I'll kill her," yelled Sam Rosen, shaking his fists. "She always hated her sister."

"What do you know about it?" screamed the girl, banging out the screen door. A sob floating back got caught in the slam.

"Come on, Sam," said Mrs. Rosen wearily. "Don't pay her any attention. You know that's all she's after, attention, ever since she was born."

"Well, she should be grown out of that by now. She sure as hell *looks* old." He returned to his chair, bristling and clearing his throat.

"Linda takes after her mother," clicked the old lady. "Her mother always wanted all the attention. She even wanted to be a stage actress. With that face!" Laughing, she pointed a gnarled finger at her daughter's face. "Only it's not so bad since she had her nose fixed."

"Shut up, ma. What we have to do now is decide how to get out of here."

"Maybe there's a bus," said the grandmother.

"Ma, will you shut up?" Mrs. Rosen turned to me. "Is there a bus?"

"Sunday afternoons. "

"Tomorrow is Sunday. Where does it go?"

"What does it matter," grumbled Mr. Rosen, "as long as it's away from here."

"*Where* does it go?" insisted Mrs. Rosen.

"Albuquerque. "

"Thank you." She turned to the others. "You see, if the bus was a little earlier and went to Farmington instead of Albuquerque, we might still be in time for the funeral. Of course, we would miss sitting up all night with Sandra's body." She sent what looked like a triumphant glance at the rabbi.

"I wouldn't mind missing that," murmured her husband. "So what do we do now?"

"We take rooms here for tonight," said his wife. "What else can we do?"

"So how many do we need?"

Mrs. Rosen looked around. "A double for us, a double for ma and Linda, and a single for him."

"Fine with me," approved the rabbi.

Mrs. Rosen wrote their names in the register after that of Randolph Smith.

"Smith. I bet that's not this guy's real name," she chuckled.

“It could be Smithinsky, “ agreed Rabbi Goldstein, adding his name to the page. I gave them their keys and they went out to find their rooms.

After they’d gone, Randy got up and strolled back to the desk. “New Mexico’s gettin to be full of em.” His voice had a brand new twang. He turned the register book back toward me. “You too. None of you aliens belong out here.”

“Red Indians might say the same to you.”

We looked at each other across the desk top. My black skin never does feel right in this adobe land, but his pink flesh is no better. I thought of the row of autumn elms that color-clashed with the sienna buttes. Same problem.

“Did you get a load of the daughter?” he asked me.

“Her sister just died. I doubt she’s in the market for motel equipment.”

“Never can tell. I still got one sample left.” He pointed at his pants.

“Thought that one was mine, on free trial.”

He came around and slid his hands over my shoulders and down my body. “They wash off. You can try some too.”

I stood there before him with my head hanging, ashamed, looking at his large silver belt buckle. His fingertips spread fire down my skin. “Go away,” I told him. “I haven’t got time just now.”

He laughed. “Better not wait too long. Sale ends soon.” Then he strolled out the door.

When he was gone I turned off the tape recorder and went and poured a glass of fruit juice to cool me down.

Chapter Two

The morning droned on. Then the drone turned to snarling, snapping and backfiring. Day breaking up? I ran outside to watch the blue sky fall.

Only thing up there besides the sun was one gold biplane looping and rolling, climbing and spinning. I thought, no wonder you don’t see so many of those if they are so intent on endangering their own species. I counted two red helmets sitting one behind the other in the cockpit.

The plane disappeared up into the sun, slipped out again, flew way up high, dove way down, leveled out, flew very low, then lower still, heading west. Then one wingtip caught on the horizon and it cartwheeled out of sight. Accidents do happen. I went inside and gave it no more thought.

A while later two young white males could be seen walking through the desert toward the motel. Soon the screen door opened and they came inside. Both wore goggles pushed up on their foreheads and zipper flying suits.

“Hi,” I said. They didn’t answer at first, just standing silent, radiating light and

heat. I poured them some juice and they drank thirstily.

“Hi,” said one after a minute. “Got any rooms?”

“No rooms, but we got telephones.” I stopped. That didn’t sound right. “You want *rooms*?”

“Affirmative.”

“Well, we got rooms, no telephones.”

“We don’t want telephones.”

“Didn’t your plane just crash?”

“That is correct.” His eyes were most untroubled.

I looked more closely at him. “You the pilot?”

“Negative. He is.” He indicated his friend. Those eyes looked even less troubled, like they didn’t even know what inconvenience meant, nor blink for dust.

“Don’t he see?” I asked, flashing hand signals in front of his eyes.

“Don’t he what?”

“Or talk?”

“When there’s something to say. Mostly he writes.”

I looked closer at this pilot. “What does he write about?”

“Truth, our souls, our other lives.”

“That what you guys were up to in the plane? Tryin to excarnate yourselves?”

He smiled. “Wasn’t it beautiful? We were up there trying to achieve perfection in flight, overcome all limitations, attain utter freedom. First, we flew as high as we could, then as fast as we could, then as low as we could, then as slow as we could. We crashed while flying low and slow in a turn.”

“Sounds safe to me, except for the crash part.”

“Danger and death are just illusions,” said the passenger. “Take those diamond-back rattlesnakes you’ve got there. I’m just a disciple, but my friend could put his hand in that cage and nothing would happen to him.”

“Better ask the snakes first. They already not feelin so good. And speak to your friend about it too; you mighty careless with his life.” I turned the register around and slid over the penstand. “But I guess you both have got other lives up your sleeves.”

The passenger took the pen and presented it to his pilot friend. He signed. Then the passenger signed. I gave them keys and they went out.

Curious, I turned the register around and read the names. Oh shit. Like a row of sunbursts our pilot guest had written on the line below Rabbi Goldstein’s signature: *The Messiah*.

Chapter Three

Driving across the country seven years ago my friends and I visited the Petrified Forest National Park. We expected a cool, dark forest of stone trees with diamond night-ingales singing in the emerald leaves. (We were thinking of the Enchanted Forest National Park, I believe.) The Petrified Forest turned out to be a desert with a few giant tree trunks scattered over miles of burning sand. It's a government protected area where protection has come 100 million years too late.

Exhibitions at the Visitor Center showed how that area was once a swamp. Water containing minerals seeped slowly into fallen logs, replacing the vegetable wood with the hardest stone.

A quarter billion years ago the land around Eden Motel was under water too. The Curator has collected fossil shells near here for his static display. At times when he is pretending to believe in the Bible stories he says that each of the six days in which the Lord created the world really lasted 50 million years.

When God created the Garden of Eden, the Bible says, the earth was bare and desolate, only weeds and thorns grew. God created Man and Woman and planted a garden in Eden for them to inhabit. He created the man out of the dust of the earth. "Adobe Man," the Curator calls him, half jokingly.

The Curator says that by reaching down and picking up a little of this desert earth I can feel what the Lord felt when he created Adam. He says we have only one life and when we die we become dust like that, body and soul.

If Mr. C. is right, then feeling that earth in my fingers is the most I'll ever experience of the hereafter. If our pilot-Messiah is right, we'll all have extra lives. The Curator says there's a hereafter theory to suit every individual on earth, and more appear every day.

Seven years at this desert motel include a lot of lonely nights. After the Second Coming and his disciple had taxied off to their rooms, I was thinking that the only petrification in the vicinity of Eden Motel resembling those stony logs south of Interstate 40 was the eight-inch iron bar south of Randy Smith's belt when he pressed up to me that morning. That recollection now seeped through my body and will. I could hardly concentrate on anything, but mooned around all morning thinking how his long, thick tongue had filled my mouth with prophecies.

But I didn't like the way he'd looked at Linda Rosen. She's a tall, plain-looking woman with a narrow, arched nose red from wiping. Her angry, wet eyes were red from weeping. Not much to interest a trav. sales. you might say? I know some men believe such women are hot-blooded, wild and challenging like untamed mares. You might

think that Randy would not want her Jewish flesh, but some men screw even better out of spite, none of them say why. He surely spites black ladies too, so I take heart.

Randy's door was shut. I didn't want to knock, but figured if he saw me tending flowers in the courtyard he might open it and wander out. So, carrying a watering can I went on out into the heat. There's a row of flowers that the Curator let me plant, though water's scarce. He watched them grow, looking pained, as if buzzards were tearing at his liver. He stopped glowering only when he saw they were growing sickly and dry. Then he put on a satisfied expression and never looked at them again.

Today, as usual, the flowers were thirsty. The earth just soaked up the water as it poured, then snapped shut and didn't let in another drop. Red adobe clay must be the most willful sort of earth. I pressed a finger in and made a mouth for it to speak.

"What time does the museum open?"

I must have jumped two feet, then realized the voice came from behind. Turning, I saw Rabbi Goldstein sitting on a bench. Embedded in his face were two steely and suspicious eyes. Even his curly, greying hair looked like it wanted to fight. He was not a man I'd want to run into alone in some desert, yet here we were.

"Museum's open now," I told him.

The rabbi lit a new cigarette from his old one and ground the discarded butt into the earth with his black leather shoe. "The sign on the door says 'Sound and light show, receptors in office.' "

"Receptors rent for two dollars."

"Two dollars!" he coughed. "I paid three dollars for the whole Carlsbad Caverns just one month ago."

"Here you get the Creation of the Universe and the Fall of Man. If you don't want the sound-and-light show you can see an old Bible, scrolls, and that sword there for free."

"That's a *what?*" He walked over to the charred sword which was sticking out of the ground and kicked it with his foot. "Who do they say it killed?"

"It's a facsimile of the burning sword the Lord put in the Garden of Eden to warn folks away from the Tree of Life."

"Just a facsimile? What if I want the real thing?"

"Then pay the two dollars. The real thing's inside."

He looked at me very skeptically. "You know what you're saying? That's false advertising. I could have this whole place closed down." Taking out his wallet he removed two dollars. "But I'm a nice guy, so here's the dough. If I tell my tax man it's for religion, he'll deduct it."

"That's the spirit."

I took the money and went inside to get the earphones. When I returned, Rabbi Goldstein was sitting on the bench again, head back, eyes closed, frowning.

"Something the matter?"

His forehead expanded, then knotted, then did it again. He replied on a knot, “Maybe.”

“Anything wrong with your room?”

“Everything. But it’s not that.” He sighed and began coughing. Then he said, “Is someone who isn’t a postman, and who finds a letter, legally or morally obliged to deliver the letter if it bears no stamp?”

“Are you asking *me*?”

“Of course not. What would *you* know? Anyway, if the letter wasn’t actually mailed, how does the finder know whether the writer really intended to mail it?”

“Why not ask the writer?”

He didn’t seem to hear me. “Is our first obligation to the living or to the dead?”

“Living.”

He looked at me in surprise. “Who asked you? Gimme the earphones.” His thick hand opened wide like a star and I hooked the headset on it. He hefted it two or three times as if testing whether it would be too heavy for a rabbi to carry. Then he put it down on the bench and seemed to forget it.

“I understand you all are on your way to a funeral,” I said after a minute.

“That’s right. It’s tomorrow. The Rosen’s elder daughter, Sandra. What a lovely young woman. She had everything she could want, a successful husband, two healthy kids, a beautiful home....”

“How did she die?”

He glanced at me in surprise. “None of your business.”

“You’ll never see me again,” I told him.

“Baby, if I thought I’d ever see you again....” He shook his squinting head, leaving the threat unspoken. “She took an overdose of barbiturates.”

“On purpose?”

He shrugged, twisting his head from ‘Who knows?’ to ‘Yes.’

“I O.D.’d once,” I told him. “I almost died. It’ll be seven years tomorrow.”

“You’re lucky you lived. There’s a case in the papers right now that didn’t turn out so well. In fact, she’s a *Schwartz*, like you.”

“Any idea why the Rosen girl did it?”

“Any idea why *you* did it?”

“I was just a kid, twenty years old. I didn’t know any better. Do Jewish folks think suicide is a sin?”

“That depends on who does it,” chuckled the rabbi. “For a Jew, *Jewish* suicide is a crime against God, his people, and his family.”

“Does his soul go to hell?”

“Well, that’s debatable. Even the ancient Pharisees debated the existence of hell. Finally they decided it probably didn’t exist, but if it did, *this was it!* Heh, heh. I guess you could say that God’s punishment for suicide is death.”

“Back into dust? No afterlife?”

He shook his head, then made a little sideways head movement as if he could maybe squeeze out a few alternatives if pressed.

Each year the Curator expects me to read through the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments, at least once. Each time I do, about a million questions come into my mind. The Curator takes no interest in them. He says they are not valid questions. He feels the reason mankind has never evolved spiritually or emotionally since Gen. 2.7 is because it has been wrestling with answers instead of with the questions.

We had a Catholic priest who stayed a few days, but I couldn't get much useful information out of him either. Any time I asked him something serious, he'd laugh. Whenever I joked, he'd take it seriously. He believed that the Old Testament stories were only fables but that everything in the New Testament was true. I asked him how come he could believe in the story of Christ's Resurrection and not believe in the creation of the universe story. It seemed to me if you could believe the one your mind was soft enough to accept the other.

He told me he believed in the Resurrection because it was true. Completely reliable guards — trustworthy as police officers today — who had guarded the sealed cave where Jesus lay had attested to His miraculous disappearance. Christ's own mother, Mary, was another witness. “Who would not believe that holy woman?” he asked me. On the other hand, he said, the creation story was an obvious fiction. The thought of anyone believing fiction made him laugh. He laughed louder and longer so that I couldn't ask other questions, and finally he snuck away under cover of laughter.

Rabbi Goldstein wasn't that jolly. He just sat on the bench with his eyes closed to the sun. “There's a question I'd like to ask you,” I said to him, “about Moses.”

“Why don't you ask your boss? He should know.”

I didn't reply. I just sat there saying nothing until Rabbi Goldstein opened his eyes to see what was tying my tongue. “Okay,” he said gruffly. “Shoot.”

“Moses led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt at God's insistence and looked after them during forty years in the Wilderness. He spent forty days and nights on a mountain and brought down God's Commandments and did everything else the Lord asked him to. Right?”

“Right.”

“So after all that, how come God got so upset over some tiny incident that he decided to kill Moses and never let him enter the Promised Land?”

Rabbi Goldstein seemed mildly surprised. “The Lord let him climb a mountain and *look* at Canaan,” he said. “What more do you want?”

“It's not the same as putting your feet over there. Moses had just spent forty years of his life listening to a bunch of complaining, squabbling people and doing God's work for him. He deserved better.”

“Well,” said the rabbi, “Moses was very old by then. He probably had no strength

left to cross the Jordan. God was doing him a favor letting him die.”

“But the Lord told him straight out that the reason he wasn’t going to let Moses cross the river was because he’d disobeyed an order.”

“Now listen to me,” said the rabbi, beginning to sound testy. “Moses was the Lord’s general, wasn’t he? Generals have to obey the chief.”

I didn’t want to upset Rabbi Goldstein, but I wanted my answer. “I understand that,” I said. “But this was such a little thing. Just because Moses tapped a rock with a stick to get water out of it, God said he’d never enter the Promised Land. Now why did God do that?”

By this time Rabbi Goldstein had turned dark red with anger. So maybe the Curator was right — maybe there was something wrong with my questions. After coughing for a moment or two, the rabbi lit another cigarette, took a deep drag, coughed again, and said:

“You’re too young to remember, but in the early fifties there was a war called the Korean War. A very great general called Douglas MacArthur led the U.S. Army. This general’s Commander in Chief, President Harry Truman, ordered MacArthur not to cross the Yalu River or advance into North Korea. The general questioned this decision, questioned it in public, in the news media. So do you know what Truman did? He fired him — fired the best general this country ever had — in the middle of a military campaign. Why? Because a general has *got to obey his Commander in Chief*, even if he knows he’s right and the Chief’s wrong. Now, Moses was God’s general. God told him to do one thing and he did another, so God had to punish him. If you don’t punish soldiers for insubordination you won’t have an army. If you don’t have an army, what are you gonna do when the Chinese and the Russians come over the hill?”

“Pray?”

“Goddamn right,” he laughed. “Pray. Pray for an army that you don’t have because it’s gone all to hell. Does that answer your question?”

“That answers it. That was a good answer for that question.” Yes, I was thinking, the Curator’s right. There must be something wrong with my whole approach.

But Rabbi Goldstein wasn’t done yet. “A few minutes ago you asked me what Jews think about suicide. In a Jewish family it’s the same as in an army. Not everyone has the right to do any damn thing they want. Sandra had a father and mother who brought her into the world, raised her, and paid for her teeth and her education. She had a husband who supported her financially and two kids who needed looking after. Sandra had responsibilities to all of them, so tell me this: Even if her health wasn’t up to par, what right did she have to throw everything away with one selfish act?”

“Beats me,” I replied. “You going to ask that at the funeral?”

Rabbi Goldstein settled back on the bench and closed his eyes. “Are you kidding?”

I waited for him to say more but he looked like he’d finished with the subject. I

picked up the watering can and was starting back inside when I remembered something. “By the way,” I said to the rabbi, “you being a man of faith maybe you’d like to know. The Messiah is staying at this motel tonight.”

“The Messiah? What’s that, a rock group?”

I had to smile. “Maybe. Only this particular one is just a person. He signed the register that way.”

Rabbi Goldstein winced. “What is he? A hippy? Long hair and beard?”

“He’s a smooth-shaven pilot. His plane crashed out there, just over the rise. Maybe you heard it flying by this morning.”

“That yellow plane? Yeah, I saw it. That was the *Messiah*.”

“And his passenger, who says he’s a disciple.”

“They must have both got hit on the head in the crash. There’s a lot of loonies down this way. Probably they were smuggling pot over the Mexican border in their plane.” He got to his feet and I followed him toward the museum. “You say the Curator is inside?”

“Want me to ring the bell?”

“Okay.”

That done, the door opened a crack from some internal signal. The rabbi put his face to the crack and peered into total blackness. “Do I get my money back if I’m not satisfied?”

Without answering I pushed him gently inside and shut the door. He’d think it was worth the two dollars. Everybody always did.

Chapter Four

Getting back to the office I was surprised to find Randy Smith leaning on the reception desk looking into the boa cage.

“That pink one’s called a rosy boa,” I told him. “Want to hold it? I’ll take it out.”

“Don’t bother. Happen to have a rosy boa right in here.” He patted his fly. “Just feel free to reach on in and grab hold. It don’t bite or snap. “

“Thought that zipper was Ms. Rosen’s private door.”

I hoped he’d contradict my jealous words, but he didn’t. So I held up my chin and pretended not to care. Randy watched me arrange my papers and set up the typewriter. “I never saw anyone work as much as you,” he said. “Always tappin. I can hear you all the way across in Room Four. The Curator has found himself a real jewel.”

“Why thank you,” I said.

“But now,” he continued in a most casual voice, “speakin of Linda Rosen, you ain’t seen her lately by any chance?”

“Her lately? No, I ain’t seen her lately. You ain’t seen it either?”

He didn't reply, looking at me steady and disapproving. Maybe I was overdoing my hurt by trampling on one of his two faces. It seemed like a good time to change the subject. "A while back you were telling me how to close a sale, but you never did say how to get one started."

About a minute went by before he decided to speak. "You need an opener."

"I'm listening," I said, starting the tape recorder with my foot.

"It depends on who the potential customer is and the situation."

"Just in general."

"No problem." His voice and face were starting to warm up. "You need the right physical approach and the good initial impression: well-groomed, friendly smile, self confident manner. Leadership is important too because research shows that a customer on the verge of buyin is like a demoralized army being pressed to come out and fight. His psychology is mob fear, so you have to relax him and lead him in the direction you want him to go. It helps if you have some background on the customer's interests. Then you say somethin to get his or her attention and interest and break the ice. Best thing is to start with some question which flatters the customer by callin upon his or her special knowledge."

I sighed. "I guess any woman is already in your bag. I bet someone tall and thin like you never has problems selling himself."

Randy Smith put his elbows on the desk and leaned my way. "Why don't we just lock the front door and go mess around back there, back of the lobby."

"I don't think the front door *has* a lock. We ain't bothered much out here by thieves and itinerant cocksman. Wait while I take a look."

I'd just stood up when we heard the sound of voices outside. Several persons were walking up the drive toward the motel.

"Oh shit," I said. Second time that morning new arrivals had queered Randy's pitch.

Chapter Five

Introducing: Mr. and Mrs. Fred Hussion of Sedona, Arizona; she about sixty-five with small, yellow-blue curls, he paunchy and balding;

Mr. and Mrs. George Frink of Sedona, Arizona; he husky and weather-faced, just over forty, she slim with long, upward-sloping nostrils, back-length brown hair and bangs;

Mr. and Mrs. Fred Pierce of Cottonwood, Arizona; she about sixty-five with small, yellow-blue curls, he paunchy and balding;

Mrs. Charles of Los Angeles; upswept, auburn hair, pompadour, forty-nine to fifty-three in age, shoulder pads and large boobs;

Reverend Matthews of San Diego, California; middle fifties, wearing a clerical collar and purple eyebags.

News Flash: The minibus driven by Reverend Matthews failed to stop at the intersection, left the road, balanced a split second on two wheels, then rolled into the dry creek. The party managed to climb out and find their way to the motel.

“I’m gonna sue the folks who put that pile o’ sand in the road,” Mrs. Hussion was saying as she burst through the screen door. “See if I don’t. I’m callin our lawyer right now. Girl, you work here? Well, where’s the phone?”

After we’d sorted out the telephone pickle, the eight sat wearily down.

“Rev’rend,” said Mr. Pierce after a bit, “what do you suggest?” All eyes turned toward their leader.

Reverend Matthews is a medium-tall man, part of this height used up by a sizable head. His large, handsome face wears deep lines down the sides and some straight ones across the brow. Shadowy hollows around his eyes are lined with folds of purple-grey lizard skin. As these eyes turned slowly toward Mr. Pierce, I could see that someone desperate lived behind them.

Reverend Matthews took a long breath and seemed to regain some life force. “Well, Mr. Pierce, ladies and gents, I think the first thing we should do is get down on our knees and give thanks we were none of us killed.”

“Amen,” said bosomy Mrs. Charles, sliding off her chair and placing her two knees side by side on the floor. Creaking and groaning, the others joined her. All closed their eyes in prayerful silence.

Standing in front of his flock, the minister took out a small book which he opened without looking. “Communion Eternal of the Cosmos, hear our prayer.”

“Wait, Rev’rend,” said Mrs. Hussion, groping blindly to adjust her hem under her knees. “Okay. I’m ready. Go ahead.”

Still holding the pause, the minister looked around at the prayerful faces. His eyes rested a few seconds on Mrs. Frink kneeling as tall and slim as a plaster madonna. The young woman’s hands lay folded devoutly across her chest and her thick eyebrows joined across her brow in a permanent and righteous scowl. Taking a deep breath, Reverend Matthews raised his eyes to the ceiling.

“We thank you for guiding the bus so that we missed the dune and fell harmlessly in the ditch.”

“Amen.”

“We thank you for otherwise letting us travel in safety and comfort to see the miraculous wells and for the generosity of those brethren who want to share their opulence with us.”

“Amen.”

“We thank you for allowing us this chance to prosper during our present lives, our future lives, and through the lives of all our brothers and sisters in highest conscious-

ness. We are one family, united in the Eternal Communion of our time/space matrix. Amen.”

“Amen.”

“You may rise.” So saying, the Reverend headed toward the juice table.

The others got to their feet with moans and much snapping of joints. “Rev’reud,” Mrs. Hussion called, “you oughtta devise some way we youngsters could do these prayers without havin to go down. I tell you, prayin is fine, but my arthritis is somethin else.”

Reverend Matthews poured himself some juice, tossed it off and poured another. When he turned around his face was calmer. Holding his glass low and easy, he wandered back.

“Mrs. Hussion,” he smiled, “I know what you must be feeling. But wouldn’t it be better to ask the Eternal Communion just to go ahead and cure your arthritis once and for all, rather than ask us to eliminate the humble practice of kneeling?”

She looked at him in amazement. “Cure it? You never told me. Could E.C. do that?”

Reverend Matthews unrolled his smile a notch. “It’s just a matter of holding the thought, of believing.”

“Why, Revrend,” exclaimed the woman, “you know I believe. That ain’t no secret by now.”

“I know it, and *you* know it, Mrs. Hussion, but does the *Eternal Communion* know it? When was the last time you showed them proof?”

Mrs. Hussion looked amazed. “Proof? I bought that damn motel they sold me, what more proof do they want?”

“There can never be enough renewal of effort,” said the reverend, turning to address the others. “How many miracles did Moses have to perform to convince Egypt’s Pharaoh that God meant business? How many times did Christ have to offer miraculous demonstrations of His divinity and power?”

“He means the *oil revenues*,” tall, buxom Mrs. Charles prompted in a loud whisper.

The reverend nodded. “That’s correct. Mrs. Charles knows. When you folks have all that oil money coming in, if you’ll just give five percent to the Order, I think it will be proof enough.”

“And my achin’ll stop?”

“In this life or in the next.”

“Tell em I’ll give em *ten* percent if they’ll stop it right now,” said Mrs. Hussion firmly, patting her yellow-blue hair.

Mrs. Pierce looked around her. “Okay, Rev’reud,” she said, “now we’ve had our pray, what do we do next?”

The reverend turned to me. “Any kind of transportation around here?”

I told them about the Sunday bus to Albuquerque. They all decided to take rooms for the night and be on it the next day. This decision made, everyone moved toward the juice table except Mr. and Mrs. Pierce.

“In any case,” said Mrs. Pierce, leaning confidently on the register, “there ain’t nobody’ll miss Daddy and me if we’re home a day late. Our kids don’t even know we’re gone. They live in California. Only thing, we closed down our motel to make this trip, so we’ll lose a little weekend business, but that don’t matter. At least we weren’t killed.”

“You own a motel too?”

“Sure do. In Cottonwood. Ever been over that way?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“I don’t guess you have. We don’t get many nigras. Not that we got somethin against colored folk, mind. Mr. Pierce and me, we know what it’s like havin black skin. That right, Daddy?”

“That’s right, Mother.”

I stared at them in amazement. “Ma’am,” I said, “how come you and your daddy know what it’s like being black?” Behind the postcard rack I glimpsed Randy Smith bending down to hide his wide smile.

“Why, child, you may not believe this, seein me and Mr. Pierce white as the snow, but we was once nigras, same as you. We was also yellah, Mexican, Indian, and one time — and I have proof of this one as plain as the nose on my face — I was a Eskimo lady eatin whale blubber up there in Alaska.”

“That must have been darn cold.”

“It was, it really was. Damn near froze my nose. You can see I still have this tiny button to remind me. But that ain’t nothin. Daddy here was an Apache chief, ain’t that so, Mr. Pierce honey?”

“That’s right, Mrs. Pierce.” With his hand to his mouth, Mr. Pierce stifled a few fast wails, “Woo woo woo.”

“Myohmy,” I laughed. “Sounds like daddy still got a couple Sioux arrows up his backside.”

Mrs. Pierce’s eyes and lips narrowed. “You keep on like that and you ain’t never even gonna make *yellah*.”

“I’ll settle for being Mexican,” I told her. “Always did like *frijoles*.”

Mrs. Pierce was just turning to stomp angrily off when Randy slipped from behind the postcards to block her way.

“What about us white folk?” he asked her. “What color do *we* come back?”

Eye to eye with Randy’s middle shirt button, Mrs. Pierce’s head swiveled away sharp to the side. “Rev’rend,” she called, “would you come over here a minute to answer some o’ these questions and bring us some o’ that punch?” Then she looked around.

“Where did Fred go?”

The reverend had been enjoying a cosy stand-up chat with Mrs. Charles. But he

poured some juice and came over.

“This fellah,” Mrs. Pierce croaked dryly, taking the glasses, “wants to know what race we white folk come back as. You tell im,” she squeaked. “My voice is wore out talkin to this nigra gal. Hold on. Wait.”

She took a long sip from one of the glasses, choked briefly, set both glasses on the desk, and said low and wet, “Now it’s okay. It’s come back. Listen,” she said to Randy and me, “I guess you ain’t never heard that this world is headin for a decade o’ disaster. Right, Rev’rend? Floods, fires, earthquakes and so forth. Unfortunately, this has *got* to happen because the earth is gettin so overtrashed with population. There just ain’t room on it any more for the white folks. Look at India and you’ll see what I mean. Or New York City.

“So there’s gonna be this cleansin of the earth which will start in 1985 and last exactly ten years til 1995. A lotta folks are gonna die, but a lot ain’t. And by the year 2025 there’ll be a new race established on earth.”

“A new race?” I said.

“That’s right. From another planet. The new race will have long, long fingers, wide apart eyes and low ears. My son,” she announced proudly, “has the ears. My daughter has the eyes and the hands.”

I had to hold onto my lower lip with my teeth so as not to smile. Trav Sales was coughing into his fist hole.

“You may think this is hilarious,” Mrs. Pierce cautioned us perceptively, “but you won’t be laughin when that rain starts fallin and the earth opens up and those mountains come tumblin down on your heads. “

“I’m sure you’re right,” nodded Randy, with a real serious sneer.

“These aren’t facts anybody can grasp right off,” Reverend Matthews told Mrs. Pierce soothingly. “We can understand that, can’t we?”

“We can if you say we can.” She looked around. “By the way, you ain’t seen my Fred? His juice is here waitin.”

“He told me he was feeling the call of nature. I think he went looking for the little boys’ room. But to get back to the subject, this gentleman here just wants proof, the same as everybody else. The same as you did.”

“You mean the charts?”

“Yes, the charts too, but even more, you recall, that *special experience* Mrs. Charles told us about?”

His words struck a bell. “Rev’rend,” said Mrs. Pierce, “I’d forgotten about that. Must be gettin old. Go ahead. Tell em about the near-death experience o’ Mrs. Charles. No, I’ll tell it. You see that big gal over there? Well, about two years ago she was involved in a swimmin accident. Nearly drowned. Her heart stopped beatin for several minutes. Well, as you know, when the heart stops beatin, you’re dead. Brother, are you dead. Stopped heart, that is the *medical* and *legal* definition o’ death. Even so, she was

artificially respirationed back to life and is here with us today to tell us what she seen.”

“I’ll bet her whole life flashed in front of her eyes,” said Randy.

“It did. It flashed backwards like a movie film set the wrong way. Watchin it, she was filled with this feelin of complete peace and understandin, as if ever question she ever had was being answered one by one. And then suddenly, standin before her she saw this shinin figure dressed in white openin up its arms. Mrs. Charles wanted so much to go with it, but she recalled her poor, dear children back home who needed her, and her poor crippled sister who wouldn’t know what to do without her, so she decided that no, she couldn’t get away just yet, no matter how temptin it looked. So she returned to her earthly body. But she saw what it was like crossin over and she’s not afraid about ever dyin. In fact, when her work here on earth is done she looks forward to goin on to a new and different life.”

“That’s great,” said Randy.

“Only the most amazin part is still to come. When Mrs. Charles come back after this swimmin accident, she was talkin old, old German outta one o’ her previous lives. Old, old German because five hundred years ago she was the wife of a German prince. Ain’t that right, Rev’rend?”

“Mrs. Pierce,” said the minister, blushing a little, “haven’t you got this story mixed up with the one sister Agathe told us during our last meeting?”

“I know it was sister Agathe,” whispered Mrs. Pierce loudly. “but *he* don’t know it. I just wanted to slip it in, stead o’ tellin a whole nother story. Anyway,” she said to Randy, “you get the idea. I’m goin. I gotta find my Fred.”

She took her key and went out. Reverend Matthews took this opportunity to ask for his and Mrs. Charles’ keys and signal her to join him outside. As they left, Mr. and Mrs. Frink, the youngest of the minibus crowd, strolled over.

“I been lookin around at this lobby,” said Frink. “I like them metal wall scul-
tures. Where’d they come from?”

I told him the Curator had made them himself.

“Look like they was all cut out of automobile fenders.”

“They all was.”

“This Curator fellow, seems he’s got himself a captive raw material input, what with all the wrecks we seen down at the crossroads.”

“The Lord giveth,” I told him, “and the Lord toweth away.”

“The Lord toweth away minus a few patches. Sure it weren’t your Curator removed the STOP sign down there? I seen places decorated with huntin trophies before, but never nothin like this. What’s that sculpture over there supposed to represent? A twelve-point Chevrolet Impala?”

I couldn’t help grinning. “Mister, you sayin we live off the land?”

“I’m sayin it might be a good way to fill your motel rooms and still have some by-products left over. However, that triflin sort of scam don’t concern me no more as I’m

sellin my own motel and gettin into the oil business. “

“The oil business! Do tell.”

“Oil is what this trip is all about. We’re already six months late gettin in on it, all except Mrs. Charles. Six months ago, before they even started drillin, she invested ten grand. Now they’ve found two wells and she’s got minimum five grand a month comin in for life. Well, as Rev’rend Matthews says, seein is believin, so we all took this trip to Farmington to see them wells with our own eyes. And there the beauties were, just like he said, pumpin away. Soon as we can unload our motel my wife and me are investin. The Pierces and the Hussions too.”

“Let me get this straight,” said Randy. “You folks are fixin to sell your motels and put all that money into this oil business?”

“That’s affirmative. We’re tired of these piddlin motel profits. Oil means millions. Just *one* well means millions, and there’s already two. Any day they’ll find more and we want to be in on it.”

“How come they’re lettin you in on a deal like this. Seems they wouldn’t need any investors with all this goin for em.”

“Nothin more natural. The Rev’rend has certain very wealthy oilmen in his flock and they’re givin us this tip. Sharin with their brethren is their way of sayin thank you to the Order. O’course, we plan to plow back five percent of our profits to the E.C. It’s only natural, I think.”

“Real natural,” said Randy. “Only one thing bothers me.”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t you think you’re being conned?”

“Conned?” George Frink looked at him blankly.

“Swindled, fleeced, hoaxed,” explained Trav Sales.

“Who by?”

“By the Reverend and Mrs. Charles, to name two.”

Frink’s jaw dropped. “Are you kiddin? Do you know what you’re sayin? Why there’s nobody in the world Ginny and me have higher respect for than those two. They are two people possessin the very *highest* of cosmic consciences. I’d doubt my own mama and papa before I’d doubt them. We love those two people, ain’t that right, Gin?”

“That is *right*,” said his missus, looking at us severely, her head tipped forward as though staring over bifocals. “That is God’s truth.”

I was standing in a kind of daze, wondering how these turkeys had survived daily life until now, when I heard Randy asking, “What I can’t figure out is, if you folks all have such high cosmic consciences, how come you’re so interested in making a quick million bucks. You know what Jesus Christ said about the chances of a rich man going to heaven.”

“Jesus was absolutely right,” nodded Frink, “and when we’re ready for heaven why we’ll just have to leave the money behind. But we got about seven zillion lives to

live before that day comes, so we got to plan ahead.”

“You’re gonna take the money with you on your reincarnations?”

“Sure are. That’s what the Rev’rend arranges for us. He has these charts, a way of knowin when and where people’s souls come back in other bodies.. He can find em and give em their money. He found Mrs. Charles that way.”

“What if he doesn’t manage to find you in your next life? Misplaces a decimal point or something.”

“Well, we can say we already had a good time with the millions in *this* life. We’ll be ahead of the game any way you look at it. It’s better than motels.”

“You been in the business long?”

“About a year. Back then some of us brethren and sisters were dissatisfied with our lifestyles. Ginny and me, we had this gas station in Costa Mesa, but we were squeezed out when the oil crunch come. After tryin this and that for a couple years we joined the E.C. and our Order found us this motel outside Sedona. Same with the others, though the Pierces and the Hussions were retired folks with time on their hands.

“Only as it turned out, these motels weren’t in the best shape when we bought em and since then its been one unholy chore just keepin the toilets flushin and the coolers blowin, not to mention the roofs from leakin and the pool from crackin. So now this oil thing’s come along, we’re all jumpin at it. From now on its gonna be me, oil millionaire George Frink, puttin the squeeze on the little service station operators, not the other way around.”

Frink snapped his fingers and I handed him their key. “Have a nice day,” he said, walking out the door.

When they’d gone I took out the smile I’d been hiding. “I guess folks’ll believe anything,” I said to Randy. “Oil millions, reincarnation. I’ll bet we’re almost the only ones here right now except for Mr. C. and maybe the rabbi, who don’t believe in more lives.”

Trav Sales looked at me in surprise. “Whadya mean ‘we,’ black woman?”

“You believe in reincarnation, white man?” I watched him nod. “You believe in a super race with low ears takin over this earth?”

“If you believe in Christ you have got to believe in reincarnation,” Randy told me. “If He really is just and loving, how can you explain all the pain and suffering He lays on the world? It only makes sense if you know there’s somethin better comin up in the hereafter.”

“And you also believe what she said about races, how you start out long ago being black and work your way up to white?”

“Hell no. Nobody evolves from a lower race to a higher one, otherwise by now there’d *be* no colored folks. No, the races stay where they are, with white on top.”

“That is what you truly believe?”

“That is what I *most* truly believe.”

“Well, Randy,” I said, “compared to you, Miz Pierce talks like a reincarnation of Abe Lincoln.”

With a mean chuckle, Trav Sales nodded goodbye, pushed open the screen door, and ... stopped in his tracks. Looking past him I saw Linda Rosen heading our way across the courtyard. Even from that distance her hair looked wild and her face red and blotchy.

Randy turned back to the postcard rack and started examining the cards. “Better put a new ribbon in your machine,” he told me. “And a fresh tape on the deck. You are about to witness your first super-sales demo.”

Chapter Six

Because my clerk, Marly, may soon be leaving Eden Motel, for good, and because we have several guests this weekend keeping her busy, I shall personally type up this museum tour tape. — The Curator. 11:30 p.m., Sat.

The door shut. Rabbi Goldstein stood in total darkness. Suddenly a blood-curdling doubt seized him. Had he been tricked?

“I hope this ain’t Auschwitz,” he said aloud. “Heh, heh.”

No answer. Only the terrible, inquisitional silence.

He had never felt so completely defenseless. Making a fist he shook it in front of his face. “I can’t even see my hand,” he wailed softly. He strove to hear the footsteps of approaching doom, but both ears were smothered in the soft mouths of the receptors. Against the primal silence he heard only his own rapid breath and beating heart.

Then a change. The pulsing, stifling darkness seemed to ease, to dilute, to fill like a vast, galactic lung, achieving greater dimensions of space and time. He sensed that in this night he stood near a great and unruly ocean. A wind that was neither warm nor cold blew over him. From it he drew deep breaths, seeking the scent of algae, but none yet grew. Through it he strained to hear the cries of seabirds as yet unborn.

“In the beginning,” said a voice that seemed to crackle inside his very brain, “when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness and an awesome wind, the power of God, was moving over the water. Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”

Was there? Where? Yes, light, a faint one, but growing rapidly. The rabbi tried to see by the light, but saw only light. There were no sunbeams dancing on ocean waves, there were no waves, there were no museum walls.

I can see light, he thought, but nothing else. Are my eyes open?

The invisible, light-blind rabbi touched his eyes and felt his lashes flicker. Should

he give himself up to terror or to reason? Or relax and enjoy it? Clever guy, this Curator, for here is truly the birth of the world.

And as this thought opened in his mind like a flower, a magnificent, sweet, and very intense emotion arose from it. Touching his eyes again, he wiped away tears.

The light brightened and faded. The darkness reappeared. The first day of Creation had gone by. The rabbi knew that on the second day the skydome would be built. Describing it later, he said that as that day dawned his strange light-blindness seemed to gain a depth of vision greater than thirty football fields. He could still see nothing, but could see it at fantastic length and breadth.

“There gotta be a seam somewhere, an angle-joint, a crack, some rough spots.” But there was only an immense and luminous void.

“Then God commanded, ‘Let the water below the sky come together in one place,’ and it was done. God called the water ‘sea’ and the land ‘earth.’ Then God created all kinds of plants growing from the earth. When he saw them he was pleased. It was now the end of the third day.”

On the fourth day the sun, moon and stars were created and on the fifth the creatures of the sea and sky. On the sixth day the animals of the earth were made.

Rabbi Goldstein now listened to time pass with a wide smile on his face and impatience in his soul. He was waiting to be born.

“Then God said, ‘And now we will make human beings. They will be like us and resemble us.’ And saying this he reached down and took some soil from the ground and formed it into a man and breathed into its nostrils and the man began to live.”

Tears coursed down the rabbi’s cheeks and into his smiling mouth. Is birth such a sad event? he wondered. Or am I crying from joy, and if so, why do men cry from joy?

“And he put the man he had formed into a beautiful garden, the Garden of Eden. And as he slept, from his side, the Lord took one of his ribs and created woman. And they were naked, the man and woman, but not ashamed.”

“I can see,” exclaimed the rabbi softly. It was as if his tears had washed a veil from his eyes. He looked around and found he was standing in a garden.

It was a garden rich with leafy smells and sounds. There were groves and copses, undergrowth and creepers, grass, weeds, flowers, vegetables and fruits. Where no plants grew the ground was bare except for occasional insects and lizards, stones, toads and small rodents. A laughing young man and woman munched fruit while watching two squirrels chase each other up and down a tree.

What a guy this Curator must be, thought Rabbi Goldstein. A horticulturist and an expert with special effects.

For in spite of its substantive appearance, the scene was infused with unreality. The rabbi found that if he looked too long at anything, that object began to transform into shimmering light. Especially difficult to observe were the sexual attributes of the woman which kept burning away in blue dazzle under his laser gaze.

Where had he witnessed that illusory quality before? Ah, yes. It was in the Sinai one day at high noon. An area of desert to the left of the road had metamorphosed into a shimmering blue-grey lake that hovered a few feet above the desert sands, cool and iridescent. Hills had floated on the “water” and in the middle distance had stood a shadowy group of huts with dark palms surrounding them. The guide had told them that mirages were phenomena of heat waves and of distant objects reflected from the sky. Somehow, he decided, the Curator had harnessed and improved upon nature’s technique.

“And God looked on what he had done and was pleased. It was the ending of the sixth day. And on the seventh day he rested. And that is how the universe was created.”

At this, the earphones went dead. The animated, flesh-colored figures of the man and woman switched off, turning into lifeless grey forms.

Finito? Or was it a power failure? The rabbi took off his earphones and tapped them against his palm. Still no current. He was wondering what to do when a sudden rustling in the bushes made him turn. A man with a trim, white beard — myself — was walking toward him, arm extended.

“Mr. Curator, I presume?” said Rabbi Goldstein, hooking his headset over my wrist.

“That’s correct, sir, but I didn’t come for your earphones, only to welcome you with a handshake.” We shook hands. “How do you like it so far?”

The rabbi, looking around for a place to hang his receptors, beamed absently. “Fantastic.”

“No complaints?”

“Well,” he said, attempting to hook the headband over his left shoulder., “maybe just one little one.”

“Oh?” I felt my smile stiffen imperceptibly. I’m always eager for criticism, but only when it’s deserved.

“We don’t really get to *see* the Creation. We hear about it, sure, but for two bucks it would really be great to see it.” As the receptors fell, the rabbi caught them and hung them firmly around his neck.

“But you saw the primal night, did you not?”

“Oh, sure. If you can call that ‘seeing.’ ”

“And the very first light?”

“Yeah, but what about the raging sea with the wind of God ruffling the waters? Have you thought about trying ordinary film projectors?”

“You felt nothing from the darkness and light?”

“Sure I did, even a sense of space as the sky was created. Those effects come across just great. No, don’t get me wrong. There definitely were pluses. I guess I even cried a couple of times. Only I think that for the money we could at least have had the sun, moon and stars and the creatures of the earth and air. You know, a little color. That ain’t much to ask.”

“But you can see those any time you look about you,” I shrugged. “It was my purpose to make you experience the Creation directly, and in this I have succeeded.”

“How do you know that?” asked the rabbi with annoyance in his voice.

“Because you wept. Now come and let me show you the garden.”

It was like a pleasant mid-summer afternoon as the rabbi and I strolled together under the shady trees. After a while, one tree in particular caught my companion’s eye. It was larger than the others, its trunk and limbs thickly knotted with age. The branches were sparsely covered with leaves having green backs and silver linings. Among them hung a strange and luminous fruit.

“Yes,” I smiled, anticipating his question, “that is *the* tree. Our star attraction in the vegetable department.”

“Beautiful,” said Rabbi Goldstein. “But what kind of fruit is that? Pears? Or lightbulbs?”

I found myself smiling with embarrassment, for in fact his observation was not facetious. Seeking to graft together the light of understanding with the fruit of knowledge, I had come up with a rather unappetizing hybrid. I was about to try to explain this, when fortunately a rustling sound in the bushes caught our attention,

“There it is now,” I said. “Do you see it?”

“See what?” asked the rabbi, looking apprehensively toward the sound.

“There. The snake. Don’t be afraid. It isn’t dangerous. It works on the same principle as the man and woman, though I’ve incorporated a closed circuit, one of my newest adaptations, to give it more freedom. We’ll follow it. That’s the simplest thing to do.”

The tall snake made its way slowly through the garden. Following behind it the rabbi was confused. What should be his official sentiment? Should he be revulsed at the sight of the slick, pink form moving ahead of us, three quarters erect, like some lewd and naked gland? Or should he feel satisfaction in the beauty of this supple animal and the technical know-how of his bearded friend?

Walking beside the rabbi, smiling, frowning and biting my nails, I scrutinized every movement of my creature. “As you may recall...” I broke off to watch the snake navigate a particularly rough section of terrain. “Uh ... God told the man and woman that they could eat any fruit in the garden except the fruit of the tree that gives knowledge of good and evil. He told them that if they ate of that fruit they would die.”

“Yeah, only they *did* eat of it and Adam still lived to be 930 years old. What a way to die,” he chuckled. “I mean, Curator, that not everybody today takes the Bible stories literally, not even some rabbis.”

I glanced at him in surprise. “This I understand. I myself am an absolute non-believer. However, I was not speaking just now of Adam and Eve. I was speaking of the man and woman in the garden. They were immortal, unique and nameless. That man and woman died, in a manner of speaking, that very day.”

“Okay, only I think you should know in advance, I happen to be a rabbi. In fact, this semester I’m teaching an adult Bible class one evening a week.”

“Wonderful. Then you’ll be able to tell me if...” I held my breath as the snake, bending and whipping, forced its way between two creeper-infested bushes. “Whether I’ve made any textual errors up until now.”

“As I see it, you’ve taken some obvious liberties, but so far so good meaningwise. On the other hand, your serpent....”

Stopping suddenly, I held up my hand for silence. “There,” I whispered, “the snake has found the woman. Now put your receivers back on and watch. I’ll rejoin you presently.”

As the snake, tall and unblinking, approached the naked, feeding woman, the rabbi slipped the headset over his ears. The current was on; his head filled with clackings and warblings. A faint electronic hum, indicating the consumption of precious energy, added a note of urgency to the moment.

The woman, unstartled to see the snake, smiled innocently at it and continued nibbling a peach. (Later Rabbi Goldstein was to say that never had the Bible story appeared so real to him.) The figures glowed with life. Their breath and heartbeats seemed rhythmically phased with the rapid beating of the rabbi’s own pulse, heightening the familiar story with almost unbearable suspense. Rabbi Goldstein was wondering whether she, or 1, or anyone, knew that her beautiful, virginal and almost hairless cleft was being devoured and redevoured by the shimmering incandescence of his unpardonable stare.

“Did God really say,” asked the snake, “that you shouldn’t eat fruit from any tree in the garden?”

“Not exactly,” the woman replied, “We may eat the fruit of any tree except that one over there. If we eat that fruit, or even *touch* it, we will die.”

The snake laughed. “That’s nonsense. You won’t die. The Lord only said that to frighten you. He knows that when you eat of that fruit you’ll be as wise as he, as wise as God himself.”

The woman walked over and looked more closely at the tree. It was obvious how delicious the fruit looked to her. Then she became thoughtful; what the serpent had said made sense. Ignoring her fears, she plucked some of the fruit and ate it. Then she went and found the man and gave some to him. When they had eaten it, their expressions changed. Before, their faces had been clear and unworried, but now their brows came together like clouds in a darkening sky. Looking down, they saw that they were naked. So they went and gathered fig leaves, wove them together and covered themselves.

The afternoon shadows lengthened and evening came. Someone was walking in the garden. It was the Lord. The man and woman hid themselves, but the Lord called to them.

Then the man came out from between the trees and said, “I heard you in the gar-

den. I was afraid and hid from you because I was naked.”

“Who told you that you were naked?” asked the Lord. “Did you eat of the forbidden fruit?”

“The woman you put here with me gave me the fruit and I ate it.”

The Lord said to the woman, “Why did you do this?”

“The snake beguiled me,” she replied.

The Lord said to the snake, “You will be punished for this. From now on you will crawl on your belly and eat dust. You and the woman will hate each other.”

At this the snake, proud and erect, began to bend and sway violently as if attacked by invisible flails. Unseen blows seemed to rain on him, whipping him from side to side, then drumming upon him until he lay writhing on the ground.

“Oh, my God,” breathed the rabbi, guiltily dropping his gaze to his toes.

The Lord spoke the list of ills that man and woman would henceforth bear, such as toiling for their food, and painful childbirth. Then he cursed them with mortality.

“You were made of dust, and to dust you will return.”

The Lord named the man Adam — mankind — and Adam named his wife Eve — life — and the Lord dressed them in animal skins and turned them out of the Garden of Eden to till the soil out of which they’d been made. Then God put a flaming sword in the garden to warn others away from the Tree of Life.

The garden stood deserted. Rabbi Goldstein’s hand went to his earphones; they had gone silent. For a moment he stood motionless, then reached for a cigarette. A sound made him turn and he saw me standing next to him, watching his face with great eagerness.

“Well?” I asked.

“Fantastic,” said the rabbi. “But what a tragic story.”

“Tell me, Rabbi, what special message does this fable have for the Jewish people?”

Rabbi Goldstein sniffed the pungent wick of his Zippo lighter, then flicked it on. “It’s very simple. God told them *not* to, they *did*, so he punished them.” He touched the thick flame to the tip of his cigarette and inhaled deeply. “It’s all there in a nutshell,” he said, snapping the lid shut. “Listen to the guy who knows right from wrong, do what he tells you, and life can be great.” As he spoke, smoke trickled from the corners of his mouth. “Go against what’s right and you’re gonna suffer. Simple,” he coughed.

“But to possess knowledge, isn’t that worth any suffering?”

“Nah, why suffer if you got an old man who’s dumb enough to do it for you? Listen, Curator, those two kids had a great life. Why did they hafta mess it up?”

I regarded him thoughtfully. “Are you joking? Or do you really mean it?”

“Sure I mean it,” said the rabbi loudly and unconvincingly. “I tell it all the time to my students — not the adult students, the young ones. Do what you’re supposed to do and everything’ll be great. The garden is yours. Disobey authority and *you* are respon-

sible for the consequences, so don't go crying to mommy. That's the whole lesson of the Adam story."

I felt myself frowning. "This is a very down-to-earth interpretation coming from a rabbi."

"Well, I'm a down-to-earth guy. In fact, I'm a very down-to-earth guy." He took a deep drag on his cigarette. "That lesson ain't just taught in the Garden of Eden. It's taught in back alleys down in the Bronx where I grew up. In fact, I taught it to a lot of the punks."

"I see." There was an awkward pause as I tried to think of something to say.

"Now you take that snake," continued the rabbi. "You built the son-of-a-gun, but I bet you can't even *guess* what it reminded me of. I see it as a kind of symbol. In fact, I'm not the only one. Some ancient rabbis had the same general idea. I was telling my class about it last week and it nearly blew their minds. There's a rabbinical legend that says that the idea in the serpent's head was: I'll go kill Adam and marry his wife and then I'll be king of the whole earth."

"Really?" I exclaimed. "Why it sounds as if those rabbis thought the snake had an Oedipus complex."

Rabbi Goldstein looked offended. "I didn't say that. Don't jump the gun on me. I don't happen to believe in that theory."

His words made me smile inwardly. I must admit, Freud's theory is difficult for most persons to accept. To imagine that one has harbored ancient desires to kill one's father and marry one's mother, or, in the female, the reverse desire, doesn't go down easily with the conscious, reasoning mind. And yet, the more I speak with visitors in my museum, and the more I question them, the more I hear the Oedipus story repeated in one form or another.

"You mean," I said to the rabbi, "that you never felt any antagonism toward your father?"

"Oh, sure. When you put it that way. Every kid feels like murdering his old man some time or other. I'd say it's mutual."

"And you never planned to marry your mother when you grew up?"

"Sure, but that idea doesn't last long. Oedipus must have been some kind of nut to go through with it."

"Actually, as the story goes, Oedipus did everything he could to insure that the oracle's terrible prophesy *wouldn't* come true. He didn't even *know* that the man he killed was his father, or that the woman he married was his mother."

"Then that should prove the Oedipus theory isn't true. It wasn't even his fault."

"On the other hand, perhaps therein lies the true meaning of the Greek drama — that unknown or *subconscious* forces can guide our actions even when we try *consciously* to resist doing them."

"Great. Only I never killed my father and I didn't try and marry my mother."

“I’ll bet you did the next best thing. I’ll bet you married a girl just like her.”

“I’ll say I did. Just like her as far as cooking is concerned. Only now my wife is ill: She’s been in and out of mental hospitals for five years. Right now she’s in.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that.”

“The problem was her mother. Her mother hated Edith almost as much as Edith’s father hated me.”

“I thought Jewish families are supposed to be very close.”

“Too close, if you ask me. The ghetto syndrome. But times have changed. The Diaspora happened over a century ago. Individual Jews want to do their own thing these days. For instance, we moved to the suburbs, though I’ll admit it was a pretty lonely life for my wife, alone all day. Our daughter is adjusting pretty well out there, but she better be careful who she brings home. When the time comes, he better be Jewish and he better be serious. For the moment the kid’s at that age where she says she wants to marry me, heh, heh. I kind of think that’s cute.”

“Maybe she’ll marry a man just like you.”

“Just so it’s not some jerk. My kid and I have become close since her mother had her breakdown. No mama to put on the pressure. For a while I tried sending her to psychology clinics and group therapy, but she’s been locked up now for the past six months. Thank God I’ve got good insurance. But it seems you can only give a person shock treatment so many times before it doesn’t work any more. I guess their brains get short-circuited after a while. It’s funny thinking of thoughts being electricity, or chemical reactions. Thoughts should be like ghosts.”

His words made me smile. “Indeed they should,” I told him. “In a ‘perfect’ universe, they surely would be.”

The sound of the door buzzer interrupted. “It must be another customer,” I said. “Let’s stroll back.”

At the entrance I looked through the hidden peephole, but saw no one. “I can’t see who it is. Well, anyway, I think you’ve probably had enough for now and would like a rest. You can come back later if you wish.”

“Is there more?”

“Yes. Cain and Abel. I’m also considering working up a Moses display. That would give me a chance to work with the splendid phallic imagery of the Old Testament, the burning bushes, the pillars of fire and cloud, and especially the Tent of the Lord’s presence where Moses met privately face to face with God while a pillar of cloud guarded the entrance.”

“The Torah’s full of great religious imagery,” agreed Rabbi Goldstein. “And speaking of Moses, that colored gal who works for you, she asked me a question about Moses just before I came in here.”

“Marly did?” His words surprised me. “What was her question?”

“She asked why God had killed Moses and never let him into the Promised Land.”

“Why on earth did she ask you instead of me?”

Rabbi Goldstein laughed. “Who should know the Torah better than a rabbi? Anyway, I had the impression she’s a little afraid to ask you things. “

“Afraid?”

“Don’t get jealous. Just a teensy bit afraid. *Maybe.*”

“Impossible. Marly’s been here with me seven years. I found her half dead from drugs, abandoned by the roadside. When she arrived here she knew nothing except what they teach in ghetto schools and cheap hotels. I educated her, taught her to read the classics, to write, to think and observe. I treat her like my own daughter. There’s nothing she can’t ask me.”

“Be that as it may,” said the rabbi. “I drew her a parallel between the Moses story and the one about Truman firing MacArthur. You might even say I drew her the 38th parallel, heh, heh. I almost served as rabbi in the army during the Korean War, so I’m familiar with what was going on.”

“Almost served?”

“The fighting ended too soon. If Truman had let MacArthur cross the 38th, I’d have seen some action. But what do you want? The Prez canned him, just like God canned Moses.”

“You could have told Marly that Moses died of old age.”

Rabbi Goldstein shook his head. “I tried that one on her, but she wouldn’t buy it. Anyway, the MacArthur explanation is more dramatic. It teaches a valuable moral lesson, and ain’t that what the Bible’s for?”

“Of course not.”

The rabbi looked surprised. “I don’t think I heard you correctly. It sounded like...”

“You heard correctly. No, that’s not the way the Bible is most valuable to mankind. In fact, it has been misunderstood and misused for thousands of years. However...”

The door buzzer gave three impatient rings. Again I put my eye to the peephole. “Now I see him. Gracious. It’s a young man dressed in a strange costume. In fact, there are two of them.”

“What are they, hippies? Fags? God forbid, Jewish kooks? Lemme look.” The rabbi put his eye to the peephole. “Oh,” he said, “I know who those guys are. Your girl told me about them. They’re a couple of nuts who crashed their plane near here. One calls himself the Messiah.”

“Really?” I looked out again. “He’s quite young to call himself the Messiah.”

“He’s young to call himself the anything, except the punkest of the punks. I tell you, Curator, when I see dumb kids like that coming around saying they know how to save the world, I feel like wringing their necks. “

“Generally they’re only preaching peace and love.”

“That’s what they *say* they’re preaching. What they’re really trying to do is tear down the society that we,” he pounded his chest, “built. Lemme tell you, what they’re saying ain’t no declaration of peace. It’s trouble they’re asking for.”

Putting his hand on his heart, the rabbi continued more calmly. “I’ll get outta here. You should have some fun with them. I gotta watch my blood pressure and I don’t trust myself around kids like that. They really bug me, and when they’re from good Jewish homes, they better watch out. I’m liable to *crucify* em.”

Rabbi Goldstein laughed heartily at this layered thought. I showed him out by a different door and went back to greet the two young men waiting outside.

Chapter Seven

1 a.m., Sunday morning —Marly.

Flashforward: Tonight I’m staying up to transcribe the office notes. This Saturday was the busiest we ever had. Thanks go to the dune.

I’m tired but will sleep some other time. Invisible forces blow from each direction. I am standing in the middle of a dark eternity, unable to hold fast to anything, to this strange wind, the blowing sand, the stars, or to my own changing destiny.

There are still two persons I must see before I go — the Curator and Linda Rosen. These names are written in the spiral notebook of my mind.

Seven years have gone by, now a change is coming, I don’t know from where. Maybe a knight in shining armor will ride over the hill and carry me away (smile). Or Mr. C. will let me take the bus to Albuquerque. I’ve been happy here, but Messiah says a balloon fiesta is over that town right now. He says it is something to behold if you are out there by the dawn’s first light when the balloons wake up.

There’s so much yet to see on earth and so much typing to get done. I’ll be working all night and morning even if nothing else happens between now and bus time. The Curator is helping by typing up the museum tours. I can hear the clicking of his machine and the spaces between his thoughts. Does he too think that there is need to hurry?

Just looked in at the snakes. Who told me today that snake noses are called snouts? *Snouts*. So I had to unbandage one to see, then undo the others to be fair.

Unbanded, they all looked suddenly respectable and very serious. I decided to feed them since tomorrow — no, today, Sunday — I will let them loose on this high plateau. They say the modern way is to feed snakes frozen mice, but all our mice are hot and frisky.

When I opened the top of the first cage both rattlers were chattering and coiled ready to strike. The Curator explains that we and they are not each other’s natural prey. They do not hunt us for food and we are anxious not to run into one of them. He says

the rattling is nature's way to prevent an accidental encounter that would benefit neither party.

I dropped two genuine prey into a well of sudden silence. Still as death the coiled snakes waited. As always, a strange curiosity seemed to grip the mice, drawing them in lessening circles until they stopped nose to snout with the snakes, staring into their eyes. A terrible pause, then *pow!* The strike is too fast to see, but the Curator says the snake's head is back, jaws wide open. The fangs shoot straight as arrows into the victim, discharging venom.

Hit, the dying mouse starts to totter and convulse, the snake impatiently strikes again and again. Then it disengages its jaws and eats the mouse head first. It's always the skinny tip of the rodent tail sliding last into the grin of old rubber-lips.

Snakes are dumb. Eve never would have married that serpent for its brains.

Chapter Eight

To continue: Linda Rosen marched through the screen door, letting it bang shut behind her. Without breaking stride she went right past Randy Smith, bumped up against the front desk, and planted both elbows on the register book.

"My grandmother and I have no bathroom," she announced. "Not even a toilet."

I was smiling at her while putting a fresh tape on the machine as fast as possible. "Nobody's got one," I assured her. "We live on the moon."

"What if one feels the urge?"

"One goes around back of this office and to the right. There one'll see a wood door with engraved crescent."

"Oh great." She stepped back, frustrated. Her wild hair hung in strings, flayed by too much high-speed wind through car windows. She looked ready to crack.

"Maybe you won't feel the urge," I said kindly, switching on the recorder. "Anyway, you'll probably be leaving for Albuquerque tomorrow."

"Why 'probably?' You told my folks there's definitely a bus."

"I mean you just might feel like staying on a while. Lots of folks do. This is a real nice place."

"Without flushing toilets?" She shook her sharp-prowed head. "I've had it with the simple way of life. At my age I want creature comforts."

By the postcard rack, from the corners of his eyes, Trav Sales was sizing up this customer. Lights flickered inside the tall, transparent head as he worked out his opener. Linda Rosen stood combing her fingers through her mousy hair, lifting it off her damp neck, waiting. On the tapedeck the tape coiled and uncoiled smoothly. All over the room microphones listened breathlessly.

"Excuse me, Miss." With a pleasant grin Randy came over and sidwinded his

elbow a hitch or two along the desktop. “Did that clerk just tell you there are no toilet facilities at all in this motel?”

“No. The clerk said there’s one out back, but that you’re better off holding it until you reach Albuquerque.”

Randy laughed. “She can’t mean that. The bus don’t pass by here til tomorrow. Nobody can wait that long.”

“Don’t bet on it.” In spite of her hard words, Linda glanced helplessly around the lobby. “What’s the point of even *being* in the United States if you can’t have a proper bathroom?” Her eyes filled with tears at this sad thought. Turning abruptly, she walked past Randy, grabbed a magazine off a table, and dropped into an armchair. Without another word she buried her attention in the pages.

Trav Sales watched her with a tigerish glint in his yellow-flecked eyes. Flashing three postcards at me, he flipped three dimes onto the guest register, then leaned close. “I’ll see if I can close the sale with just two,” he whispered.

“Be a sport,” I told him. “Blow thirty cents on the girl.”

“Just watch.”

Working up a serious expression, he took a huge, yellow fountain pen out of his vest pocket, walked into the lounge and sat down at a low table near Linda Rosen. Moving slowly, like as not to frighten wild birds, he unscrewed the cap of the pen and stuck it carefully on the other end. Holding the pen tip upwards, he frowned at it thoughtfully a few seconds, then leaned forward and began to write on card one.

All through this Linda had been trying not to look. Now she couldn’t resist a quick peek. When she saw he was only writing postcards and not death certificates, she relaxed, lay the magazine down open in her lap, and blew her nose.

“Are you a tourist?” she asked.

“No.” Finishing card one with a flourish, he reached for card two without looking up at her. “I’m a traveling salesman.”

She gave a short, rough laugh. “Good grief.” Her dark eyes examined him curiously a moment. “What do you sell, if I might ask?”

“Motel equipment.”

She laughed again. “Great. Then sell some bathrooms to this motel.”

“Maybe I will.”

“I was just kidding. You can’t. There’s not enough water out here.”

“That don’t matter. I rise to a challenge.” He kept his eyes on his slow-scribbling pen.

“Pretty sure of yourself,” she said with half a smirk. “I suppose you could even sell them a swimming pool.”

“Not Olympic size.” Suddenly he looked straight at her with a wide grin. She smiled, blushed, frowned and dropped her gaze back into her magazine.

Randy, I said to myself, you just got one big left foot in her door.

I don't know just which I was rooting for. On one hand I hoped to see that snake fail with Linda, then come wriggling back to me. But what if she did spurn what he was offering? Then that salesman would never get Linda off his mind. He was no man to give up easily in this life. And if she never did let him worm his way inside her, he might grow to respect and love her in time. That is the way men are.

But the idea that most tortured me with jealousy, unlikely as it could be, was: What if Randy takes her and still likes her afterwards?

So I figured the best would be if she did give in, the sooner the better, and leave leftovers for me. Life is no simple thing up here on the moon. Still smiling, he introduced himself. "I'm Randy. Randy Smith."

Linda's jaw opened a little in surprise, but now she knew for sure what he was selling.

We then learned that by coincidence Trav Sales has a daughter Linda, nine, and a son Randolph Jr., ten. This news both reassured and deeply disquieted Linda Rosen who is a bundle of nerves. I think you could tell her that birds lay raw eggs and make her cry.

"Where are your children now?" She asked this like she really had to know.

"At home in Tucumcari with their mother."

"Why aren't you with them?"

He laughed. "I have to make a living."

"You must be gone days at a time. Even weeks."

"Days," he allowed. "My territory stretches from the Colorado River in the west to Amarillo in the east, from Cheyenne in the north to El Paso in the south. Just over four states."

"That's very impressive. Those names ... Amarillo, Cheyenne ... well, I've been living out of this country so long ... they sound like ... poetry. You must be very good at your job to handle all of that."

"I am. I like selling. And to help me cover a territory so large I have another valuable trait."

"Which is?"

He leaned forward and looked intently in her eyes. "I'm fast."

"Oh."

With that Trav Sales was right inside the door. Linda held the magazine to her red face and slid an inch down in her chair. Randy turned his undivided attention to completing the second postcard. 'Fast' don't mean he hurries all the time. Strike is another kind of fast.

In this minute of silence I looked over at the cage of sleeping mice. What was it that drew them to the fangs of death? What kind of business deal were they really seeking in those rattler eyes? What disappears from the world when a mouse dies? Could Randy Smith close a sale with a bandage on his snout? On his cock?

Then Trav Sales made his first error. "Enjoying your trip?" he asked, slapping

down the cards one, two, three on the tabletop like he'd forgotten how many there were. There followed a most terrible pause. When he looked up to question Linda's silence, he saw tears.

Oh shit was written all over his face as he recalled the sad reason that had brought her along this road. "I didn't mean to ask you that," he said. "Let me take it back."

My friend Al once told me he couldn't get it on for a crying girl. He said using tears of true grief in bed was a professional no-no. Such tears will soften the hardest cock and harden the softest heart and no good can come of them. Long experience told me that now a part of Randy Smith was melting away. Maybe the picture postcards had made him forget Linda was traveling to her sister's funeral.

Their conversation broke down completely for a minute. Linda was as ashamed as Randy. "I'm sorry," she said, wiping her eyes. "We're just going to Farmington."

"I know the place well," said Trav Sales briskly. "Northwest of here. Have a good client in Farmington. Bought twenty motel units from me last year, everything from carpeting to walls, completely color co-ordinated pink and brown."

Linda looked terrified. "What motel?" she asked breathlessly, maybe picturing her suicided sister lying between pink sheets in some brown room.

"Uh ... I believe it was the Firebird Motel," said Randy. "Yes, that sure was the name."

Linda relaxed slightly. "Never heard of it."

"You been to Farmington before?"

"No. My sister ... lived there."

"Well, it's a fine town," said Randy, clearing his throat. Then he looked over at me. "Hey, how about a couple glasses of that elixir you folks give out?"

"It's settin right there lookin at you," I called back. "Just help yourselves."

Randy walked to the rear of the lobby and poured two glasses of the juice. He gave one to Linda who drank it right down. Afterwards she looked a little refreshed.

"So you have a son and daughter," she said.

"That's correct."

"He's older?"

"Yes."

"I'm making a kind of unofficial survey," she chuckled wryly. "Can I ask if you were pleased to have the son born first?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Not especially. Not really." He thought another moment. "Only now you mention it, yes, I did want the first to be a boy. So did my wife. But I'm glad we have Linda. She's a little darlin."

"My survey shows most people do want a son first, but will settle for the second being a boy. Having only daughters is a catastrophe." She laughed very unsuccessfully since two tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"You from an all-girl family?"

“Does it show?”

“Only when you laugh.”

They both laughed at that and Linda blew her nose. “It’s the time difference,” she explained. “I left France three days ago and I’ve only slept about six hours since then. I’m completely exhausted and in a ... well, a very difficult situation with my family. There’s been a death.”

“I’m most sorry to hear that,” said Trav Sales sincerely. “Why don’t you lie down and take a little nap. Maybe things’ll look brighter.”

“I keep trying to sleep, but I can’t. Listen, Randy, one really can’t go home again. I was away ten years and now that I’m back my folks still treat me like a little girl. What’s worse, I *react* like one. It’s awful.”

“Don’t let it get you down. ‘No person is a prophet in his own home.’ Jesus Christ said that two thousand years ago.”

“Did he say *why*?”

Randy shrugged. “I guess it’s just human nature. It’s always been like that and always will.”

“Did Christ offer any remedy?”

“You’d have to ask my brother. He’s the family expert on religion. But I will say, goin back to before, I wouldn’t of minded if we’d just had girls. My wife was the one really had her heart set on a boy.” He frowned thoughtfully. “Though I do have to admit, it *is* nice when you can tell folks the firstborn’s a son. Or at least the secondborn.”

Linda looked at him with an amused expression. “I was the second girl. When I was little I’d ask my mother where I came from. She’d tell me she found me in a wastepaper basket.” Linda tried to smile but the corners of her mouth wouldn’t come up. More tears traveled down her cheeks. “I really believed her. I can still remember that childhood image I had of myself in the wastepaper basket with my head and feet sticking out the top. When I’d try to question my mother about how she’d found me, either she’d scream with laughter at my questions or get furious or both.”

“You shouldn’t think about those things,” said Randy. “You only make yourself unhappy.”

She sighed. “I haven’t thought about them in many years, only now, coming back here, for this ... funeral. Mainly it’s the jet lag. There are eight hours difference between French time and local time. What I’d like to know is, how come when the prodigal son returns home the father kills the fatted calf, but when the thrifty daughter returns they try to eat her alive?”

Randy smiled. “You married?”

“Negative.”

“If you were married you’d have a husband to stand up for you and take your side of things.”

“No thanks. I prefer not to depend on anyone but myself. People always let you

down sooner or later.”

He smiled. “You’re a tough customer. I’d be afraid to try anything with you.”

“Good. This is definitely not the time or the place.”

Trav Sales seemed to take a deep breath. Leaning forward suddenly, he put his blond, freckled hand over one of Linda’s and fastened his gaze on her eyes. “Come to my room,” he said.

I guess the same hot wave of desire filled both her and me. I almost gasped aloud. Linda was speechless, in confusion. Her hand jerked back as if stung, eyes looking wildly around the room. The snake had made his first strike, the salesman his first attempt to close the sale. Like the man had promised, he’d done it on a resistance.

“N...no,” said Linda, looking ready to walk right out the door on his arm.

“I hope I didn’t offend you.”

“No, no. I suppose ... I’m flattered. Only as I said before, this isn’t really the time. Or the place. I mean it,” she said earnestly.

“You wouldn’t regret it. Come with me.”

Strike two! She was tottering, but not down. This mouse must have some built-up immunity, I thought.

Her hands shaking, Linda set her empty glass on the table next to Randy’s post-cards, but made no move to get up. “Pretty cards,” she said, without really looking at them.

Randy picked up one and showed it to her. From across the room I could see it was the picture of a giant saguaro cactus which looked like it had a long cock and two balls.

“To whom are you sending that one?” asked Linda dryly.

“To my daughter. She’ll never notice the resemblance.”

“Don’t count on it.”

Grinning, he slipped the card back under the others. “What do you do in France?”

“I live.”

He squinted suspiciously. “You got somethin against the U.S.?”

“No, no, it’s not that,” she said hastily. “There just aren’t so many pressures over there. No *family* pressures. And you have a ready-made identity. I’m *L’americaine*. It’s great.”

“What do you live on, if I might ask?”

“I have a modest income and I make some money doing translations and writing magazine articles. I’m a pilot. Sometimes people pay me to fly them places.”

Randy looked impressed. “I never met a lady pilot before. Weren’t you ever married?”

Linda’s nose wrinkled in disgust. She shook her head. “I’m not the marrying kind.”

“You never wanted children?”

“At times. But I was afraid I might treat them like my folks had treated me. It put me off.”

“You could have treated them nice. No law says you gotta do like your folks did.”

“I’m not so sure. I think there’s a law of nature that says it. In my family, hating daughters probably dates back to some monkey mother who rejected her baby. And that rejected baby rejected her own baby and on down the evolutionary chain to me. I decided to end the problem by not having children of my own.”

“Sounds pretty drastic,” said Randy Smith. “My family don’t see things that way at all. We’re fundamentalists.”

“Then you don’t believe in Darwinian evolution?” asked Linda, looking at him curiously. “Do you believe the Adam and Eve story?”

“I didn’t evolve from any ape, I’ll say that.”

Linda was silent a moment, like she was searching through her whole mind for some polite way to continue the conversation. “Well,” she said after a bit, “maybe it did all trace back to Adam and Eve. Did Eve have any daughters?”

“The Bible says she had two sons, Cain and Abel.”

“That’s right. And Cain killed Abel. You’d think a family with two sons would do better than that. I wonder what went wrong.”

Randy shrugged. “You got me.”

“I read the Bible for the first time a few months ago. It’s a weird book. The worst of all was the Lord.”

“The *Lord*?”

“God. He was always losing his temper and wiping out whole masses of people. Anytime anyone did something that displeased him, he’d punish him and his descendants for generations. Look at what he did to his own children, Adam and Eve. And poor Moses. It’s the most depressing book I ever read.”

“That’s the Old Testament. You should try reading the *New* Testament. It’s full of love and hope.”

“Are you kidding? Look at what happened to Jesus. His own disciples disowned, deserted and betrayed him. He died a horrible death. What’s hopeful about that?”

Randy shrugged. “He was resurrected.”

“So?” She looked at him steadily, waiting for him to continue.

“You know,” he said, “you really should meet my brother. He’s a born-again Christian. He’d give you all the right answers. Or talk to the old guy who runs this place. I hear he operates a religious museum.”

“Wild horses couldn’t drag me. Have you seen it?”

“I had to listen to enough preachin when I was a kid. Anyway, I won’t be here long. Soon as I can get to a phone, I’ll call the auto club, have them come get that dune off my car. Would you hand me that ashtray?”

She picked it up and held it toward him. “Do you smoke?”

“No.” He set the ashtray down with one hand, took her fingers with the other. Kneeling in one smooth swoop he cupped her face against his lips, at the same time pressing her hand onto the hard object inside his pants.

Her eyes were wide open, but she didn’t pull back. Why didn’t that dumb mouse run to save herself? The kiss went on and on, got slippery and rubbery and finally stopped.

Looking half paralyzed, Linda drew back her hand slowly after maybe a press or a pinch to make sure she was being offered genuine factory parts.

“Come to my room.” He stood up, reached in his pants and pulled out his key. “Room number four.”

Linda got to her feet slowly, walked back to the juice bowl and refilled her glass. Looking hot and tortured she came back and sat down in the same chair. Randy sat down again in his same place, looked at his watch. I guessed he was switching into a time’s-runnin-out closing technique, that girl’s army being more demoralized and fearful than he had assumed.

Then suddenly she struck without warning. “What about you?” she demanded. “You’ve been asking all about me, but what about you? Who are you? What’s *your* family like? What’s *your* mother like?”

Randy looked at the floor. “I don’t really know. My mom died when I was two.”

“Oh.” Attack went right down the drain. “I’m awfully sorry. How did she die?”

“Of complications, giving birth to my brother, Ben. We were raised by our pa and this other gal he married.”

“Was she a good mother?”

“I guess us boys were too wild for her. She ran off with some car salesman when I was ten.”

“What about your father?”

“He’s gone now, too.”

“Do you feel he loved you?”

“I guess he did, only it was hard on him when our ma died. He kind of held that against Ben — they never did get close. As for me, I guess he loved me as much as he could. The only reproach I could have was that he never taught us anything. He knew a lot about huntin and fishin and farmin, but he never showed us. Kept it all to himself.”

“How did he die?”

“Got drunk and shot himself with his huntin rifle. He was only thirty-five at the time.”

“Good God. And I complain about *my* childhood.”

“All that happened a long time ago. It’s been over and done with more than thirty years ago. I’ve got my own family now, my own kids.”

“Do you take them hunting and fishing?”

Randy laughed. “Hell no. All they want to do is watch TV. Course, I’m beat

when I get home after a week on the road. I like to take it easy. It's my wife Jane who has the hard life, raisin the kids and keepin house. But it was her choice marryin me. She wasn't pregnant or anything, like Ben's wife. I warned her about my wanderin ways, but she felt she just had to marry me in spite of my faults. So my conscience is clear."

"Clear about messing around with other women?"

"Yeah, I guess." He hung his head, pretending to look ashamed. "You must think I'm an awful sinner."

She looked to see if his face wore a grin, but the grin was hidden so she answered him straight. "People live their own lives. I can't judge anyone else. Only, a single woman has to be careful how she hangs onto her self-respect. And that isn't easy with sex maniacs like you running about loose." She put back her head and laughed deep in her throat.

Trav Sales looked hurt. "I'm not after your self-respect."

"What then? My love?" Again she laughed like out of a deep, dark pit.

"You know what we both want from each other," Randy said, looking from her to his watch and back.

"You'll have a long wait. Like forever."

"Better make up your mind sooner than that. I won't be gettin it up that long. Come back in twenty years, all you'll find is one big remnant sale."

Her voice grew an edge. "Listen, Randy, just believe me, there's no way. Maybe if we'd met at some other time. But we're on our way to a funeral. My sister's. That's why we're all traveling together. So you see what I mean when I say it's not the time or the place."

"I understand," said Randy Snake, the time-bider.

"You should. You've had more experience than I have with death in the family."

"If you don't mind my askin, how did your sister die?"

"Sleeping pills. Randy, your father killed himself too, but he had genuine reasons for unhappiness. Now take my sister. She had everything she'd ever wanted: two healthy if rather uninteresting children, a husband who absolutely adored her (I personally can't stand the effing snot, but we almost never meet so it doesn't matter), plus a lovely home and lots of social life with friends. She made pottery and was successful selling it. So what happened? Why did she do it? I mean, why her instead of me, for instance."

"Didn't she leave a note?"

"She did leave notes — letters — for everyone in the family but me. At least that's what I've been told. And of course no one will let me see their letter or tell me what she said. The one thing that really bothers me, and I may be wrong, but I think she definitely would have left me a letter too. Unless she really despised and hated me, there are things she'd have written, explanations she owed me, a forgiveness...." She broke

off, looking desperate.

“Forgiveness? For what?”

“Never mind. Something that happened long ago when we were kids. I just can’t help feeling that her husband has my letter and won’t give it to me. It would be just *like* that damn bastard.”

Trav Sales shook his tall, blond head. “All this is pretty complicated. My life has been a lot simpler. Whatever’s happened, happened. I just go my way sellin motel equipment. If you keep busy and mind your own business, you don’t get upset by all those weird feelings.”

“I guess you’re right. It’ll be better when I’m back in France, away from my folks. But Randy, my sister was in a coma for *ten days* and nobody even notified me that something had happened until after she was already dead. I feel ... I feel that if I’d been there with her in the hospital that maybe, by some sort of ... of deep ... sisterly love, I could have kept her alive. Maybe if I’d been there she wouldn’t have died. What if she thought I’d abandoned her? What if she was waiting for me to come to her ... and I didn’t.”

Tears poured down her cheeks. Randy moved over beside her and put one arm around her, gentle as a friend. She tried to undo her last lump of Kleenex, but it disintegrated in her fingers. He offered her a square of neatly folded and ironed handkerchief, laundered by a Christian woman waiting back home in Tucumcari.

“Were you and your sister real close?” he asked.

She shook her head, carefully unfolded the handkerchief, and blew her nose. “When we were little, I worshipped her. She was my elder sister and everything about her seemed wonderful to me. Even so, I competed with her constantly in order to get some love, or at least a word of approval, from our parents. But I never succeeded. I was always the evil child and Sandy was always the angel. I always got the blame for everything and she always got the compliments and praise. All the same, I loved her and wanted her to love me.”

“Look, Linda,” said Randy, “even if you and your sister didn’t get along when you were kids, you can’t blame yourself for her death.”

“You don’t think your brother blames himself for your mother’s death? And for your father’s suicide?”

Randy looked blank. “Her death was no fault of Ben’s. He was being born when it happened.”

“Right. But the deaths that his birth *seemed* to cause were so traumatic for him that now he’s been born *again*.”

Randy frowned. “I never thought about it that way. I bet you believe in all that headshrinker stuff.”

Linda looked at him a silent moment, then smiled a flat smile. “Shut up, Randy. It’s hard enough respecting you as it is. Listen, when I heard the news about my sister, I

dropped everything and took the first plane to New York. I met my folks and we flew to Albuquerque to meet that awful rabbi, which is another incomprehensible story as my sister was as atheistic as I am.”

“Maybe she was born again.”

Linda laughed bitterly. “Maybe. More likely it was that awful husband of hers. I believe he does light candles on Friday evenings, and all that nonsense. Anyway, now she’s dead and, thanks to our folks, I wasn’t with her when she needed me.”

Randy frowned. “Aren’t you being a little hard on your family? You know, there’s a case in the newspapers right now — maybe you didn’t get to read about it over in France — of a gal who O.D.’d on pills *seven years ago* and still is alive and in a coma. Funny coincidence, I was drivin down the highway that day, right near here, and saw a bunch of ambulance guys working on her. But I guess she never came to. Newspaper says they’ve got her hooked up to one of those breathing machines. There was a previous case where they pulled the plug on a white gal, but this case is complicated because this gal is a nigra....”

“Please say ‘black.’ ”

“Black. So even though there’s a precedent, all the militant nigras are screamin genocide. Anyhow, they’ve decided to pull the plug on this one too. It’ll happen tomorrow, after her family has prayed in church. Makes it seven years to the day she’s been in a coma.”

“So what does all this have to do with my sister?”

“Only that you shouldn’t be too hard on your folks for not tellin you right away. They were probably thinkin it could go on for years and didn’t want you to come all the way back here for no reason.”

“Listen, my friend,” said Linda, “that may be the reason I wasn’t notified, which I doubt, but now let me tell you why *they* didn’t come here sooner. You see, about a year ago my folks were flying to Miami and they were in the airport in New York. A young man helped my father carry one of his bags, he being too helpless to hire a porter. Later, my father learned that the fellow was a well-known rock singer. I can never remember his name, but he’s very big.

“Well, for the past year they say my father’s been bragging about that incident to one and all. He hates rock, but he’s watched the career of that boy as if it were his own son. The day they heard about my sister’s over-dose, it was a few days before a big TV special in which this kid was singing. My father wouldn’t budge his ass from New York, he was so afraid of missing that show.”

“He could have watched it in Farmington.”

“Sure, but he’d just bought a huge color TV and he had to watch the kid on that. So they never came to New Mexico until now. How’s *that* for parental love?”

“Well,” said Randy, “I hope he enjoyed the show.” Reaching forward, he gave her hand a squeeze. “I can see why you’re sore. But you shouldn’t blame your father. He

probably always did want a son.”

Linda started to say something, then changed her mind. Drawing back her hand, she tucked it under her. “Randy, I’ve come for one reason — to find out if my sister left any last message for me. Maybe I can get some information out of her kids.”

“What do you think she’d of told you?”

He waited for her to reply, but her face was contorted with emotion. Crossing over, he put his arm around her shoulders.

“You’re just a little baby girl.” He put his other arm around her and she turned her face into his neck, sobbing. After a minute she seemed to gain control. Sitting up, she blew her nose.

“When we were kids,” she said, “Sandy and I were playing one day. Running down the stairs after me, she tripped and hit her head. It caused a concussion. Our mother said it was my fault. From then on anything Sandy ever did that wasn’t brilliant — and even before the accident she was no Quiz Kid — was blamed on me. I remember that day so clearly, Sandy lying unconscious in a pool of blood and ma screaming that I’d killed her.”

“Did your sister blame you?”

“We never discussed it.”

“So you think she may have written you a letter letting you off the hook?”

Linda paused, looked at Randy strangely. “I did think it, right up until this very minute. But now that you ask, I suddenly realize it was probably only wishful thinking.” She hid her face in her hands.

“Why don’t you lie down and get some rest?”

“My grandmother’s asleep in our room. I don’t want to disturb her.”

“Then use my room. I won’t bother you. If you want, I’ll just give you the key and you can lock me out.”

“That’s awfully kind of you,” said Linda, “but I think I’ve already used you enough for one day.”

“Tell you what. I’ll go on over to the room. You come along if you feel like it. You don’t have to worry about me tryin anything.” Caressing the side of her head, he kissed her wet cheek. “You know, you remind me of my daughter when she’s feelin blue over some little thing.”

“How nice,” said Linda, a little dryly.

“You want to come with me right now? I hate leavin you like this.”

“You go ahead. If I do come I don’t want my folks seeing us going into your room together. Things are acrimonious enough as it is.”

“Don’t worry about what others think. Come with me now.”

“No.”

Reluctantly he got to his feet. “Room Four.” Chucking her under the chin, he turned and walked across the lobby without looking back. I was sure that no bullfighter

or salesman likes turning his back before he's made the kill, but Randy must have known what he was doing.

Linda watched him leave and stayed sitting another few minutes. Taking deep breaths, she made wide smiles to force her puffy face back to normal. I guess she wasn't decided yet, wouldn't know if she was going to Room Four until her feet took her there.

Standing up, she crossed to the back mirror and started dabbing at her face. Then she saw Randy's handkerchief in her reflected fingers. Quickly she looked at her real hand. Handkerchief was still there. I knew she was thinking she'd have to return it. So she put on her dark glasses and walked out the front door.

Head high, she walked into the blinding sun of the courtyard. In the center she paused, read some door numbers, pivoted toward the four, and stood still a moment looking at it. Then she walked across to the door and knocked. It opened. She went inside and it closed after her.

As far as any of us half-hidden onlookers could tell, Salesman Smith had closed one more deal.

Chapter Nine

To give Marly some respite this busy weekend, I have decided to transcribe all of today's museum tour tapes myself. 12 midnight. —Curator.

After seeing out Rabbi Goldstein, I welcomed into my museum the aviator-cum-Messiah, William Barnes, and his disciple, John John.

"I'm very sorry to hear about your airplane accident," I told them.

"Thanks," said John John, a slim, sandy-haired young man similar in appearance to his friend. "Only it wasn't an accident."

I looked at them in astonishment. "Not an accident?" An insurance scheme? I wondered. Attempted suicide? "I can think of several reasons to crash an airplane," I told them, "but none is worthy of a Messiah."

The two regarded each other questioningly. Then the Messiah looked at me with raised brows. "Gee," he said, "we can only think of one. And it *is*."

Just then the door buzzer rang and I was obliged to answer it. Outside stood two more persons who had come for the tour. They introduced themselves as Reverend Matthews and Mrs. Charles.

"Well," I said, rubbing my hands together, "it isn't every day that my humble museum is visited by representatives of both the priestly and prophetic traditions."

A complete silence greeted these words. Glancing from one to the other, I saw that Reverend Matthews was looking stern and very reserved, while the Messiah and his friend wore expressions of such guilelessness that it was impossible to tell whether they

ever blinked their eyes.

“Fine,” I said briskly. “Then if there are no objections, we can get started right away. Do you all have earphones?”

None of them had.

“Earphones imply control, as in Air Traffic Control,” explained John John. “Bill and I like to fly on waves of air, not airwaves. But we paid the full admission price.” He showed me Marly’s receipt.

“And we,” said the large-boned Mrs. Charles, flashing an identical document, “are completely in tune to the outer cosmos from whence we receive adequate information impulses on bands of light.”

I’m accustomed to persons in this part of the world wishing to avoid any experience that might jiggle the cardcastles of their religious beliefs, but, as my intention was to do precisely that, I felt I had to prevail.

“I don’t know what to say,” I told them, wringing my hands. “Without sound there can be no show. Later I’ll ask questions. If you haven’t worn earphones your replies will be disoriented and bizarre. For an old man’s sake, please put on headsets.”

They all graciously agreed to humor me. I found and dusted off four pairs of foam-padded receptors, watching to see that all were correctly donned. This done, I regarded my guests with satisfaction. “On with the show!” Hurrying to the control room, I threw a switch. Instantly the four were plunged in primal darkness.

“In the beginning, when God created the universe....”

The Creation followed its linear progression of day and night. The world of the ancient Hebrews was non-cyclical. Day followed day, season followed season, like milestones along a road leading from Eden toward some distant Messianic Age, from mankind’s dusty beginnings to men’s dusty deaths.

My four visitors stood quietly as Creation first enfolded, then released them. Because I wished to include the Cain/Abel episode, I decided not to make an intermission between the Creation and Garden scenes. Mrs. Charles screamed when first she saw the serpent, but quickly recovered her *sang-froid*. As the snake approached the naked female, my bosomy guest turned to whisper something to the reverend. Bending toward him, her eyes riveted on the action, she accidentally smeared scarlet lipstick on his left earphone.

This museum is my life’s major work. Here I investigate my most profound conviction: that the Bible contains the mind — both the conscious and the subconscious — of the human race. To psychoanalyze this book — to learn *why* our species wants to self-destruct — is my goal. Unless it learns to understand itself, humanity must become extinct. Its salvation lies not in the stars, not in visits from outer space, not on the Cross; it lies in the hidden depths of the human mind — and in this book.

Hence this museum, my hobby and proving ground. Here I investigate my theories, seeking always to discover the few missing links which still elude me. This is why

I look forward to conversations with visitors, hoping to discover new truths. I feel that on the day I fully understand what occurred between the man and woman in the Garden of Eden, my museum and I will vanish in a blaze of inner light.

As Adam and Eve walked sorrowfully out of Eden with the snake snapping at their heels, I flicked on the lights. Four pairs of eyes seemed to refocus out of a dream. Taking off their receptors, my visitors rotated their heads. With a quick movement of one lacquered fingertip, Mrs. Charles deftly wiped the lipstick from Reverend Matthews' earphone.

Mrs. Charles is a big woman, fully as tall as her companion, and probably fifty years old. Her facial skin lies across her nose, cheeks and chin like the relief map of a harsh and desolate middle age. Oily runners, craters and dusty hills fill the landscape. Powdery hairs, bristling like reeds, surround the red marshland of her lips.

"How did you like my snake?" I asked her.

She faced me squarely. "Ugly and ungodly. Are you Jewish, by any chance?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because that snake was not a piece of Christian interpretation."

"Gee," said the Messiah, "I thought the snake was neat. In fact, the whole production was super. I hope there's more."

"Oh, yes," I promised, attempting to beam appreciatively at my young admirer, but probably only grimacing.

John John, who had torn a leaf off a bush, had crushed it between his fingers, and had sniffed it, now handed it to his Master. "Smell," he suggested.

The Messiah put it to his nose. As he inhaled, an expression of utter revulsion gripped his features. "Yuk!" he exclaimed, dropping it to the ground. "That smells *terrible*."

John John nodded. "I had the same sensation. It's really strange."

"*What's* strange?" I asked with extreme curiosity.

"The power of illusion," said the disciple. "I mean, that leaf is only an illusion, but it has the power to smell bad to both Bill and me and probably to you guys as well." Crushing another leaf, he offered it to us, but we hastily declined.

"Now tell me," I urged them, "what thoughts did you have about the show?"

"Adam's problem," replied the Messiah, who since smelling the leaf had been blowing his nose repeatedly in his handkerchief, "was that he was formed out of earth instead of cloud. If he'd been born with wings instead of shoulderblades the history of the human race would have been different. He wouldn't have had to stay on the ground and till the soil out of which he was made."

"Certainly not," added the reverend with an ironic smirk. "Instead, he could have sowed the wind, and reaped...." With an eloquent opening of his hands he left the rest unsaid.

"The whirlwind!" William Barnes smiled delightedly. "Why not? I can see it

now: Man, reaper of whirlwinds! Isn't that more magnificent than scratching around in the ground after his food? Imagine Adam with wings, doing chandelles and lazy eights, loops and snap rolls over Eden instead of pulling a plough in a field. He *could* have flown, you know. Anybody can. It's only that he was born in a time when man's awareness of his possibilities was nil."

"And today," I interjected, wondering how centuries of dusty little rabbis and gaunt theologians had overlooked this primal error, "how would you suggest we reach that lofty level of awareness? On the wings of love and poesy? On the empennage of the soul?"

"Gee, no," said Barnes. "I'm not speaking metaphorically. I mean that all you have to do to *have* something is to desire it hard enough. For instance, if you want to live forever, you just *can*. Even Jesus, who lived a very long time ago, could imagine eternal life. If every one of us could imagine that afterlife with all his heart and soul and strength, there'd be no more death."

"Many have tried," observed the reverend, "with little success."

"Then try it first with something more simple. Imagine a yellow rose. Imagine it hard enough, know it's there, and you'll *have* a yellow rose. If you *know* that you can fly, even fly through a mountain, you'll do it."

"I thought I'd heard," said the reverend in his deepest, driest tone, "that this morning you tried to do exactly that, but didn't quite make it."

"But we *did*," said John John excitedly. "It was only the plane that didn't get through. Afterwards, we decided to call it a day and celebrate. I have a big blue M to sew on Bill's flight suit tonight. If you happen to see us standing here before you right now, it's because we have to be *somewhere*, but tomorrow we'll fly away."

"In a wrecked plane?" sniffed Mrs. Charles.

"My airplane will be repaired before departure time," smiled the young pilot reassuringly. Pressing his fingertips to his temples he seemed to concentrate a moment. Then he relaxed, again letting the smile suffuse his features. "In fact," he told us, "it's airworthy right now. I tell you, anything is possible if you believe it is."

The Messiah stopped speaking as his disciple, whose face had suddenly taken on a worried, almost frantic expression, tapped him on the shoulder and whispered urgently in his ear. William Barnes looked around vaguely. "Outside, I think."

"Is something the matter?" I asked, realizing at the same time what the problem must be. "You can go out through here." Walking back a few yards, I opened the door slightly to allow as little real air and daylight as possible to flood into our controlled environment. "Across the court you'll see a door with a crescent moon."

John John handed me his earphones and hurried out.

"I tell you," the Messiah was saying as I returned, "when I'm flying at night in my airplane and the sky is a mass of twinkling stars, and down below, spread out across the invisible earth is a sparkling city, or maybe just a vast, dark land with here and there a

few lights shining in farmhouse windows, I sometimes think to myself how so many people down there are leading dreary, desperate lives.

“Who are these people? They are the descendants of Adam and Eve who believe that dirt and toil and sin are unavoidable. They’re the folks who’re completely boxed in and tied up with so-called ‘reality.’

“Meanwhile, away up there, flying along with the night breeze strumming through my airplanes wingstruts, I’m thinking if only they could come flying with me just once, and look down at their lives with the perspective of a flying human. They’d see then how tiny and unimportant and repetitious their houses and barns and lives appear.

“Folks, I’d say to them, step right up. If you’ll just climb into my airplane I’ll show you miracles: the birth and death and resurrection of clouds. I’ll show you a universe of stars expanding, rushing outwards into a universe of eternity. Fly with me, I’d tell them, and you’ll never want to return to your dreary jobs, your mortgages and car payments, your family arguments, screaming children...”

“Screaming children?” interrupted Mrs. Charles indignantly. “You’d expect them to leave their children? Who do you think you are, the Pied Piper?”

William Barnes laughed. “Their children don’t need them. Nor vice versa. That’s only an illusion of our society. Even Jesus knew that the family is a hopeless unit. ‘I came to set sons against their fathers, daughters against their mothers, daughters-in-law against their mothers-in-law; a man’s worst enemies will be the members of his own family,’ He said. Only this wasn’t a prophesy; it was a State of the Union message.”

Mrs. Charles’ mouth became a thin line and her face bristled menacingly. “Jesus Christ *never* said that,” she snapped.

“Matthew 10:35, Luke 12:53.”

Mrs. Charles looked for verification to the reverend. He shrugged, opened his palms and nodded his head helplessly. “Certain newer translations. “

“Then, in that case, poor Jesus was momentarily out of touch with reality,” said Mrs. Charles firmly. “We know He never had a wife and children. And you,” she said, glaring at William Barnes, “you who spend all your time flying around with your friends, if you had to support a wife and children you’d quickly change your tune. Reincarnation in the Eternal Cosmic Soul, yes, but it has to be earned through correct, moral living here on earth.”

The Messiah laughed, his head thrown back so that we saw his long, tan throat. “I have four kids,” he told her.

“Four ... *children*?” gulped Mrs. Charles as if she couldn’t trust her hearing. “Four children of which you yourself are the father?”

“That is affirmative,” replied William Barnes, pilot, Messiah, and parent.

She turned, dazed, toward the reverend. “He has four kids,” she said, as if he might not have grasped this revelation. She turned back toward Barnes, red with indignation. “Then what business do you have risking your life by flying into mountains

when there are *four little children* waiting back home. I'll bet you haven't even told your wife you won't be home tonight."

"They don't expect me. I haven't been home for about two years."

"Two years! You mean one day you just decided to fly away and never went back?"

"You could put it that way," nodded Barnes. "I felt I had other, more important things to do. "

Mrs. Charles seemed to control herself with a great effort. "And what, may I ask, does your wife say to this? How does *she* like being left with four children to look after?"

"Cathy? I really don't know. I suppose she'll have to work it out for herself. If she wants to live with illusions about work and responsibility, then she won't be all that happy. But that has nothing to do with me. It's her own free choice, whatever she decides."

"*Her free choice!*" shouted Mrs. Charles so that Reverend Matthews put his hand on her arm to calm her. "There's no free choice when you've got four kids to look after. What does she use for money while you're off flying around in the twinkling stars?"

"Last year I earned nearly two million dollars through the sales of my latest book. My family gets a large hunk of that, plus our farm and other stuff."

"T...two million dollars?" Completely stunned, Mrs. Charles looked from the Messiah to the reverend and back. "For a *book*? What's your name again?"

"William Barnes."

She frowned. "What was the name of the book?"

"*A Bouquet of Roses.*"

Mrs. Charles struck her forehead with the heel of her hand. "Oh, God. Of course. Now I know who you are. And that book brought you in two million dollars?"

"That is affirmative," smiled William Barnes, pilot, Messiah, and author.

For one awful moment I feared Mrs. Charles would sink to her knees in front of the young man. Her hand came out, hesitated, and somehow resisted touching the sleeve of his flying suit. "Oh, Matt," she said, knitting her fingers together, her eyes fixed radiantly on Barnes, "why couldn't *you* ... ?" She broke off with a sigh.

Reverend Matthews, whose face had been growing darker during the last part of the conversation, now demanded, "Why couldn't I *what*?"

His tone of voice brought alarm to Mrs. Charles' face. "Nothing, nothing," she said hastily.

"What?" he insisted. "Write a book? Earn a million dollars?"

"No, no," she pleaded, still unable to take her eyes off the writer, as if fearful he might de-materialize the moment she looked away.

"Or maybe you want me to leave my wife and children. Well, I seem to recall," continued the reverend, "doing just that a few years ago. *Urged* to do so, in fact, by an

attractive young woman who today seems completely in favor of marital fidelity.”

“But you see for yourself,” cried Mrs. Charles, “as William Barnes says, there can be extenuating circumstances. When, by leaving wife and children, you can attain your full possibilities, as you, my dear, have done, and as he is doing, then flying away becomes a beautiful thing.”

She turned to me. “You see, Curator, Matt *wanted* to leave his former existence. He had to leave. There was this awful young minister making his life a trial.” She turned to the reverend. “You told me you wanted desperately to get away but needed help. You said I was a sign sent you by heaven.”

Now it was the turn of Reverend Matthews to feel awkward. Several years had certainly slipped by since his seductress had represented a palatable alternative to anything at all. “You see, Curator,” he said, “I was the head pastor of our church. However, at that time I was encountering difficulties....”

“The congregation was down to almost zero,” whispered Mrs. Charles loudly.

“The problem,” pursued Reverend Matthews, “is that over the recent past most people have come to want ready-made answers. They want a minister who has been born again in Christ, who they believe will help them attain a sudden, complete and irreversible spiritual awakening. They want to see a rock of faith standing before them in the pulpit. And along with this they want a lot of razamatazz, fireworks and special effects. What they do *not* want is a man who thinks, ponders, studies, at times even struggles with his beliefs, who sometimes sits up through the night reading and praying and seeking for light.”

Reverend Matthews ran his hand through his thick, greying hair. “So the powers that be decided to hire a second minister. They chose a bearded young fellow who had already begun to make a name for himself on television and through writing religiously oriented paperback tracts on motorcycling, rock stars, the media and Zen, but who still wanted a showplace in the pulpit of a real church. This fellow sold himself to them by promising to demonstrate that churches can be filled.”

“You didn’t blame them,” cautioned Mrs. Charles.

“No, I didn’t. How could I? Churches *should* be full; even curiosity-seekers might stay to become worshippers. And why, I asked myself, should anyone want a minister who himself is struggling with the eternal questions? Wouldn’t it be better to give them a man who’s seen the light, who’s been reborn in the absolute conviction that Christ died to save mankind and who has himself made that leap of utter faith into the lap of salvation, there to be purged of all sin, with a one-way ticket to heaven gripped in his righteous fist?”

Reverend Matthews brought his rising voice back under control, continuing softly, “The young minister they hired was brilliantly knowledgeable, could read not only Greek but Hebrew, and easily parried the most difficult theological questions thrust at him by believers and agnostics both. He was extremely energetic, one might say ‘hyper-

active,' jogged fifteen miles every morning and spent his evenings consorting with all sorts of individuals.

"He told me one day that he had struggled for years to become rich and famous, but without any marked success. Then, by chance, he'd met a worldly and popular rabbi who took him under his wing, so to speak, showed him how to commercialize his talents, and introduced him to a theatrical agent who got him started in television. I saw in the newspapers only the other day that he has resigned from his pulpit in my former church and has taken up lecturing for high fees at colleges. and universities throughout the country."

"Then you yourself are not a practicing minister at this time?" I asked.

"Not for five years. I'm into cosmic consciousness, reincarnation, bent spoons, ESP, UFO's and all that ... bull."

"But golly," exclaimed William Barnes, "don't you see that you've tapped into the real thing? The only reality is in illusion. You don't have to believe in Christ to be saved. You have to understand your own limitless possibilities. You're a free man, free to do anything you want."

"That's exactly what I told him five years ago," agreed Mrs. Charles. "Isn't that what I said? You believed it well enough for five years, but now something has apparently changed your mind."

"Five years," mused the reverend., "Five years of cheating old and young folk out of their life savings."

"Cheating?" cried the woman. "Just look how happy you've made them. You've given them something wonderful to believe in. You've taken away their fear of death, given them a promise of endless life. And anyway, who can prove that those lives *aren't* waiting out there for them? Before they met you they were miserable. Nobody cared about them. All they had to look forward to was loneliness and death, with only a vague promise of heaven."

Suddenly she paused as an idea seemed to come to her. Composing her features in a coy and pleasant smile, she turned toward William Barnes. "By the way," she said, "have you ever thought of investing in oil?"

The Messiah laughed delightedly. "I don't need to," he told her. "My airplane flies without oil or gasoline."

"Good God," breathed Mrs. Charles, clasping her hands. "That is surely the true sign of Messiahdom."

At this, I decided it was time to return to the business at hand or we would never get to the next scene. "Well," I said, "why don't we move on to Cain and Abel?"

"But shouldn't we wait for that terribly nice young man to return from the little boys' room?" asked Mrs. Charles.

"He may be a while. Quite a while, in fact."

"What kind of toilets do you have here anyway, she asked. "Chemical?"

“Quicklime,” I replied as pleasantly as possible.

“I see.” She shivered involuntarily.

“He’ll be back,” said the Messiah confidently. “In the meantime, let’s move on to the next act. I’m sure John John would have wanted it that way.”

Returning to the control room I flicked a switch, plunging all of us back into darkness. When light and action returned, the Garden of Eden was gone and in its place we saw stretching to the horizon a vast and rugged landscape.

While most of the land was dry and uncultivated, here and there lay fields shining with the golden stubble of harvested grain. In the near distance, a flock of sheep and goats grazed on wild herbs. A young man was walking away from the herd carrying a struggling lamb in his arms. Not hearing bleating reminded me to switch on the sound.

“After leaving the Garden of Eden, Adam had intercourse with his wife and she became pregnant. She bore a son whom she named Cain and a second son, Abel. Cain was a farmer, Abel a shepherd. Each brought an offering to the Lord. Cain gave some of his harvest; Abel brought a first-born lamb, killed it, and gave its choicest parts as an offering.”

My three visitors watched enrapt as the story unfolded before their eyes. The special effects of the lamb sacrifice were particularly well worked out (if I say so myself). To the ancient Hebrews, blood was believed to be life itself, therefore it was never handled casually, never eaten. In my production I had tried to show the reverence held since earliest times for the blood of slaughtered animals and the vital force it represented.

While Abel was offering his animal sacrifice, his elder brother was selecting the choicest parts of his harvest to present to the Lord. Both brothers were handsome young men, swarthy from the sun, strong from their labors. Both were proud to lay their gifts before their Lord.

“The Lord was pleased with Abel’s offering of the lamb, but he rejected Cain and his offering of produce from the fields. Cain became furious and scowled in anger.

“‘Why are you so angry?’ asked the Lord. ‘If you had done the right thing, you would be smiling. Now sin is crouching at your door. It wants to rule you but you must not let it.’

“Cain gave no reply. He was too angry. When they were out in the fields, Cain slew his brother.

“But the Lord had seen this and asked Cain, ‘Where is your brother?’

“Cain replied, ‘I don’t know. Am I my brother’s keeper?’

“Then the Lord said, ‘Why have you done this terrible deed? Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground like a voice calling for revenge. The ground has soaked up your brother’s blood and will no longer produce crops for you. Your curse is to be a homeless wanderer on the earth.’

“And Cain said, ‘This punishment is too harsh. You are driving me off the land

and away from your presence. I will be a homeless wanderer and anyone who finds me will kill me.’

“ ‘No,’ answered the Lord, ‘If anyone kills you, seven lives will be taken in revenge.’ So saying, the Lord gave a sign to Cain pledging that if anyone killed him he would exact a sevenfold vengeance. Thus reassured, Cain left the Lord’s presence and went to dwell in a land called ‘Wandering,’ which lies east of Eden.”

I switched off the sound and action and rejoined my guests. “So, what do you think of the Cain and Abel sequence? With humble apologies,” I smiled, bowing toward William Barnes, “at having omitted chandelles and barrel rolls. Still, the story contains a modest amount of excitement: the first murder of the first brother, committed by the firstborn son of the first man and woman.”

Mrs. Charles shook her pompadoured head and her large bosom heaved with sighs. “When you look at it close up,” she said, “the Bible is a strange book. I have Fundamentalist friends and I guess it all makes sense to them, but I’d hate to try and figure it out by myself.” She turned toward her companion. “What did you think of that scene, Rev’rend?”

The long, grey hairs of Reverend Matthews’ eyebrows twisted together as he reflected. He seemed so disturbed that I was beginning to wonder whether the car accident he’d suffered that morning had unlocked some terrible forces that now were struggling within him.

“I’ve been away from the Good Book so long, seeing this was like ... returning home. I felt I could just walk across that field to that grazing flock and say hello to those boys like they were my own brothers. It awakened so many memories, so many questions...”

“Did it answer any?”

“It did for me,” said Mrs. Charles. “I was waiting to see how the Lord would put the mark on Cain, and I was relieved when he didn’t. In the movie version God goes splat on Cain’s forehead. Just looking at that actor with splat on him made you want to hit him.”

“The magnificent thing was that Cain suffered no remorse for murdering his brother,” smiled William Barnes. “Did anyone notice that?”

“Sometimes a man’s remorse comes later,” said the reverend, looking no one in the eye.

Hoping to prevent the conversation from going in all directions, I quickly said, “Reverend, there are a number of questions usually raised by this story. Could you remind us of a few?”

He considered this a moment. “The Cain/Abel questions I used to get were: Where did Cain’s wife come from? Who, if they were the firstborn children of Adam and Eve, did Cain fear might kill him when the Lord banished him from his presence?”

“Anything of a more interesting nature?”

He shrugged. "It's also been asked why the Lord accepted Abel's offering and rejected Cain's." Despite his nonchalant air, as he said this the man's voice cracked slightly. Pursing his lips, he rubbed his knuckles across them two or three times.

"Any ideas on the subject?"

"Oh, some say that Cain *knew* he was doing wrong, that by offering produce from his fields he was trying to regain paradise simply through his labors. They say that this can't be done, that the only way to regain what Adam lost, through his disobedience, is by washing sin away in blood, the blood of the sacrificial lamb, the blood of Christ. It's not something you're supposed to understand; it's a matter of mystery and faith."

I noticed that as the reverend spoke, his forehead had broken out in beads of sweat and his eyes seemed lost in deep pools of purple shadow. Indeed, he was looking so traumatized by these reflections that I hesitated to question him further. But since of the three guests he undoubtedly had the greatest knowledge of the subject at hand, I urged him to continue. "Any other ideas why Cain was rejected and Abel's offering was accepted?"

Reverend Matthews sighed, then continued easily, as if it were a matter on which he'd spent much time reflecting, "Some say it was a demonstration of the Lord's absolute and arbitrary authority over his children. It has also been pointed out that Cain and Abel represent two different types of communities, the agricultural and the pastoral. When the Lord rejected Cain's sacrifice, thus imperiling prospects for the agricultural community, Cain slew his brother in a ritual act in order to fertilize the soil by drenching it with sacrificial blood. But the Lord proclaimed the soil was henceforth sterile and drove Cain away."

"Thank you, reverend," I said. "Now, for just one moment may I suggest we look at this story from a ... let us say ... a non-religious angle? In this way the Lord would simply be a father and Cain and Abel his two sons. Would this approach offend anyone?"

Everyone shook their heads with more or less reserve.

"Then what was the author who wrote it unconsciously trying to say? Stripped of religious overtones and symbols it's the story of a father who, fearing the eventuality of his sons growing up and replacing him, finds a 'socially acceptable' way to rid himself of both of them. Mind, I use the words 'socially acceptable' not to describe the relatively unpeopled setting in which the story takes place, but the society existing thousands of years ago when it was written."

"But how did Cain and Abel threaten their father?" objected Mrs. Charles. "They seemed like good boys to me, trying to do what they were told. I never did understand why the Lord rejected Cain's offering."

"Cain was a double threat to his father," I explained. "Not only was he the elder son, and therefore closer in line of succession, but, being a farmer, he represented the new, more modern way of life which was replacing the old, nomadic sheep-herding ways

of the fathers. By making his offering to the Lord in an untraditional way — a gift from the fields rather than an animal sacrifice — Cain was challenging the old Order. His father, feeling deeply threatened, couldn't accept it."

Noticing that Reverend Matthews and the others were following my argument with attention, I was encouraged to continue.

"Please note that the omniscient, all-knowing and powerful Lord *allowed* Cain to slay his brother. Then, with that son out of the way, and no blood on his own hands, the father banishes Cain, thus getting rid of both his sons. Because these shabby wish fulfillments were cloaked in Godly righteousness, the story has easily passed thousands of years of scrutiny by rabbis, priests and the lay public.

"Indeed, the Cain/Abel story is basically the same as that of Adam and Eve. There, too, the children challenge the authority of their father, are symbolically killed and then banished. The authors of the Bible compulsively repeat this basic theme."

"Jacob and Esau," nodded Reverend Matthews.

"And in the New Testament, the return of the prodigal son. For no apparent reason the father deals unevenhandedly with his sons, causing dissension between them. While some pious explanation is made by Luke, in fact, religious and mythic interpretations have always sought to disguise, to hide, basic human conflicts rather than illuminate them. A story, after all, arises from the author's unconscious, clothed in symbolism like a dream. That's why one must go deeper than the story, deeper than pious rationalizing, to understand what the author is *unconsciously* trying to express."

"But how deep can you go?" sniffed Mrs. Charles. "There has to be an end somewhere."

"One can go back as far as early infancy, even prehistory. Since earliest times, the earth has been a mother-symbol. Examine the Cain/Abel story from that angle. Cain, the farmer son, has ploughed and harvested his mother earth. Proudly he offers part of this harvest to the father who naturally refuses to accept it.

"But," I continued, "the most fascinating father/son conflict of all binds the Old and New Testaments together in one mind-boggling unity."

"You...." Reverend Matthews, starting to interrupt, let curiosity silence him.

"The Old Testament," I hastened to explain, "describes the Hebrew God as a powerful, often jealous and arbitrary *father* type. The *New* Testament, relating the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, describes the triumph of the *son*. No wonder Christianity, perceived as the religion of the son, became so popular around the world, leaving the patriarchal Hebrew religion something of a fossil. While Judaism endures because it satisfies certain needs, it's no longer really vital or dynamic. The son, Christ, has replaced the father."

"And now has a son of his own," added William Barnes, with an unblinking smile.

We all looked thoughtfully his way, but no one spoke. After this brief pause, I continued, "One might even explain the ages-long hostility between Jew and Gentile in

terms of the father-son conflict.”

Reverend Matthews was frowning. “I can’t accept your theory,” he said flatly. “If Adam and Eve and the Lord — if all men — are acting out some sort of unconscious infant drama, then there can be no such thing as free will. What you’re saying is that there’s no accountability for our actions, for sin, even for murder. You’re saying that no man need feel guilty, since he acts out of motives he can neither understand nor control.” The reverend looked around distractedly. “Following your argument to its logical conclusion,” he said, “we find the very thing our Messiah friend here teaches — that sin itself is an illusion.”

Before I could deny this, Reverend Matthews turned toward William Barnes. “And if one follows *your* philosophy to its logical conclusion....” He broke off, shuddering at what he saw.

“You’re right,” smiled Barnes. “In fact, I’ve already done it. But golly, I don’t feel bad about it at all. I tell you, guilt and sin *are* illusions, inventions of the ancient Hebrews. Cain *couldn’t* have killed Abel, because it’s impossible to kill someone. That’s the reason God allows what *appear* to be murders, what *appear* to be suffering of innocents in this life. Don’t you see? Destroying a human body only liberates its soul from earthly miseries and recycles it back into the cosmos. I’ve done this very thing myself.”

“My dear boy,” chuckled Mrs. Charles. “You talk as if you’ve actually killed someone.”

The Messiah, his face radiant, nodded. “Last night. My father. I shot him through the heart.”

Chapter Ten

It’s mid-afternoon, blazing in the sun, cool in the shade. The snowbirds and other guests are resting. Linda Rosen is still in Room Four with Trav Sales. Only Messiah is up and about, looking, searching. For what or whom? He doesn’t preach the world is coming to an end. His message is much worse: He says it never will.

I once read in a magazine a letter written by some man saying the elephants will soon become extinct, that countries are still testing nuclear bombs, our oceans are dying, and woodcutters are chopping up the lungs of our earth. He said that all the same, he had some Good News:

He said that he could see a day very far hence, after the elephants, after the fallout and asphyxiation. On that day, on the floor of some lead-infested sea, some tiny protein molecule would still survive. Thus, ten million years later, more elephants, jungles and Shakespeares. (And woodcutters and physicists? He didn’t say.)

Snowbirds are old folks with white hair, pensions, and a chill in their bones.

Snowbirds live in the north and migrate south in the winter. They become seasonal visitors, like robins, and truly believe they will be back every poet's springtime.

I read in some very old, translated book — Cicero? — that a young person is like an unripe fruit on a tree. It doesn't want to fall from the branch; it must be torn off. But an old person, he wrote, is like a ripe fruit that drops easily by itself from the tree. Cicero never met the snowbirds.

Today both Rabbi Goldstein and Trav Sales have mentioned an O.D.'d black girl lying in a coma now for seven years. Tomorrow, Sunday, after church, they will pull her respirator plug, setting the raft of her life adrift on some vast and unexplored sea.

When they spoke of her a chill passed through me and I asked myself why. Do I know her? It's strange, but I feel some certain kinship with that girl, as if she is a part of me, flesh of my flesh, and our two destinies are joined in some urgent and mysterious way.

Eternity is on my mind today. I like the thought of just one dusty death, though my years have not yet ripened on the tree. I would not want to be a restless ghost, called upon by spiritualists to speak and tap. Unborn again, no one would ever find me, nor stick me back in any skin: black, white, yallah, feathered or furred. The freest we can become is earth or dust, and that's no piece of cake either.

Feeling restless, I visited the dune, learned it has escaped a place in Colorado called Great Sand Dunes National Monument. While heading south it was blown off course by unfavorable winds. Dune says millions of tons of dunes are trapped up there by high mountains. I asked it where it thought it was going and it said the sea.

Chapter Eleven

Sunday morning, 1:30 p.m. Tour #3. —Curator.

Mid-afternoon on Saturday, I was surprised by a knock on my workshop door. I opened it to find Marly standing outside, looking worried. This is only the third time in seven years that she has visited my workshop, so I knew something must be bothering her.

I invited her inside, apologizing that I could not give her my complete attention. In fact, I was having trouble with Cain's and Abel's feet. The stubble of the fields has been seriously damaging their soles. The protective jell I had applied a few weeks earlier, and dried under a heat lamp, had made the feet so brittle that some of the toes had chipped off. Now I was experimenting with a drying agent introduced into the jell itself, and was hopeful that this would solve the problem.

She entered the cold workshop cautiously. It is a daunting place, I must admit. It is here that I fashion my Bible characters, as well as the flora and fauna of the garden.

The walls are covered with parts of “human” and animal anatomy in various stages of completion. Plastic foam partially covers limbs formed out of wire frames; electrical wires of many colors dangle like nerves and veins from wrists, heads and torsos. Prefabricated skeletons complete the unpleasant impression of a charnel house.

“I can see why you keep it cold in here,” she shivered.

I had to smile. “Yes, sometimes I myself believe it is real flesh.”

“And what do you believe when you look at *me*? Would *my* flesh rot in a warm room?”

I could tell that her mind was on very basic fears. Like a little girl, Marly was suddenly wanting to know what she was made of, where she had come from, and why she is here. I had been dreading such a “father/daughter” discussion for some time, and was only surprised it hadn’t come earlier. Now I realized she had been dreading it as much as I, and had only been driven to it by recent events.

What could I tell her? I’ll admit I never thought she’d stay this long at Eden Motel. No one ever has. The day I discovered her lying comatose by the roadside, her brain had already suffered massive damage from the effects of barbiturates. One must credit her seven-year survival on modern medical techniques which can support life almost indefinitely.

“It seems to me,” she said then, “that everyone that comes to our motel has been in some sort of terrible accident. Even I came here under peculiar circumstances.”

Laughing, I reminded her of the “accident of birth” that everyone must experience. I pointed out that all of life takes place between the accidents of birth and death — that Eden Motel is but a small part of that, a way station if you will. But she was not amused or put off.

“And there’s that black girl on the respirator,” she continued. “What will happen when they pull her plug?”

Pushing Cain aside to make room on the table for his brother, I almost upset the jell pot. Her question irritated me and I replied testily, “Either she’ll die or she’ll go on breathing without the support system. What happens in hospitals is completely out of my hands.”

“I mean, what will happen to *me*?”

I ran my palm over Abel’s soles and leaned down to examine the stubble damage. Worse than that was the color of portions of his “skin.” Incredible as it may seem, I have been unable to remove the bloodstains, even with strong soap, and may be obliged to reupholster him completely out of some other material. “You sound personally concerned,” I replied, after a moment.

“Of course, I’m concerned,” she exclaimed. “Something’s going on here. So many of our guests seem to ... seem to ... disappear, for no apparent reason. “

I frowned. “I have no control over that. The call of nature is heard by everyone sooner or later. I’m not omnipotent, after all. I’m just a curator, a custodian, and a bit of

an inventor.”

“Yet for other guests there seems to be hope. That bus to Albuquerque....”

I had to laugh. “Hope? Have you ever *been* to Albuquerque?”

“I drove through once.” Then she had to admit, “I see what you mean. But it’s better than the other — it’s better than *nothing*. I was wondering,” she paused, then continued more boldly, “if I left here ... if I had to leave here for any reason ... could I take the bus?”

“How you dramatize things! Of course you may do whatever you feel like doing. The choice is yours. Listen, child, you do well to question things. That’s what I do constantly. Only please don’t bother me now. Cain and Abel must be dry for the next show or else the chaff will cling in bundles to their feet. Tomorrow, Sunday, I promise you we’ll talk.”

“Tomorrow may be too late. They’re pulling the plug right after church.”

“Well, tonight then. After all, I don’t want you having the impression that I can — or would even wish to — interfere in any way with the fate of individuals. My concern is quite different.”

“Being?”

“Being the salvation of mankind, no less. In my research I am an observer, not a meddler. Now tell me, have you been doing your part of the tapes?”

“More than you think,” Marly replied. “You’ll have a thick volume from this weekend.”

“Good. And now I’d like you to do me another favor. I’d like you to send me more museum visitors. Do you have any possibilities?”

She told me there were four, the Rosens, who might be willing.

“Do you think you could manage that?” I asked. She told me she would give them an offer they couldn’t refuse. Her eyes twinkled. Sometimes I think that in spite of my efforts with her, Marly has not lost any of the cynicism she had in such quantity when she first arrived here.

It was late afternoon when the sound of the museum buzzer brought me to the door. Standing before me were the four members of the Rosen family. The daughter, whom I’d seen earlier in Room Four, stood behind the others. This girl, Linda, a tall and disintegrating personality, looked as if she’d been dragged there by wild horses.

The others appeared to be in various stages and degrees of self-control. The grandmother, a tiny Russian Jewess, stood in front. Both she and her daughter wore square, medium-heeled shoes, stockings and dresses, while Linda was dressed in blue jeans and tennis shoes. Mr. Rosen wore tan trousers and a gaudy Hawaiian shirt out of which hung age-spotted arms. His face had the calm, contented and slightly abstracted expression of someone sedated with tranquilizers.

I was impressed with Marly's ability to bring all these persons here together. Welcoming them inside, I observed pleasantly that it wasn't every day I had three generations represented under my roof at one time.

"You wouldn't today either," Mrs. Rosen assured me, "if it wasn't for this. " She handed me a piece of paper which I saw was a receipt written out by Marly for the sum of two dollars. On the top of the receipt was typed: *4 for the price of 1 (smile)*.

"Before we get started," said Mrs. Rosen, twisting her headset absently in her hands, much to my distress, and seating herself on one of the chairs I'd provided them, "I think you ought to get one thing straight so that you're not disappointed by our reactions to the show."

"She's speaking for herself," interjected Linda Rosen, her voice sounding as if she had a headcold. Looking at her more closely, I noticed her eyes were red and puffy.

"I'm speaking for myself, your father, and Bubby. If you have anything to say, then say it when I'm finished." Mrs. Rosen turned back to me. "You see, Curator, we're Jews, but we don't believe in all the religious craperoo. We believe that there is no god, no supernatural power, directing our lives, and that we evolved from primitive forms, like Darwin said. We believe that when we're dead we're dead and that the earth and universe were created according to that recent article in *Time* magazine, in case you saw it. We've come to visit your museum because there really isn't anything else to do here except sit in those lousy rooms. You have no TV?"

"No, no TV," I affirmed, my head suddenly shaking uncontrollably with a nervous tic it sometimes acquires in times of stress. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not," sniffed Linda Rosen.

"I'll bet you're not," observed the mother archly.

"Is there anything *you* wish to say before we begin?" I asked Linda. "Anything that differs from what your mother just told me?"

"Let's just get on with it," said the girl with an exhausted sigh. "I'm sorry if I sound rude, but I got back from Europe a day or two ago. I'd finally managed to fall asleep when that clerk woke me up and dragged me over here. For me, it's the middle of the night, French time."

"Yes, right away. I just want to mention that the presentation you're about to see is not particularly oriented toward the devout. Comparatively few persons today believe that the books of Moses were direct revelation by the Lord. In fact, to take these stories literally or religiously is to overlook their most interesting and informative aspects."

"Why don't we just get started," smiled Mr. Rosen, trying to project an attitude of helpless boredom while appearing marginally polite at the same time.

Without another word I went to my control booth and threw the switches. Total darkness flowed over them. I pressed a button and a strong, black wind blew over them. All about them the primal sea surged and broke invisible waves.

"In the beginning, when God created the universe, the earth was formless and

desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness, and an awesome wind, the power of God, was moving over the water...”

This sea, this primal sea from which we all have come, rolled with the majestic cadence of the priestly words. The litany of Creation, of the dark surging forces, of the dark cosmic womb that preceded all else, engulfed my four visitors.

“And God placed the lights in the sky to shine on the earth, to rule over the day and the night and to separate light from darkness...”

Though they couldn’t yet see, I could see them. The first dawn of history illuminated Linda Rosen’s face and found it wet with tears. Sniffles came from the mother and granny and there was much rummaging in handbags for tissues. Mr. Rosen cleared his throat, the phlegm moving with a deep rumble. Accustomed as I am to such noisy distractions, I find them all the same regrettable.

“And he put the man he had formed into a beautiful garden, the Garden of Eden ... And the Lord said to the man, ‘You may not eat the fruit of that tree; if you do, you will die.’ And the Lord God made the man fall into a deep sleep ... took out one of the man’s ribs ... formed a woman out of the rib and brought her to him...”

“I can see!” cried four voices at once as the lush, green garden appeared around them. Having stupidly forgotten to warn them about the snake, I threw the switches, shutting down the audio and action. Instantly there were cries of disappointment.

“How have you enjoyed it so far?” I asked, rejoining them.

“Beautiful, wonderful, fascinating.” They had risen to their feet to gaze at the beauty on all sides.

“It should be on Broadway,” said Mrs. Rosen. “It was that good.”

“And you, Miss Rosen?”

The young woman was visibly impressed. “Great.” Her eyes searched the garden, “Isn’t there more?”

“Now comes the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden,” I told them, “popularly known as the Fall of Man. I came to be with you just now because I didn’t want the ladies to take fright when they saw the snake.”

“Do you mean *that* snake?” asked Mrs. Rosen.

I turned to see where she was pointing and jumped to find the serpent standing at my shoulder, it having come up behind me while I was talking.

“Is it real?” asked Mr. Rosen, swaying backwards, but bravely holding his ground.

“In a way, but...” I broke off to watch the granny. She had focused on the serpent and, far from appearing frightened, had begun to laugh. Once started she couldn’t stop, but laughed and laughed, bending over and dabbing at her eyes with tissues.

“Bubby, control yourself,” said Linda, patting her lightly on the back. “She’s got the giggles,” she explained. “It’s that weird purple snake.”

The old lady tried to regain her self-control. “It looks like...” But she couldn’t continue, so wracked was she with mirth. Her face, when she raised it, was a fist of

wrinkles. Tears of laughter streamed from her knotted eyes. “It looks like.... like....” Unable to find the word, she jabbed one finger in the direction of her son-in-law’s trousers, then toward mine.

“She thinks it looks like a cock,” explained Linda. “Bubby, pull yourself together. Have more respect.” But by now she too had started shaking with laughter. “Bubby’s so funny,” she gasped apologetically, “and it really does look like one.” Her giggles turned into a scream of uncontrollable mirth.

“Now stop it, both of you,” ordered Mrs. Rosen. “You’re acting like a pair of idiots.” A chuckle escaped her.

Mr. Rosen rumbled the gob of phlegm in his throat. Completely at a loss for words, he and I avoided each other’s eyes. Fortunately, at this moment, I saw the serpent was approaching the naked woman who stood a short distance away nibbling a peach.

“Headsets,” I cried. “Places. On with the show!” And with no more ado I retreated to my control room and set the machinery in motion.

The serpent, moving sensuously, approached the woman. Asking his historic question, he received her immortal reply. Couched in her words was a terrible ambivalence of feelings: desire for pleasure, yet fear of the father’s taboo. Reassuring her fears, the snake stimulated her desire.

As the story of man’s primal conflict unfolded, my four visitors watched transfixed. What thoughts and emotions did they experience as the woman tasted the fruit, then handed some to the man? Breathlessly they watched as the young couple, having shared the forbidden meal, covered themselves with fig leaves and hid in the bushes from their father.

Now came the Lord. Seething inwardly at this disobedience, yet pretending not to have seen, he asked his son about the forbidden fruit.

“The woman that you put here with me gave me the fruit and I ate it.”

The Lord asked her why she’d done such a thing.

“The serpent beguiled me.”

Without further ado the father meted out punishment for them all.

As the scene ended, I closed down the sound and light and rejoined the group in the garden. “Well, how did you like Act II?”

Removing her earphones, Mrs. Rosen patted her hair. I personally didn’t like it as much as Act I,” she said. “It didn’t — how do you say? — ‘grab’ me. In any case, the girl was clearly the trouble-maker of the family.” She glanced at her daughter. “And Eve was certainly in cahoots with the snake.”

“Well, is that it?” asked Mr. Rosen, lifting himself from his chair and starting to look around for the exit.

“There’s still one more act,” I told him.

“Oh, okay,” he said agreeably, sinking back again. “I didn’t know.”

I couldn’t help noting that during the past few minutes Linda Rosen’s face had

become quite dark with suppressed emotion. But as she started to speak, she was interrupted by her grandmother.

“I liked the snake best,” said the crone. “He was very convincing. The two kids were a little wishy-washy, but the snake...” She reflected a moment, smiling inwardly.

“A great production,” affirmed Mr. Rosen. “I don’t know how you did it. You should be working in Hollywood instead of going broke out here. “

I thanked them for their praise, feeling a certain numb anticipation, like a man standing in the calm eye of a cyclone. Then Hurricane Linda took the floor.

“Doesn’t *one* of you realize what you just saw?” Her eyes flashed from one member of her family to the other. “Didn’t even *one* of you get the message?”

“Yes,” nodded Mrs. Rosen. “I, for one, got it. Only I didn’t want to mention it because I knew you’d start climbing the walls. But I got it.”

“Then what was it?” demanded her daughter. “According to you.”

“According to me, the story was about how a daughter feels she can do whatever she damn pleases with no consideration for anyone else. Eve was a mean, greedy, selfish girl with no gratitude at all for what her father had given her. Such ungratefulness...”

“Dear,” said Mr. Rosen, “don’t get so excited. Linda knows what the story was about.”

“She certainly does,” said Linda, “and now she’ll tell you so you’ll know too.”

Mrs. Rosen sighed. “So get it over with.”

“I saw a woman in the middle of a terrible and very lonely situation. Not just any woman, but all women. Not just me, but you too.” She paused meaningfully.

“Okay,” said her mother. “Is that it?”

“So what happens to her? First the snake — that God-her-father personally created and put there — seduces her. Then mealy-mouthed Adam, her husband, who had just as much free will as Eve and who could have refused the fruit, blames *her* for making him eat it.” In her anger she turned on me. “A beautiful, inspirational story, isn’t it?” she demanded. “You can tell it was written by men.”

I held up both hands and was about to reply in my defense, when Mrs. Rosen interrupted. “Although this story is nothing but religious craperoo,” she enunciated with terrible clarity, “the interpretation my daughter has put on it shows to what depths she’ll go to attack her father and me.” She turned toward Linda. “And I happen to know in whose room you spent most of this afternoon. I can also guess what that pick-up boyfriend of yours must think of you.” Suddenly she was shouting. “You were a troublemaker since before you were born, and now you’re old and you’re still out to make trouble.”

Before the enraged daughter could reply, I regained my control booth and flicked the main light switch off and on to distract their attention away from each other. “Earphones,” I shouted. “Seats. Act III, Cain and Abel.” Then, before anyone could protest or try to run out, I threw the special circuit breaker and drenched them all in total night.

For a full two minutes I let them sit in isolating darkness, giving a chance for all our nerves to settle. Occasional recriminations still hissed back and forth between them like arrows in the night, but they were whispered, out of respect for the darkness and the theatre-like situation.

Thank goodness, I thought, that sober, predictable men wrote the Bible, instead of irrational females.

After leaving the Garden of Eden, Adam had intercourse with his wife and she became pregnant. She bore a son which she named Cain and a second son, Abel.

The Rosens watched with intense concentration the unfolding of the tragic story of the two brothers and their offerings to the Lord. Linda Rosen, tissueless, caught isolated tears on the backs of her knuckles, then sucked them away with her lips.

Cain took his brother aside and slew him.

Four pairs of eyes took in this scene as if riveted on it. How difficult and thankless it is to be a Jew, I thought, chosen by some strange destiny to create, preserve, and transmit down the centuries the hailed and hated conscience of our civilization.

As Cain left the presence of the Lord, and went off to the land of Wandering, I switched off the machine and rejoined my guests. There was no need to ask what they'd thought of the production.

"Beautiful." Mr. Rosen appeared deeply moved. "Some day I'll have to sit down and read the whole book. I've just never had the time or inclination. I really hate that craperoo. It's one of those things."

"I don't think there was anything at all beautiful in what we just saw," said Mrs. Rosen firmly.

Her husband registered mild surprise, then nodded, shrugging. "My wife's the theatre expert of the family," he explained.

"I just want the Curator to know," interrupted Mrs. Rosen, "that Jews today find this sort of animal sacrificing very barbaric. In fact, many think religion itself is a completely barbaric ritual."

"A little barbaric for me, too," agreed Mr. Rosen, managing to clear his throat without either swallowing or coughing up. "I'm surprised the editors haven't cut out that goat sacrifice. That's probably why it's so hard for people today to read the damn thing."

Linda turned to me. "One question," she said. "How come the Lord accepted Abel's offering and rejected Cain's?"

"I don't know," I replied.

"You have no idea?"

"No." Strangely, the girl's presence irritated me beyond my power to reply.

"Well," she said after a moment, "don't you think that by favoring one son over the other, the Lord caused sibling rivalry between the brothers which provoked Cain to slay Abel?"

“You see, Curator,” interjected Mrs. Rosen, “by coincidence my daughter finds herself in a situation very similar to the one we just witnessed. “

“Oh, shut up,” snapped Linda. “I can’t listen to any more of your shit.”

“She killed her sister,” explained Mrs. Rosen, “and she’d like to kill her mother too. She may succeed yet.”

“Shut up, will you?” Linda turned to me. “I happened to be six thousand miles away when my sister died. Anyway, no one murdered her. My mother is completely crazy.” Already on her feet, Linda started walking about aimlessly, terribly distressed. “Where’s the way out?” Her voice was desperate.

“She knows nothing about it, but we do. Our daughter left us a letter before she died.”

Linda froze in her tracks. Her eyes glared fiercely at her mother. “Did she leave me a letter or not?”

“Did you receive one?”

“No. But did she leave me one?”

“Ask the U.S. Post Office.”

“You are so full of shit you stink,” shouted Linda, whirling around and walking away in a circle.

“Then ask Rabbi Goldstein,” said the mother. “He’s the one in charge of mailing out her letters. He’ll tell you the same thing. Anyway, why should Sandra have written to you? You always hated her, just like you hate all of us.”

“Where’s the door?” Linda asked me, her voice very agitated. “I can’t find the way out. There’s no way out of here.”

“This way.” I started to lead her toward the door when the grandmother called to us.

“Me too. I have to go to the toilet. Is there any toilet here? There’s none in our room.”

“Over here.” I led them to the door and opened it. Outside it was already night. The contrast caused them to gasp in amazement. “Cross the courtyard and you’ll see a door marked with a crescent moon. Enter there.”

“I’ll help you, Bubby,” said Linda, taking her arm.

“I can manage,” said the old woman, pulling it away. “I can see the crescent moon. It’s there, just across the yard, shining in the sky.”

I went back to my two remaining guests. Mr. and Mrs. Rosen appeared to be bickering, but as I approached, they turned to face me with a smiling and united front.

“I hope you’ll excuse my daughter,” said Mr. Rosen. “My wife sometimes overdoes the kidding, but Linda never could take a joke, even as a little girl.”

“Our daughter is a very attractive and talented young woman,” said Mrs. Rosen. “We don’t like to tell her this because it would go to her head. Look.”

She rummaged in her handbag and pulled out a billfold. From this she carefully

took a magazine clipping. “Linda once had a poem of hers published in a national magazine. Don’t tell her I showed you. Also, she’s a pilot of airplanes. Her sister was never very special. We blame this on a concussion when she was a child. So we had to make sure, as they were growing up, that Linda didn’t get all the compliments. Maybe we went a little too far. Did you say you’re a doctor?”

“A curator. Tell me, how did the concussion happen?”

“A fall downstairs when the two girls were playing. It was generally considered to be Linda’s fault. She pushed her sister.”

“I see. Then if I understand correctly, you have two daughters, but no son?”

“Nope,” smiled Mr. Rosen ambiguously.

“Then you do have a son?”

“Yup.”

For some reason Mr. Rosen’s manner confused me. I glanced at Mrs. Rosen for some sign, but she was looking silently at the floor.

“*One* son?”

“Yup.”

I felt uncomfortable, feeling things under the surface of our conversation that I didn’t understand. “Might I ask where he is now?”

“On the tube.”

“You mean, on television?”

“Yup,” he smiled proudly. “He’s a pop singer.”

“You must be very proud of him.”

“I am.”

I could do nothing but take him at his word. “Then you’re extremely fortunate,” I told him. “Generally, if you scratch anyman’s life story, you find a father/son conflict. This just goes to show that there are exceptions to every rule. Let me congratulate you. A good relationship between father and son is very rare.”

“You can say that again. Did you see the NBC Special the other night?”

“I must have missed it. Was he on?”

“He stole the show. As usual.”

“I suppose his busy schedule kept him from being here with you now, at your time of sorrow,” I said consolingly.

Mrs. Rosen seemed to cough. “It’s time we were going.”

And so I showed them out.

Chapter Twelve

The Frinks and Rabbi Goldstein met at the juice table.

“Frink,” said Frink, extending his hand.

“Goldstein,” said the rabbi, shaking it.

Ginny Frink tried to look pleasant as she ladled out the juice, but her heavy, joined eyebrows scowled in concentration. She yelped with relief when just two drops spilled.

Frink gulped his down. “Good stuff. Drink some o’ this ever once in a while and you don’t get hungry, or so it seems.”

The rabbi held his glass up to the windowlight and looked into its pulpy murk.

“You already drank some? How long ago?”

“Just after gettin here. And we’re still alive, if you can call it livin.”

The rabbi sipped at the rim of his glass. “Not bad.”

“Passin through on business?” Frink asked, as they walked back through the room.

“You could say that,” replied Rabbi Goldstein, choosing a seat by a window.

The Frinks sat down on the sofa. “Mind if I ask what you do?” asked Frink.

“M’wife and I own a motel.”

“Whereabouts?”

“Sedona. That’s near Flagstaff. Only we’re sellin out soon’s we get back.”

“You don’t like Sedona, or you don’t like the motel trade?”

“They’re okay, but there’s no money in motels compared to the input they require. It’s okay for older folks with time on their hands. Gin and me like Arizona, though. The air’s real clear so it’s a good place for UFO sightings.”

“UFO sightings?”

“That’s right. My wife’s made two verified sightings so far. One got into the newspapers, only they didn’t use her name or give her credit. From her description the experts say it probably came from JT 389. That’s a galaxy *only* six trillion light years from earth.”

“Amazing. And the other?”

“They don’t know. It’s a new type only three people ever seen before. They’re still checkin it out.”

“Do you realize,” said the rabbi, “how long it would take a spaceship to travel six trillion light years?”

Grinning smugly, Frink snapped his fingers. “Faster’n that.”

“Light travels at 186,000 miles per second. Multiply 186,000 by the number of seconds in six trillion years and you’ll have the *distance* between that galaxy and here. Now, if it takes *light* six trillion years to go that distance, imagine the amount of time it would take a spaceship or any other object.”

“You’re talkin relativity physics,” said Ginny Frink sympathetically.

“That’s the name of the game,” nodded the rabbi.

“We’re talkin consciousness. Mind power. It don’t take no time for a *thought* to travel six trillion light years.”

“You mean you’re just *thinking up* these flying objects?”

“Sort of.”

“Then you admit they’re not real?”

She laughed under her knitted brows. “Not real? Sure they’re real.” She looked at her husband. “George, listen to this guy. He thinks UFO’s aren’t real. Where’d you say you’re from? New York?”

“Albuquerque.”

Mrs. Frink looked mildly puzzled. “That’s good UFO country,” she said. “Course, now they got some smog.”

“Look, Mr. Goldstein,” said Frink, kicking the leg of the table. “You think that’s not real?”

“No, that seems very real to me.”

“You know what it’s made of? Atoms. You know what atoms are? They’re nothin. Just a bunch of electrical charges so small nobody can even see em. In other words, that table is made outta pure electricity. So is that chair you’re in. So are you. Matter is nothin but a whole lot of electrical charges all bunched together.”

“Fine,” agreed the rabbi. “So now we’re back in Einstein’s world. But the table is sitting there. It’s not traveling around in outer space visiting other galaxies.”

“How do you know? How can you prove it? How can you prove this same table ain’t sittin in some motel up on Galaxy JT 389?”

“I can’t.”

“How can you prove Mr. Goldstein ain’t sittin in some motel in some other galaxy? Maybe me, George Frink, is just *imaginin* you being here and talkin to me.”

“I don’t think so. I feel very present.”

“That’s because you ain’t receptive to that kind of thought experience. Your consciousness ain’t raised very high. Some folks have it, some don’t.”

“I take it you do.”

“I ain’t got the time to work at it. My wife does, and it shows. It’s somethin that requires a lot of concentration at first, then it comes easier. She travels a lot outside her body in the universe. Evenings she’s always tellin me where she’s been that day and what it was like. I tell you, there’s no way she could have made up those places. She never could of seen em on earth.”

“She might have read about them in a book.”

“Okay, then where did the person who wrote the book see em?”

“He could have imagined them.”

“That’s just what I’ve been tryin to tell you,” laughed Frink. “Imagination is electricity, same as that table. It can go anywhere as fast as thought. You never saw a river here on earth tastin of chocolate milk, or a mountain made of rock candy. But they exist somewheres. Have to. How else folks gonna know about them?”

“Movies?” asked the rabbi, trying not to grin.

Mrs. Frink suddenly reached down and gripped her knees. “I feel somethin,” she said in a tight, low voice. “It’s very near.”

“How near?” Looking worried, Frink was off the sofa, kneeling in front of his wife. “How near, honey?” He looked anxiously into her face which was staring and tense.

“Ten billion light years. It’s coming toward earth like....” Suddenly she ducked, hiding her screaming mouth in her hands. “Gone,” she said weakly after a moment, her voice trembling. “Gone by. Thank God. But it was very close and it was ... it was....”

“Awful?”

“Indescribably awful.” Ginny Frink buried her small, narrow face in her hands and doubled down in her chair.

Frink rubbed her back awkwardly. “See what I mean?”

“Yes. Does that sort of thing happen often?”

“Comes and goes. Depends on variations in energy levels in the earth’s electromagnetic field. Sunspots don’t help neither. When conditions are right, she’ll receive up to maybe twice in one week. Bedtime’s her best time for receivin, when she’s tired from the day and her resistance is low. After one o’ those, she’ll just drop off to sleep like a baby.”

“Rabbi Goldstein,” I called across, “did you happen to notice whether there’s a bedspread on the bed in your room?”

“A bedspread?” He frowned. “Yes. Why?”

“Just checking.”

Rabbi Goldstein turned back to the Frinks who were both looking at him curiously. “You a rabbi?”

“Didn’t I tell you?”

“Not that I recall.”

“You asked me what I did, and I thought I told you.”

“I’d of remembered that,” said Frink, shaking his head. “You hear him say it, hon?”

“No.”

“We guessed, you was ... uh ... Jewish, but not that you was a rabbi.”

“Well, now you know.”

“Lot of Jewish people came into this motel this morning. Our place gets em sometimes too. Remember Mr. and Mrs. Feinberg, honey?”

“I remember.”

“Not that we got somethin against Jewish folks, of course. How could we? We might o’ been Jewish in some previous life.

“Or some later one.”

Frink shook his head. “No.” he said, “from here on we won’t reincarnate into any previous levels of consciousness. Jewish, Moslem, Christian, we’re done with all of that. Once your consciousness is raised, it’s up there for good unless you do somethin really dumb.”

“Like what?”

“Like not trustin the Thought, refusin Communion, somethin like that.”

“What kind of Communion ritual do you observe?”

“There’s a gatherin twice a year of the flock, once in the L.A. area, another time somewheres in Arizona. Members make their reports and we have discussions and prayer sessions. There’s other secret things which we don’t talk about with the non-elect.”

“You mean secret rites?”

“The Grand Communion it’s called. And yeah, it’s secret. It’s only for paid-up members.”

“Sorry to bother you, Miss,” said a voice behind me.

I jumped. The pilot/Messiah was standing at the desk. He’d probably been there a while, waiting for my attention. “Can I help you?”

“I was looking for my passenger, John John. Have you seen him?”

“Not recently. Maybe he went for a walk.”

“Not without me. The last time I saw him was in the museum. He was leaving to find the bathroom.”

“Did you look in there?”

“Yes.”

“You did? What did you see?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing at all. Not even a wooden seat. He’d better get back soon. It’ll be dark in a little while and he’s not wearing strobes.”

“Strobes?”

“Position lights,” the Messiah laughed apologetically. “It wasn’t a very funny joke.”

“Well, why don’t you go on back and have some fruit juice. It’ll refresh your sense of humor.”

“Okay, but if you see him going by, tell him I’m looking for him.”

“Will do.”

The Messiah crossed the lobby and poured himself a glass of juice. He was walking back toward the front desk when Frink hailed him. “Howdy. You a flier?”

Changing directions, William Barnes walked over to the three. “I fly,” he said, sitting down.

“Thought so. Could tell by your suit and goggles. I fly too. Checked out on Cherokee 140’s. Logged a couple hours in a 310. Woulda had my multi by now ‘cept for a short circuit in the stall warner, kept catchin on fire. How about you?”

“Cessna 150, Stearman, Lear, F-104, F-16, Flying Fortress, BD 5 an’ Space Shuttle.”

Frink stared at Barnes with open mouth. “Guess you must have your instrument ticket too.”

“Don’t use it much any more. I’m mostly into biplanes these days.”

“Yeah? My wife read a book by some fellow flies those things. Goes around the country sellin rides and stuff like that. Sounded like fun, cept there’s no money in it. Can’t recall the guy’s name.”

“William Barnes?”

“That’s it. Barnes. My wife’s read most of his stuff. She thinks he’s pretty good.”

“He’s got very high consciousness,” nodded Ginny Frink. “In his next book he’s gonna make a breakthrough into something really new. I can feel it coming. He’s gonna explain how to leave our dirty bodies behind once and for all and grasp onto that cycle of rebirth into a new and completely different spiritual form. I just can guess what he’s gonna say.”

“What’s he gonna say?” asked the pilot, looking at her with real interest.

“It’s hard to explain in words.”

“Try.”

“Maybe we can get rid of our dirty bodies by blowing our dirty brains out,” joked Rabbi Goldstein, but no one seemed to hear him.

Ginny Frink concentrated hard, her face glowing like a sunset beneath a cloudy sky. “It’ll be a big breakthrough. It’ll explain everything, death, birth, life, everything. There’ll be blood and violence, but something pure and innocent too. In each book he’s gettin closer, each book goes a little farther. First there were just hints, then more, and in the next book, *whammo!*” She hit her fist into her hand. “He’s gonna tell us how we can be saved from sinning in the flesh for the rest of eternity. The guy’s a genius.”

“My name is William Barnes,” smiled the pilot.

“Well, hi, Bill,” said Frink. “I’m George Frink, and this here’s my wife, Ginny. Over here we have Rabbi ... uh....”

“Goldstein.”

“I’m *the* William Barnes,” smiled William Barnes.

“Well, great. We’re *the* George Frinks, and this here is *the* Rabbi Goldstein from Albuquerque. I don’t have to ask what you’re all drinkin ‘cause there only is *the* one thing to drink around here, and it’s on *the* house.”

“George,” said Ginny Frink quietly, through clenched teeth, “this is *thee* William Barnes.”

“I ain’t deaf.”

“He’s the *writer*,” she whispered forcefully out of the corner of her mouth, her face tipped downward toward the floor and her long hair falling over it. “He’s the pilot who writes *those* books.”

“*Dammit*,” exclaimed Frink, striking his forehead. “Went right by me. Tell you what it was — the way you said *thee*, like it was a kind of initial or something. Threw

me right off.” He looked the pilot over. “Well, well, well. Hey, Gin, honey, this here is *the* William Barnes. How d’ya like that?”

“And this,” said Rabbi Goldstein to the Messiah with a wave of his hand at the Frinks, “is your reading public.”

“We sure are. My wife reads everything you write. Sometimes when we’re in bed at night she reads me parts. Really puts me to sleep, if you know what I mean. Great stuff, but deep.”

“I have all your books.” said Ginny Frink. “I wish I had them here so you could autograph them for me,”

“You don’t need them here,” said Rabbi Goldstein. “Barnes can just transmit his name onto the flyleaves by mental telepathy.”

“Oh, *would* you?” beamed Ginny Frink.

Shooting a brief glance at the grinning rabbi, Messiah placed his chin on his hands and closed his eyes. After a moment he opened them. “All done.”

“I can’t *wait* to get home,” squeaked the happy woman. “Thank you so much.”

“It’s nothing.”

“He *means* that,” nodded Rabbi Goldstein.

“George, do you suppose we should tell Mr. Barnes about the wells?”

Frink considered this a moment. “I don’t suppose it could hurt.” He rubbed his large hands together. “I always felt I woulda made it big as a businessman, buyin and sellin commodities.”

“Wait,” said Messiah. “Don’t speak.” Putting his knuckles to his brow he seemed to concentrate. Finally he looked up. “You folks, and this reverend, just visited some oil wells for the purpose of investing.”

“That’s right,” shrieked Mrs. Frink. “George, George.” Pounding her husband’s thick shoulder she looked triumphantly around the room.

“Extra-sensory perception?” asked the rabbi.

“Not exactly. Reverend Matthews already made his pitch to me in the museum.”

The rabbi grinned. “You admit it?”

“No choice. Look behind you.”

Rabbi Goldstein turned to see a large man wearing a clerical collar pushing through the screen door. The rabbi held his thumb up toward Barnes and they exchanged a grin.

Entering the lobby, Reverend Matthews headed straight to the front desk. “What time does the bus pass by here tomorrow?” he asked me.

“About two o’clock.”

“Are you sure there’ll be seats for everyone? I’ve noticed that quite a few persons are staying at this motel and no one has a viable car. Are they all planning to leave by bus?”

“Not all. Some have already gone, some may decide to stay on a while, and a few

will probably take the bus,”

“You say some have *gone*?” asked the reverend, his voice rising excitedly. “How did they go? Did they walk? Did they fly?”

I shrugged. “I’d like to know that myself.”

“And why,” he said, looking around and out the windows at the red and yellow land, “would anyone choose to stay on in this God-forsaken wilderness?”

“Some just stay. Been here seven years myself.”

“Well, I’m worried about the Pierces,” said the reverend. “I’ve looked all over for them. Now Mr. Hussion is missing too, and I understand one of those pilots has disappeared. What’s happening around here anyway?”

“You sound tired and distraught, Reverend,” I told him. “Why don’t you just go in back and help yourself to some juice. I’ll see what I can find out.”

He sighed. “I suppose I have no choice. I’m stuck here until tomorrow anyway ... that is, if I don’t disappear in the meantime.”

“You be here tomorrow afternoon and the bus’ll take you,” I told him. “Just hang on.”

“*Hang on*,” he repeated grimly.

Turning away, the minister headed unsteadily toward the rear of the lobby. Passing the seated group he caught sight of William Barnes and instantly stopped. For a moment he stood, swaying, seeming about to speak as the two exchanged a long, troubled, questioning look. Then the reverend went on back to the juice table.

Barnes, looking at his watch, said it would soon be dark and he’d better find his friend. He was leaving by the screen door just as the reverend returned with his glass. Apparently disappointed by Messiah’s sudden departure, he looked after him a moment before joining the others.

“To our millionaire Messiah,” said the minister, raising his glass toward the exiting figure.

Millionaire! The word seemed to hit the Frinks and Rabbi Goldstein like an electric shock. “You gotta be kidding,” exclaimed Frink. “Him? A millionaire?”

“His books *are* very popular,” acknowledged Mrs. Frink. “Best sellers. “

“Well, you’re the dope who buy’s em,” said her husband. “It’s *you* made him a millionaire. With my money. He can thank us.”

“I buy his books because I like what he says, not to make him rich.”

“Don’t matter why. A million suckers like you cough up ten bucks apiece for that shit and there he is, flyin high for life.”

“It’s not shit,” objected Ginny Frink through her tortured face. “It’s the same sort of thing the rev’rend here teaches us, only William Barnes makes it into a kind of story.”

She smiled at the reverend and suddenly saw the large, aging head masked with spiritual suffering.

“William Barnes,” she explained hastily, “is just so light and easy to read. You

don't have to understand what he's saying. You just *feel* it. It takes you away on wings. You don't have to think. You don't even have to believe. You just *know*."

"Just know," repeated Reverend Matthews, shaking his head. "*Just know*."

"George?" said Ginny Frink.

"What?"

"I gotta go," she whispered.

"Where?"

"Yes," she nodded significantly.

"Okay, but we gotta find out where it's at. C'mon. I'll ask her."

"Around back with a crescent moon on the door," I told them.

Frink laughed. "Ain't seen one o' them in a while." Bidding goodbye to Reverend Matthews and Rabbi Goldstein, he and his wife disappeared outside. It was just starting to grow dark.

Chapter Thirteen

The rabbi and the minister sat almost facing each other. For a long moment neither spoke. The room was very still. Then, without lifting his gaze, Reverend Matthews said, "Rabbi, may I ask you something?"

Rabbi Goldstein looked first startled, then flattered, then wary. "Sure," he smiled. "What's on your mind?"

"If you were granted three questions to ask God, what would they be?"

"Three questions?" The rabbi squirmed. "To ask God? I don't know. I could maybe give you a couple off the top of my head, but if I had time to think it over I could maybe come up with something else."

"Just off the top."

He reflected. "Okay. Just like that. I'd ask, Why am I here? That's one. Is there an end? That's two."

Reverend Matthews raised his head as if startled. "An end?"

"An end to me, after death." He frowned. "That makes two. I can't think of another right off."

The minister was still looking amazed, but out of politeness kept his voice level. "Those are the questions you'd ask God?"

"Like I said, with more time What's so surprising?"

"Somehow ... somehow, I thought... I never imagined those would be your questions. I didn't think a rabbi.... I mean, your religion is so ancient, the Mosaic laws, the expectations the Lord had of the Hebrews so unequivocal, I thought Jews would have had that sort of thing worked out long ago."

"So why did you ask? What did you expect a rabbi to inquire of God?"

Reverend Matthews looked perplexed. “I don’t know. Seek approbation of one’s work, ask for guidance, renewal, reinspiration.” He paused. “To be honest, I’d hoped you’d already have found the answers to the questions you asked.”

“Well,” said Rabbi Goldstein briskly, “you caught me off guard or I could have posed very different questions. One day I’m gonna take a little time off alone and ponder the ultimate meanings. You know how it is, there’s always some kid — maybe you *don’t* know — having a Bar Mitzvah, or there’s a fund raiser coming up, or some marriage counseling that can’t wait. On the other hand, *you* people just have to get down on your knees and put your hands together and there you are. Contact! So tell me, Reverend, if *you* had three questions, what would *you* ask Jesus Christ?”

“I...” Reverend Matthews hesitated. “That’s the problem. I can’t seem to ask anything. I can’t talk to Him any more, kneeling or not. A few years ago I suffered what might be called a ... a crisis of faith.”

This time the rabbi looked amazed. “*You* suffered a crisis of faith? What are you? Ain’t you a minister? Haven’t you heard: Jesus Saves? Even I’ve heard Jesus saves. It’s all over, on walls and bumper stickers. The only difference is, I don’t *believe* Jesus saves.”

Reverend Matthews nodded. “Hearing is one thing,” he admitted gloomily, “believing is another.”

“You mean, you hear it’s true but you can’t believe it? That’s a sad kettle of fish for a minister.”

Although he threw a sharp glance at Rabbi Goldstein for this provocation, the reverend managed to control himself. “I brought up the problem because I’m honestly seeking light and I’ve never talked ... directly ... to a rabbi before. I thought, perhaps someone with his faith rooted in the Old Testament could throw some light on.... The truth is, I eventually hope to find salvation in Jesus Christ, but I’ve never met a saved soul or a born-again Christian whom I could stomach.”

Rabbi Goldstein laughed. “Since we’re exchanging confidences, I’ll admit something to you too. I never met one that I could stomach either. “

They chuckled conspiratorially, the laughter leaving a bad aftertaste around the minister’s mouth. “There was another question I wanted to ask you,” he said, “but....” He broke off, looking down.

“What’s the matter? Don’t be nervous. Go on, ask.”

“You know this young man who was just here who calls himself the Messiah?”

“Sure. The sky writer. What about him?”

The reverend seemed unable to speak.

“You want to know what I think of him?” asked the rabbi. “I think he’s a punk kid who was in the right place at the right time and made himself a couple million bucks.”

“But what about his ideas? How do they ... uh grab you?”

“I’ve looked at a couple of his books. Bunkum. Plain bunkum. Reincarnation?”

Million dollar bunkum. I'm not begrudging him making money. As long as I don't have to buy his stuff, let him corner the bunkum market. Only remember this. It ain't Jews who're making him a millionaire. Jews don't believe in that mystical stuff. The Lord told Adam and Eve, 'You came out of dust and into dust you'll return.' ”

“But earlier, your question to God concerned whether or not there was an end to you.”

The rabbi, taken by surprise, considered this. “That was a personal question off the top of my head,” he replied, “not a rabbinical one. Maybe what I was really asking was, what would be the nature of my non-existence, or, what's it like being dust?”

Whatever he thought of that reply, Reverend Matthews seemed prepared to accept it. “All right,” he nodded, “but if you believe in only one life and no afterlife, where do you fit in suffering? How can you justify human suffering and all the injustices of life on earth if there's no reward or punishment in eternity?”

“Perhaps you've read Dostoyevsky's book in which Ivan Karamazov is inwardly tortured by the thought of brutalities suffered by innocent children. I'll never forget the description of the little girl forced by her own mother to eat excrement, locked up in a freezing privy all night, sobbing for help. If there's no afterlife, then for many this earthly existence is pure evil and senselessness. That's one question I would ask God. Like Ivan Karamazov, I would ask, 'Who will atone for the suffering of that little girl?' ”

“Nothing can atone for that,” said Rabbi Goldstein. “No one, no way. Not Jesus, not ten afterlives in paradise or twenty reincarnations. That kid had one life and if her old lady forced her to eat shit, then she ate shit. Sure it's unfair, but a lot of wishful thinking ain't going to wish it away,”

“But then how can you *justify* it?” cried the minister. “How can you go on living in a world with such injustice and pain?”

“You do something about it, that's how. Think of this: *Jewish* mothers don't treat their little girls like that. Jewish mothers, you take for instance the Rosens No, don't take the Rosens.” He reflected. “Yeah, okay, *take* the Rosens. The parents love the kids, but the kids don't see it that way. One daughter killed herself last week and this younger daughter, Linda, to punish her parents for loving her, refuses to get married and have kids of her own. Of course, she must be forty years old now, so the question's academic, but you get the idea.”

Reverend Matthews nodded. “I understand that Jewish family units are normally very closely knit, with a lot of warmth and contact.”

“Closely knit! I can speak from personal experience,” affirmed the rabbi energetically. “My family is a strong, loving unit. I love it, I love my work. I'm a happy man.”

“Then you are truly thrice blessed,” sighed the reverend enviously.

“Not only is my family unit close, but I have a wonderful, loving wife and a beautiful and brilliant daughter. And we're no exception. Harmony in the home is something all Jews experience. Lighting the candles Friday night....” He broke off to wipe away a

tear. “I can’t wait to get back. For a Jewish husband, traveling without his family is a real hardship.”

“Then Ivan Karamazov’s story of the suffering child holds what meaning for you?” Reverend Matthews asked. “You have your happiness in this life, but what about that child? My religion teaches that Christ died to atone for our sins and that our rewards for earthly suffering await in heaven. But what does your religion teach?”

“You see, a Jew doesn’t expect anyone to atone for his sins. A Jew takes the responsibility for his own actions on himself. That’s what is meant by conscience and guilt. A Jew knows when he sins and he has his own internal hell.

“Now, about the little kid,” the rabbi continued. “The Jew doesn’t ask, ‘How can there be justice on earth or in heaven?’ He asks, ‘*Why* did the mother do that to her little girl? What can be done to stop the mother or help her? What can be done to help the child?’

“It’s no accident that Freud was Jewish. Maybe I don’t go along with his sex theories — Oedipus and all that stuff is for the birds — but he made a definite contribution to the world. Most Jews who can afford it either become shrinks or see shrinks. They feel they have to make *this* life livable because it’s the only one they’re ever gonna have. They got one chance for happiness, here and now. By the way, what was that Karamazov story about? I read it twenty-five years ago.”

“The four Karamazov brothers get together and murder their father.”

“Oh, yeah. Terrible story. What was Dostoyevsky, one of those Russian atheists?”

“He was Orthodox, and deeply religious. The questions he posed in that book torture Christians everywhere.”

“Then that explains it. If he’d lived later, after Freud, old man Karamazov might be alive today. And the kid who had to eat the shit, she’d be on a couch telling her shrink about it.”

“I sometimes think Jews consider Freud a kind of Messiah,” observed Reverend Matthews wryly.

“Jews believe in the First Commandment, ‘Worship no God but me.’ So we’re a little nervous calling every Tom, Dick and Sigmund a Messiah. Moses got too big for his pants, so God cut him down to size. Freud’s maybe like a latter-day Moses. He gave the psychological laws of God to man. Einstein was another. He explained God’s universe in scientific terms.”

“But,” interrupted Reverend Matthews, “what if a *real* Messiah came along today and told his message of eternal life? What if people by the millions listened and believed, and his ideas spread to all corners of the earth? That young man who was here a few minutes ago...”

“You mean our pilot friend?”

The minister blushed. “For instance.”

“I have a feeling you like that kid.”

“Like him?” Reverend Matthews seemed to consider this a moment. “What I like about his philosophy is its simplicity. ‘If you want to fly badly enough, you’ll fly. There is no such thing as death, therefore no such thing as murder.’ His message isn’t full of stumbling blocks like evolution of races, speaking in tongues, charts, and near-death experiences. There’s no sin, no suffering, no debate about free will and responsibility — nothing at all to agonize over. The suffering child will no longer suffer when she chooses not to; the responsibility for each of us lies in ourselves. How simple, elegant and pure.”

“Well, I’ll tell you,” said the rabbi, “I think he may have a position open for an apostle. It might be your best ticket for the gravy train. That kid he flies with — John John? — he looks a little lightweight to me. And it ain’t a bad job. After all, without Paul, what would Jesus have been? Just another resurrected Jew.” He laughed, his stomach jiggling. “Go on. Go talk with the kid. See what he says. But you’ll have to *believe* that stuff he preaches.”

“One thing is certain,” said Reverend Matthews, “he believes. He has no doubts. He’s already proven that.”

“How?”

“He flew his airplane into the ground as an act of faith that there is no death.”

The rabbi waved away the words. “Aw, go on. Anybody could do that. You don’t have to be a Messiah to crash a plane. It don’t mean you believe in eternal life because you hit a hill. Tell me something *really* terrific he’s done so I can believe too. After all, if the Messianic Age has arrived, I’d like to be the first to know.”

Reverend Matthews was about to reply, when the door opened and Randy Smith entered the lobby. Walking up to the desk, he asked me whether I’d seen Linda Rosen.

“I think she’s still in the museum.”

He looked at his watch, hesitated, then walked to the back, poured himself some juice and drank it down. That done, he glanced around the lobby and caught sight of its other two occupants.

“Hey, rabbi,” he said. “Rev’rend.” He walked over to them. “This a meetin of the Ecumenical Council, or can a layman join?”

“No objection,” said Rabbi Goldstein.

“None whatsoever,” replied Reverend Matthews, staring at the floor. Randy Smith lowered his tall body rather stiffly onto the sofa. “I may be lay, but I got a brother, Ben, who’s born again in Christ.”

The reverend’s heavily lidded eyes shifted sideways like a lizard seeing a fly land nearby. “Praise be. How did he manage that?”

“It just happened all by itself one day while he was out drivin his car. He’d never been into religion before. In fact, you couldn’t of known anyone more lustful and vice oriented. It had got to the point where he’d run dry from havin so many women. But ever since he was born again, he’s been completely faithful to Molly, my sister-in-law.

They do nothin all day but tell folks about Christ the Savior.”

“Strange, isn’t it,” said the reverend to Rabbi Goldstein, “but that’s the way it usually happens. I know of one case where a young man was born again riding in the back of a bus.”

“Ben said it was like a light flashin on all of a sudden inside his head. Simple as that. Suddenly he believed.”

“ ‘As I was traveling and nearing the city of Damascus, about midday, a bright light from the sky flashed suddenly round me....’ ” Having said this, Reverend Matthews fell into a troubled silence.

“What’s that from?” asked Rabbi Goldstein.

“Acts 22:6. Paul the Apostle recounting his conversion when the Lord Jesus Christ revealed Himself to him for the first time. ‘I was blinded by the light and my companions took me by the hand and led me into Damascus.’ ”

“It’s a good thing Paul wasn’t driving a car just then,” chuckled the rabbi. He turned to Trav Sales. “I hope your brother didn’t hit a tree when his blinding light came on.”

“No, he still could drive. Next day, him and Molly went right downtown and bought twin beds. Ever since then they go around with big smiles, preachin about Jesus Christ to ever one they meet.”

“And the suffering children?” asked Reverend Matthews in a low, tight voice.

“The what?”

“Never mind. I’m glad to hear your brother and his wife were saved and that this brought them complete joy. Did they write a book about their experience?”

“Sure did. It’s been rejected by twelve publishers so far. Ben and Moll say they’re still holdin the thought.”

“With any luck it could be rejected by twenty-four publishers,” observed Rabbi Goldstein.

“Wouldn’t surprise me at all,” said Randy. “It’s that kind of book.” Putting back their heads, he, the rabbi and Reverend Matthews had a good laugh.

“Well,” said the minister, rising to his feet, “I think I’ll take a stroll before dark.”

“Do what I suggested,” Rabbi Goldstein said. “Stop by and see that Barnes kid. Ask the girl at the desk for his room number. I promise he won’t bite. He may flap his wings a little, but he won’t bite.”

“Perhaps I will,” Reverend Matthews reflected, a faraway look in his eyes. “There’s something ... something about him, I don’t know what, something spiritual. ‘Inspirational’ might be a better word. When I listen to him I feel ... I feel I could literally spread my arms and fly away.”

“Apostle Paul couldn’t have put it better.”

Starting to leave, the reverend paused again. “One more thing. What I admire about ... Jews ... you don’t mind ... ?”

“Naw, go ahead. Get it off your chest.” Over his frozen smile Rabbi Goldstein’s eyes were lumps of hot steel.

“It’s their practicality, their pragmatism. The way they see opportunities, get things moving.”

“I been telling you, that’s the beauty of having no sure afterlife. If you want something, get it now, don’t put it off. Education? Health? A business? You only have one life, so get busy.”

After watching Reverend Matthews leave the room, a grinning Rabbi Goldstein turned back toward Randy Smith, to find himself looking into eyes as cold as cubes of green ice. At this, the rabbi’s smile faded like a ripple in water. A look of wariness spread over his face.

“So, what can I do for *you*?” he asked.

“I have a question about Linda Rosen.”

The rabbi meditated a moment on Randy Smith’s tall face. “Shoot.”

“She’s real upset over her sister’s death.”

“She *should* be.”

Now it was Randy’s turn to study Rabbi Goldstein’s features. “Why *should* she be?”

“Her only sister dies, she *should* be upset.”

“I don’t think that’s what you meant,” said Trav Sales. “You had something else in mind.”

“Like what?”

“Like feelin she’s responsible for what happened.”

“Responsible for Sandra’s death? How could she be? Linda was over in Europe.”

“I know that.”

“So? If you know that, what do you want from me?”

“I want to know what you implied just now about Linda,” pursued Randy.

“Okay, I’ll spell it out. I’m implying you don’t always need a gun to kill someone.”

Randy’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that by selfishness and greed a person can drive another person to desperation. It happens in lots of families. Anyway, this is none of your business. It’s confidential. I don’t want to discuss it with you.”

“Okay. But there’s one thing I want to say. Linda feels her sister must have left a letter for her and that her folks are keeping it from her. It’s very important to her to have it.”

“Naw,” said the rabbi, with a wave of his hand, frowning out the window. “Her folks don’t know about any letter.”

Randy’s eyes didn’t leave the other’s face. “But I have a feelin you do.”

Rabbi Goldstein hesitated a fraction of a second before answering. “What is this,

an inquisition? You got something you're trying to say? You think I'm hiding a letter? Well, you're wrong. There was no letter for Linda from her sister. She left letters on the table for her folks and her own family, but nothing for her sister."

"I don't believe you."

"Why not?" shouted Rabbi Goldstein.

"Because I can tell when someone's lyin, " said Trav Sales in a voice as level as a snake. "I can tell by the way your mouth works so stiff, the way you blink your eyes and look in all directions, the way you're getting all excited. Where's her letter?"

"*There's no letter!* Why should I hold back a lousy letter?"

"Because you're a miserable s.o.b. It don't take a genius to see you're in cahoots with her folks. You know what side your bread is buttered on."

"Butter? Ha! You never heard of cholesterol? I ain't touched butter in five years. All the same, I know why you're doing this. I know what turns a guy like you on. Jewish girls. I know Linda was in your room. I know what you two were up to."

"You think you do," said Randy, rising sinuously to stand over the rabbi. "You probably wish you'd had your fat kike eye to the keyhole."

For a moment it looked as if Trav Sales was going to yank Rabbi Goldstein out of his chair like a rotten tooth. The rabbi cowered, looked around, saw no help coming, began to bristle. "Don't touch me," he growled like a cornered animal.

"*Touch you!*"

Turning away sharply, Randy Smith threw back a look of intense disgust as he walked toward the front desk. I was still sitting at the typewriter wearing earphones. "I hope you're gettin all this down," he said. "I'm beginnin to think this whole fuckin place is wired."

"Trav, you don't mind waiting while I transcribe what you just said? I'm having trouble keeping up today, you guys all talk so fast."

Leaning on the desk, Randy kept looking back at the rabbi, as if afraid the man might suddenly up and bolt.

"I'd like to keep an eye on this turkey," he told me. "I'm afraid he'll try and destroy the letter. I'm sure he has it. Problem is," Randy massaged his forehead with both hands, "I'm feelin kinda funny. Gettin flashes. Real strange flashes. I just can't wait."

"It's out back. The door with the big C."

"Listen, if Miz Rosen comes along before I get back, tell her I've got somethin important to say to her and not to go away. Tell her..." Covering both eyes with one hand, he paused a moment, then spun around and headed out the screen door.

I turned back to the typewriter. After maybe a minute or two, I glanced back through the lobby at Rabbi Goldstein. He was looking at something in his hand, a long, white envelope. Having studied it a minute, he tapped it a couple of times on his palm, then folded it in half and buttoned it into his shirt pocket. Even though Randy never came back, Rabbi Goldstein made no move to get away.

Chapter Fourteen

*Black night comes fast
to this high plateau
where our air is thin and drier;
the blue sky darkens
and the western hills run
with vermilion fire;
till, crouching out of sight
to have his fun,
with licked fingers the night
extinguishes the sun.*

—Marly

Tonight at Eden Motel some windows are lighted, some stand dark. Flashlight beams will soon come bouncing and shooting across the court. Always one beam will stop, turn upwards, trying to explore what sun has somehow failed to show during the day; as if between the stars, the pocked and dusty planets, that wishful beam could illuminate our cold, black and windless destiny. Very soon the light will lower and move more soberly on.

I have not felt jealousy for seven years until tonight. My mind is numb with it. I never met a trav. sales. whose interest and desire didn't drain away out the business end of his cock. Yet, there was Randy Smith a couple hours later, with Linda still on his mind. Either she's better in bed than this ex-hustler, or she wouldn't let him in.

Well, Randy's gone and Linda won't ever know her social success if I don't tell her. That's my consolation and revenge.

Some say there's a moment at death when everything is clear, all life remembered and understood. They say one feels complete peace. The Curator doesn't think it has to do with afterlife; there is some earthly mechanism, he doesn't know what, but he is seeking it.

My own life is only worth forgetting. I would not like to see it flashing through my memory at the moment of my death. I was an evil, awful, sinful child. My bad character drove my daddy to leave our home. When I was sixteen, I met Al. How I did love that snake. I must have been crazy. I met him when I was at the bottom of my soul, ready to die. I was worthless, but he took my side of things. My thoughts were crazy, but he always agreed. He said he would protect me and never abandon me. He would let no one hurt or insult me. I was a princess in love. I would have done anything for him.

Al needed money, but the only thing I owned was my self. He never took all the money. He gave me back some to buy my self pretty clothes. There were other girls in his life, but Al told me I was the only one he really loved. We were driving to a convention in Colorado with three others. I was jealous and took some pills to scare him, so he dumped my unconscious body by the roadside beneath a yellow elm tree. The Curator found me near death and brought me here.

I have never told all this before, but I feel a change is coming and I want it put outside my head.

The museum is closed for the night. Mr. C. doesn't plan to join his guests in the lobby this evening. It's been a busy day and he has three museum tours to transcribe. He hates this sort of work and so will get it done quickly, he says. I asked why didn't he leave the tours for me, I could do them next week. He looked at me silently a moment, then shook his head.

As this evening grew chilly, I put some firewood in the grate.

"What kind of wood is that?" asked Rabbi Goldstein, getting up and coming over. "Juniper?" It was the first time he'd left his chair since Randy went out.

"Piñon."

"I thought so." He watched me a minute in silence, then said, "It won't light that way. You gotta use starter." He watched me light it with a match. "What are you? Some kind of witch?" Pulling over a chair, he sat down and spread out his hands to the heathen flames.

The first arrivals were Mrs. Charles seeking Reverend Matthews, and Mrs. Hussion looking for Mr. Hussion. "The light's on in the Reverend's room," said Mrs. Charles, "but he doesn't answer when I knock."

"Maybe he's asleep," I said.

"At this hour?"

"And where's my Fred?" asked Mrs. Hussion. Then a thought grabbed her. "You don't suppose they're both in there *together*, prayin and worshipping

I didn't feel like trying to guess. Instead, I introduced them to Rabbi Goldstein who got half out of his chair and nodded before sinking back down.

"Glad to meet you," said Mrs. Charles stiffly, pulling a chair to a spot as far from the rabbi and as near to the fire as she could get without being scorched.

"Glad to meet ya, Rabbi," said Mrs. Hussion, claiming the next best spot on the curve.

Mr. and Mrs. Rosen arrived. They greeted the rabbi and crowded in as near to him and the fire as possible. From there, they nodded to the two ladies and jiggled their chairs around so as not to block anyone from the heat.

"What do you think ma's doing?" Mrs. Rosen asked her husband.

"Lying down, I hope. She should get some rest for tomorrow."

"There better be seats on that bus or there'll be hell to pay." Mrs. Rosen reinforced

her words with a black look in my direction.

“What did you folks think of the museum tour?” asked Rabbi Goldstein.

“Not bad,” said Mrs. Rosen. “The story’s craperoo, but the production was first rate.”

“Craperoo?” repeated the rabbi dimly.

Mr. Rosen cleared his throat authoritatively. “We’re used to the best,” he explained.

I was beginning to understand why the Curator was giving this evening a miss, when the rabbi said, “Where’s Linda tonight?” He asked it very casually, without looking up from the flames. One hand caressed his fat breast pocket.

Mrs. Rosen turned in her chair to look into the four corners of the room. “Isn’t she here?”

“She must be with ma.”

“Not Linda. You can bet on it. She’s with someone in pants. She never cools down. First it was that salesman. Now I think it’s that guy who looks like a preacher.”

At this, the two Christian heads turned to stare at their neighbors. “Do you mean Reverend Matthews?” asked Mrs. Charles.

“He was wearing one of those collars,” said Mrs. Rosen, holding her fingers in a circle at her throat. “They were standing out there a while ago, talking together.”

“May I ask what they were saying?”

“I don’t listen.”

“Maybe the Rev’rend was askin her if she’d seen my Fred,” suggested Mrs. Hussion hopefully.

“*Better* be all,” said Mrs. Charles darkly. The blood-red lacquer on her nails flashed as she clenched and unclenched her large fists.

About then, a slim figure wearing jeans slipped unnoticed through the front door. Hidden from the hearth by the office partition, she tiptoed to the desk.

“Have you seen Mr. Smith?” whispered Linda Rosen. “Is he in there?”

“Randy?”

“Randolph Smith.” She raised her chin slightly.

“Oh, you mean Trav Sales.” Linda turned away so I added quickly, “He was here a while ago, said he’d be back.”

“Thank you.” She started toward the door.

“Miz Rosen,” I whispered.

“Yes?”

“It’s not so nice out there in the dark. Why don’t you come in by the fire?”

She looked grateful for this concern. Glancing at her watch, she started to count on her fingers, then gave up. “For me, it’s already tomorrow morning.” Her voice sounded exhausted.

“No matter. Something tells me you should be in there. It’s important.”

“I’ll be back in a minute. I just want to get a tissue.”

“Better bring the box.”

As she went out, I glanced back toward the fireplace. “Folks, I’ve got a problem,” Rabbi Goldstein was saying. “I need your help.” He looked from one Rosen to the other. Volunteering nothing, the two returned his look inquisitively.

“It’s a question of ethics.”

Mrs. Rosen squinted. “Of what?”

“Of right and wrong,”

“Just ask.” She sat back confidently.

“Of course,” said the rabbi, “I already have my own opinion, but I feel I should ask because the matter also involves you.” Reaching into his pocket he took out the white envelope. After regarding it in silence, he looked up and said dramatically, “This letter was written by your daughter Sandra just before she died.”

The Rosens were astonished. “I thought you gave out all the letters? Who is it for?”

Frowning at the object in his hand, Rabbi Goldstein brought it nearer his eyes. “The name on the envelope — still sealed I might add — is your daughter Linda’s.”

“Then how do you have it?”

“Your son-in-law gave it to me. He wasn’t sure what to do with it. You see, it wasn’t on the table with the other letters Sandra wrote that night.” He paused to scan their astonished faces.

“Where was it?” asked Mr. Rosen.

“Discarded. The envelope was sealed up and addressed, but then the whole thing had been tossed in the trash basket. My question is this: Under these circumstances, should it be given to Linda or not?”

“Of course she should have it if her name is on it,” said Mr. Rosen immediately.

The rabbi stared silently at the envelope.

“Just wait,” said Mrs. Rosen to her husband. “Don’t be in such a rush. Rabbi Goldstein is asking our opinion, so he must have a good reason. We should think it over carefully.” She turned toward the rabbi. “You say Sandra threw this letter out? It wasn’t with the others? Then I would say Sandra didn’t really want Linda to have it. She must have changed her mind at the last minute.”

“If Sandy didn’t want Linda to have it, why didn’t she tear it up?” asked Mr. Rosen.

“Tearing it up is tearing it open. Then anyone could have put it back together and read it,” explained his wife. “This way it was discarded, but safely sealed up.”

“As I see it,” said the rabbi, “there are three alternatives. One, give it to Linda. Two, throw it on the fire right now and let it burn to ashes. That way your daughter’s secrets are safe forever. Three, have some neutral party, such as a doctor, open it, read it, and then decide what’s best for Linda. After all, it might contain some pretty hot stuff

that Linda couldn't handle."

"I think the third idea is best," said Mrs. Rosen. "Since there's no doctor here, I'll read it. As Sandra's mother I have a right to know all she was thinking on her last night. And as Linda's mother, I know what's best for her too." Holding out her hand she waited for the letter to be put into it.

"Now hold on," said Mr. Rosen. "We don't have a doctor, but we have a rabbi. I think the most neutral person here is Rabbi Goldstein. He could read it out loud to both of us right now. That way nobody is cut out."

"Fine," agreed Mrs. Rosen. "Open it right now and read it." She turned toward Mrs. Charles and Mrs. Hussion. "This will only take a minute. You don't have to listen." She turned back to the rabbi. "Is it long?"

Rabbi Goldstein had already ripped open the envelope. Taking out some white sheets, he flipped through them. "Not very. She wrote big. Is everybody ready?"

"Ready," said Mrs. Rosen, sitting up very straight in her chair.

"Ready," nodded Mr. Rosen, rumbling his phlegm.

The two outsider ladies assumed expressionless faces, looked at the ceiling, and shifted their thighs.

"Dear Linda..."

In a strong voice the rabbi started to read. At this moment, the door opened and Linda Rosen reentered the lobby. Curious, she moved to a spot from where she could see the fireplace and the persons seated there.

"If this reaches you, I'm dead. Before leaving this world I guess I should drop you a few lines. You're probably reading this in some French sidewalk cafe. I'm writing it in a motel room in Farmington."

The blood left Linda's face. "What's he reading?" she asked me in an urgent whisper. "Isn't that ... isn't that my letter?"

"Yes."

Yes stunned her. She reeled, recovered, disappeared behind the office partition like someone in a trance and reappeared near the others. "Isn't that my letter?" I heard her ask in a puzzled voice.

They whirled in their seats. "Shut up," snapped Mrs. Rosen. "Get out of here. This is none of your business." She turned to Rabbi Goldstein. "Don't stop."

He lifted the letter obediently nearer his eyes. *"Only don't get the idea I'm jealous of you. I'm not. I'm writing this because..."*

"That is my letter," cried Linda. "Stop reading it." She took another step forward. I saw her hand reach out.

"Go on," Mrs. Rosen ordered the rabbi. "Don't worry about her."

Looking uncomfortable, Rabbi Goldstein watched Linda move toward him. "Somebody better stop her," he muttered.

"Don't you read another word," said Linda. She kept coming. "Give it to me."

“You’ll get it all right, and you know where,” said Mrs. Rosen, laughing darkly. “Now sit down before someone knocks you down. If you want to listen, you have to behave yourself. Act your age.”

Linda stopped. “I can’t believe what’s happening,” she said. “This must be a nightmare.”

“Then get out,” shouted her mother. “Go screw that preacher you’re so hot for.” Impatiently she shrugged away her husband’s efforts to calm her. “Or that traveling salesman. He’s your speed.” She turned to the rabbi. “Go on.”

“I’m writing this because I have a few things to say...” He glanced at Linda, who was starting toward him again, and finished the line in a rush, *“... and-later- will-be-too-late.”*

Linda lunged, grabbing at the letter, but Mrs. Charles was already up to block her. With the heels of both palms she gave Linda a painful shove in the chest, sending her reeling backwards. Not taking her eyes off the letter, Linda scrambled forward again.

“Don’t let her get me,” shouted the rabbi. “Stop her.”

“Don’t hurt her,” frowned Mr. Rosen, waving his hand. “We don’t want violence.”

“Leave the bitch to me,” said Mrs. Charles. Grabbing Linda from behind, she twisted one arm in back of her.

The young woman screamed in pain. “Help me. Someone help me. Randy!”

“Don’t hurt her,” said Mr. Rosen in a low voice. “The police could come.”

“I’m not hurting her,” said Mrs. Charles, giving the arm another wrench. Linda screamed. “She’s faking,” the woman assured them. “I’m hardly touching her.”

“She’s always faking,” agreed Mrs. Rosen. “Always crying wolf. A real cry baby. Well, hold onto her. When the letter’s over, you can let her go.”

“It’s *my* letter,” sobbed Linda hysterically. “You have no right. Where’s Randy? Randy,” she wailed desperately.

“It’s not your letter,” Rabbi Goldstein nearly shouted. “It wasn’t on the pile with the rest. Your sister didn’t want you to have it. She threw it in the wastepaper basket.”

At this a look of terrible appeal came over Linda’s face. “Then it *is* mine. It *is* mine. Listen, the wastepaper basket, that’s my address. Sandy knew it. She put it there for *me*.”

“The girl’s completely crazy,” marveled Mrs. Rosen.

“I’m not. It’s my letter. The wastepaper basket, that’s the proof.”

Again she tried to move forward to claim the letter, but Mrs. Charles twisted her arm and the effort ended in a scream. She tried to kick back at the woman’s shins, but this time agony brought her to her knees.

“Randy,” she cried helplessly.

“I don’t like doing this,” Mrs. Charles told her, “but loose women like you deserve it. It’ll teach you not to fool around with other people’s men. Now just stand back up

like a good girl.” Twisting Linda’s arm the other way, she brought her yelping to her feet.

“It *looks* awful,” explained Mrs. Charles reassuringly to the others, “but it doesn’t really hurt. Isn’t that right, Mrs. Hussion?”

“Oh, that’s right,” said the little blue-haired woman. “It might even of been my Fred she was after, ‘stead o’ the Rev’rend.”

“I’ve seen it done on TV wrestling,” said Mr. Rosen. “Just part of the act.”

“Let’s have a little quiet,” said his wife. “Go on, rabbi. Excuse the interruption.”

Unable to move without bringing on the pain, Linda stood sobbing with frustration and outrage. Finding his place, Rabbi Goldstein continued to read.

“I wasn’t planning to write you and I’m not sure if I’ll decide to leave this or not...”

“You see?” exclaimed Mrs. Rosen. “She decided *not* to leave it, so she threw it out.”

“Shut up, dear,” said her husband. “Let him read.”

“But a while ago I found a Bible in a drawer here.” The rabbi cleared his throat. *“Larry reads them, but I never have. He met this ass of a rab...”* Rabbi Goldstein broke off, his eyes racing a moment down, up and across the page. then he resumed, *“I thought it might be a good time to give it a try, for obvious reasons. So I read Genesis and Exodus just now. Man, what a sick book!”*

“I wish I could have talked with her,” sighed the rabbi, interrupting himself.

“She was a chip off me,” smiled Mr. Rosen nostalgically. “I can’t read the damn thing either. I could never get past the begats.”

“So I thought maybe the New Testament would be better. I read the Gospel of Matthew, but Christ doesn’t interest me at all. Anyway, something I read reminded me of our famous sibling rivalry and I figured it’s time I told you a few things you may not know. First of all, it wasn’t your fault I fell downstairs and cracked my head. Ma...”

“It’s not true,” muttered Mrs. Rosen.

“Ma accidentally caused my fall.”

“It’s not true.” She shook her head.

“She always blamed it on you, but it really was her who pushed me while trying to grab you.”

“It’s not true.”

“So don’t feel guilty about my seizures. I always meant to tell you. Anyway, better late than never.”

“Pill time.”

“There’s another thing you should know that happened when you were born. Get the folks to tell you, or ask Aunt Harriet. We both felt you should be told.”

“So, that’s that. The main reason I’m doing this is that my seizures are getting worse and the medicine they give me is making me look like something out of the monkey age. I’m told I should have a brain operation., but I don’t want to become a vegetable.”

Funny, you always were the one wanting to do this.

“Well, that’s all for now. Sleep approaches. I wish I could say I love you, but I don’t. But don’t cry. You hate me too. If it bothers you, see a shrink. —Sandra.”

There was complete silence except for the crackling fire. Rabbi Goldstein held the letter out toward Linda, but she didn’t reach for it. Mrs. Charles had released her, but she just stood there. Every eye was watching her face.

“What happened when I was born?” she asked quietly.

Mr. and Mrs. Rosen exchanged a glance. Then he shrugged. “Go ahead, Bess.”

“We never told you because we didn’t want to hurt you,” she said to Linda.

“What was it?”

“You were twins. Unidentical twins.”

Linda stared at her parents. “*Twins?*”

“Twins. But *your* placenta took most of the nourishment. You starved your twin brother to death.”

Incredulous, Linda looked from one parent to the other. “And you never told me?”

“Your mother and I didn’t want you to feel guilty for killing your brother,” explained Mr. Rosen.

“Killing my brother! I *didn’t* kill my brother.”

“It was your placenta,” he shrugged.

Linda tried to speak, but couldn’t. Her face was a dozen emotions. For a moment she looked as if she would do something terrible. Then she turned and walked across the room and out the door.

As she was going out, a person entering the lobby brushed past her. It was Reverend Matthews, his face glowing, transfused with light and joy. Stopping in the middle of the room, he raised his arms. “Praise be,” he cried, “I’m saved. I’ve been born again ... in William Barnes!”

A crashing silence greeted this. Then Mrs. Charles stood up. Pushing past the others, she advanced on the radiant man, raised her handbag, and swung it in one powerful blow across his head.

“Matt,” she said, “I hope the plague takes you.”

Then she stalked like a lioness out the door and into the night.

* * * * *

Later, when all had gone to their rooms, I went back by the fire and picked up the letter from the floor. It was written in a kind of childish handwriting, like mine. There was one waterstain on the last page where the ink had run. I touched it. It was Sandra’s dry tear. So I put the letter in my desk in case anyone ever wanted it.

Chapter Fifteen

Toward three a.m. the Curator saw the office light still burning and came in. He gave me his transcriptions and asked for mine. I said I'd wait and put them all together in one book, the weekend wasn't over yet.

When he left, I read the museum visits of Rabbi Goldstein, of Reverend Matthews and William Barnes, and of the Rosens. So that explained a lot.

An hour later Mr. C. came back and sat down facing me. His trim face was lined and sad. He said he wanted to sit up with me a while. I told him I wasn't dead yet and my body didn't need watching. He smiled unhappily. For once he was so gentle and in touch. Our midnight moods seemed joined by rubber bands; when he sighed, it pulled at my own breath.

He said the snakes looked better with their noses unbandaged, but that we'd better get them into glass aquariums fast. I told him I was going to give them freedom later that same Sunday morning in the desert. He said that some of them might die in liberty, they were from a lower altitude. I told him that I had a plan.

I went and poured two glasses full of juice. We raised them in a toast to things unsaid.

"You should have come this evening," I told him. "It was wild."

"The sister's letter?"

I stared at him, then guessed. "The lobby mirror?"

He nodded.

Shit. What other events had the old buzzard spied on back there these past seven years? "You got a mirror like that in Number Four?"

"Yes. "

"I should have known. Tell me, did Trav Sales make it with Linda Rosen?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Research."

"Or cat curiosity." He laughed. "You women are funny. Who can understand you?"

"You can't?"

He shook his head. "There's something about females that eludes understanding. Look at Mrs. Charles. Look at the Rosen girl. Are they insane? Or are they Everywoman — sensuous, jealous, unfathomable?"

"Linda's easy to understand," I told him. "Mrs. Charles is even easier. If you'd been here listening all day you'd understand them too. My transcripts will explain...."

"No. I'll read your transcripts tomorrow. If you think you have some innate woman's understanding of those two ladies, and by extension of all women, I want to

hear it right now, in your own words.”

“Maybe,” I smiled secretively. “In exchange.”

“For what?”

“You tell me what happened to Reverend Matthews tonight.”

“He got whacked in the kisser by Mrs. Charles.”

(Smile) “I mean his conversion to Barnes.”

“Ah, you want to understand the mechanism of faith. You want to know what happens inside a person who is ‘born again.’ ”

“Yes. And why did he pick William Barnes when he could have had Christ? Or even Buddha?”

“And in exchange you’ll explain women to me?” He took a sip of juice, then set down his glass. “All right. That’s fair enough. But not here. Let’s do this thing properly. Join me in the museum in ten minutes. We’ll have a party.”

“A going-away party?” I said for no reason, feeling my face crinkle around two sad brown eyes.

He gazed gently at me. “Ten minutes.” Then he turned and went out.

Chapter Sixteen

At night, waiting alone in some drab office, ten minutes seems eternity. To pass the time I went back and looked into the trick mirror, seeking spy-shadows in the glass, finding just my own dark gaze. Then I buttoned on a sweater, took a flashlight and portable tape recorder, and went out. In the courtyard I had to stop and point the flashlight hopefully upwards, like another fool.

The museum door was closed as always, but unlocked. I opened it and entered the warm, moist daytime garden. It was only my third visit in these seven years. I asked myself why I never came here more often. My eyes, nose, dry pores drank in everything, against leaner times.

Mr. C. waded waist-deep through the bushes. “It’s over that way,” he said.

I followed him across the strange/familiar garden, dizzy as a traveler returning home.

“Feel free to eat the fruit,” he called over his shoulder. So I pulled off a plum and bit its ripe cheek.

Then we came to that old, gnarled tree in the middle. “You remember this one,” he said.

“Yes.”

I approached the tree. I had never been so close to it before. Now, I stood right under its majestic limbs. Its thousand green-and-silver leaves shone in the glow from the pear-like fruit.

The Curator was beside me. “Would you like to taste one?” he asked in a friendly way.

“They look like lightbulbs,” I hesitated. “Are they edible?”

“If they were, would you try one?”

“I don’t know.”

“Even if, by eating it, you’d gain all knowledge of good and evil?”

“A fruit maybe,” I told him. “A lightbulb, not on your sweet ass.”

Giggling, we left the tree and continued walking. For a man of his age, Mr. C. is very trim. “As I told Rabbi Goldstein,” he said, “I’m still having trouble with the fruit.” He paused, looking hard ahead through the brush. “Ah, they’ve all arrived. Good. Come.” He started walking more rapidly.

We were entering deeper into the garden than I’d ever gone. The Curator stopped on the edge of a clearing. In the middle stood a small, glittering structure. Some figures were seated in it.

“What’s that?” I asked in surprise.

“My hubcap collection,” he told me, “fashioned into a gazebo. The folks you see inside it are the Adam family.”

“They seem to be moving,” I said, “but they look so grey.”

“Grey and silent. Except for the serpent, which is a less complex life form, like the flora here. I still can’t get the humans on Polychrome and Comm. at this distance from the control room.” He rubbed his hands together. “Well, silent, grey mingling is better than nothing. Come.”

The closer we got, the more truly human they looked, grey or not. “Aren’t they even a little alive?” I had to ask, having often wondered.

Mr. C. frowned. “Not even a little. Not yet.” Then he laughed. “The technical problems are enormous. Who do you think I am? A candidate for the Nobel Prize in biology?” Then he answered his own moot question. “No, my research lies in a quite different direction.”

We climbed three silvery steps into the gazebo. Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel were there, sitting as far from each other as space allowed. The polychrome snake was wound around a railing near Eve’s knee. We sat down among the grey group. I told Mr. C. it was like being aboard ship with the Ancient Mariner, crewed by the living dead.

“Don’t dramatize it,” he replied. “I assure you that there’s no hocus-pocus here. All things that exist in this garden can be explained by physical laws.”

“Even Eve and me?” I asked wickedly.

He hesitated, then after a moment said, “I’m willing to be convinced.”

“Your turn first,” I reminded him. “A deal’s a deal.”

Reaching forward, the Curator arranged a strand of Eve’s long hair over her grey breast. She glanced down silently. A shard of yellow fruit was in her clenched hand. The serpent swayed, ignored, by her knee.

The Curator cleared his throat. “So, you want to know what caused our friend Reverend Matthews to be born again?”

“I truly would. I’d like to hear a miracle explained.”

“I assure you it was no miracle,” said Mr. C. “If you pay attention you’ll easily understand what happened. Now, Marly, when the reverend entered the lobby this evening, what did you notice about him?”

I remembered carefully. “He looked very happy.”

“Yes, like a man in love. A man struck, as the French say, by a *coup de foudre*, a lightning bolt. ‘Happiness,’ someone once said, ‘is the satisfying of some desire of infancy.’ ”

“Then babies must love fast cars and foxy ladies. They sure used to make my Al look glad.”

“No,” laughed Mr. C. “It’s motherly love I’m talking about.”

Leaning forward, he swatted at the serpent which was staring between Eve’s naked legs. The quick pink head moved one inch to the side to let the blow go harmlessly by. A breeze blew across the garden, rustling the leaves, then everything settled down. How sad I’d feel when it came time to leave all this action behind.

“The male infant’s need for its mother puts it in competition with its own father,” he continued. “Emotions of jealousy, rivalry and guilt start to arise; a terrible love triangle between the parents and their child has begun. It is the classic Oedipus phenomenon.”

“I’m surprised any of us survive,” I laughed. Then I was even more surprised to see my boss reach over and grip my arm.

“That, Marly,” he said with intensity, “is the key word. Survival.”

“But Mr. C.,” I pleaded. “Freud’s old theory may be correct, but why is it so important to you? Why does everything have to get back to psychology? ”

“No, Marly,” he frowned, “one must go forward, *past* the limits of psychology. Why? Because psychology has proven it cannot do the job. The human psyche is, in the long term, tamper-proof. The reason for this is simple: Were men able to tinker effectively with the instincts that preserve their species, they would have destroyed their species long ago, just as they destroy everything they learn to control. So Mother Nature has taken steps to prevent this from happening; she has provided men with a physical barrier inside the brain that no mental prying or probing can penetrate. At least, not long enough to allow them to harm their species.”

I smiled. “Curator,” I said, “I just can’t believe that any lady — not even Mother Nature — ever evolved anything that could keep *you* out. I’m sure you’ll find some way to squeeze through and destroy the human race.”

He laughed, then grew serious. “Listen, Marly,” he said, his short white beard starting to quiver intently, “see what has happened in the past several decades. The human population has expanded dramatically. There are now billions of human beings

alive on this planet, each with powerful survival instincts. They all have a built-in pro-creative instinct, as well as instincts associated with the Oedipus complex which make them desire and compete, even to the death, for that which they desire. But our planet is running out of resources. These competitive instincts, which once helped build up the human race and insure its survival, will soon destroy it. They have got to be controlled. But how? If reason cannot do it, if psychology cannot, then how can it be done?"

"I just have a hunch you already know," I said confidently. "I just *know* you've found some way. The only thing I don't know is what this has to do with Reverend Matthews being born again in William Barnes. You did promise to explain that to me, remember?"

"And I intend to." Leaning over, the Curator took another swipe at the snake, managing to give it a light blow on the neck. With a dismal glance at its tormentor, the creature coiled around a hubcap, hissed once in disgust, and was still.

"All right, Marly," said Mr. C., "let's start by looking at Jesus of Nazareth. Imagine the young rabbi as he must have been — a gentle, poetic soul in terrible conflict with his businessman father and with the highly patriarchal Jewish society in which he lived. A sort of 'hippy,' unable or unwilling to compete with his father in the marketplace, he dreamed of a paradise where he, the son, would sit at the right hand of his father — as his father's equal. (As you surely know, young persons often want to get to high places without working for the honor.) Of course, this democratic vision was utter anathema to his elders, which included the powerful rabbinical establishment of the day.

"Another middle class Jew, Saul of Tarsus, known too by the Roman name Paul, also suffered feelings of alienation from his Jewish family and community. Self-flagellation and the wearing of hair shirts were extreme methods he used to punish himself and assuage his feelings of guilt. Then one day, in a burst of light, he identified with the humiliated and martyred Jesus. At that moment Saul/Paul's personality seemed to come together — he was 'reborn.'

"It's noteworthy that one of the first Hebrew traditions abolished by Paul was circumcision. Whatever else it might be, circumcision is a symbolic castration, a father's warning to his son of what can happen if the son's desire for his mother interferes with the rights of his father."

"I suppose we can guess what kind of son's revenge was in Paul's mind," I smiled.

Mr. C. nodded. "But if you think Paul had Oedipus problems, look at poor Jesus. Alas, as so often happens in severe father/son conflicts, out of desperation the son became self-destructive.

"Jesus' going to Jerusalem, where John the Baptist had been put to death already, was a desperate, suicidal act. The young rabbi rode into Jerusalem boldly, entered the Temple, threw out the moneylenders and tradespeople dealing there, and began preaching his Gospel. The Pharisees were furious, but the Romans were puzzled. Caught in the middle of a Jewish 'family argument,' they appealed to the Jewish leaders. Did *they*

want this blasphemous young rabbi silenced? They certainly did. It was not their religious beliefs that they felt were threatened by his preaching, but the very fabric of their family and social traditions.

“Sentenced to death, nailed to the cross, Jesus still hoped his father — real or heavenly — would step forward to save him, forgive him, love him. But neither did. His last words are reported to have been from his favorite psalm: ‘Father, father, why have you forsaken me?’ ”

The Curator bent down and gently drew up the snake to examine a mark on its flat head, finding only a speck of dirt. He flicked it off with his fingertip before pressing the serpent’s head back down. “Marly, do you want to know what you were crying in your delirium the day I found you under that yellow elm tree?”

“I bet I was cursing a certain pimp.”

“No, you were calling for your mother,”

His words sent hot and cold waves through me. Such a large and sudden lump arose in my throat, I couldn’t speak. Even so, I was glad he’d told me. Suddenly I wanted to know and understand everything about my past life. I watched the yellow fragments that glistened in Eve’s hand. Something told me it was better to know everything and die, than nothing and live forever.

“Do you understand why you were calling for her?” asked Mr. C.

I nodded.

“Then perhaps one day you’ll explain it to me,” he sighed. “I confess, I can’t understand it. Nor see what attracted you to that cheap pimp, Al.”

I stared at him dumbfounded and swallowed the lump. My open mouth was speechless at his true lack of understanding of females.

The Curator didn’t notice my stunned look. “To get back to what happened this evening,” he continued, “I must point out that William Barnes is no different from any man who ever lived — Jesus, Paul, Freud or Joe Doakes.”

“Present speaker excluded,” I remarked dryly, having found my voice.

He gave a modest, self-deprecating shrug. “Of course.” I had to hold myself from grabbing up the snake and whacking him with it. Still noticing nothing, my boss continued, “Now just look at what our pilot friend Barnes has done. Unlike Jesus, who acted symbolically, Barnes resolved his father-conflict by actually taking up a gun and shooting his father. Then, while justifying his action — insisting that death and murder are only illusions — he tried to punish himself by flying his airplane into the ground.”

“But this still doesn’t answer my question,” I objected. “If Jesus and Barnes were only suffering from extreme Oedipus complexes, why do so many people worship them?”

The Curator stood up. “To explain this I propose a little demonstration. You may be wondering why I brought you — well chaperoned as you see — way out here. The reason is, I’ve been working on a gadget which is a sort of working model of the key to

understanding everything. “

“That must be some gadget,” I said, impressed. “Does it understand women too?”

“Of course not. Present company is always excepted. Now, this gazebo actually is part of the gadget. The roof sheltering us contains a most remarkable mechanism which will, when I push this button....”

“Stop!” I cried, grabbing back his arm. I was sure he planned to launch us into space.

He laughed reassuringly. “Don’t be afraid. Nothing sudden or terrible will happen. I wouldn’t risk our lives and a lifetime of work.”

The button hung from the ceiling by a short wire. I watched him push it. Nothing happened. “Is something wrong?” I inquired hopefully.

“Not at all,” he smiled. “Look up there.”

I peered out at the blue sky, but all I saw was one small wisp of cloud. Relieved, but still apprehensive, I pulled my gaze back down like a stubborn kite. “If you’re waiting for a UFO, it hasn’t come,” I told him.

“Keep watching,” he said, so I looked again. Nothing, except the same cloud getting a little bigger.

“My machine changes the adiabatic lapse rate,” he told me. “Just a few degrees Fahrenheit is all that’s needed to cause instability in the atmosphere. The rotation of the earth and the garden’s moisture do the rest. It will soon storm.”

“You’re making rain?” I cried. “What does rain have to do with being born again?”

“Not rain necessarily, though a little rain couldn’t hurt. What I’m really after is a lightning bolt — *a coup de foudre* — such as struck our friend Reverend Matthews tonight.”

I stared again at this strange man. Just what was he leading up to? “I don’t want a lightning bolt hitting *my* head,” I told him. “Agnosticism suits me just fine.”

“Don’t worry. This gazebo was designed on the principles of a Faraday cage. As long as we remain inside, we can’t be electrocuted. Anyway, the storm won’t last long. They never do.”

I thought of Aaron’s sons who died millennia before a man named Faraday was born. How could the Lord have zapped them for their sins if they had had so safe a cage as this?

The wispy cloud soon covered up the sun, casting shadow on the chromium gazebo. The only brightness now was on the edges of the cloud. A strong gust of wind blew my attention to other things. It bared Eve’s grey breasts and lifted Adam’s beard.

“Look, Marly,” said Mr. C. “Look at the cloud now.”

Above us the cloud had grown larger and had rounded out, billowing white like a giant cauliflower.

“Your basic cumulus,” observed the Curator, rubbing his hands with satisfaction.

“A real beauty, if I do say so myself. The atmospheric instability this machine achieves is fantastic. The cumulus could well grow to thirty thousand feet. For this time of year, that’s not half bad.”

“I don’t even want to *think* of lightning flashing down so high a hill,” I said. “If I was home, this head would be under a pillow.”

“Nonsense,” said Mr. C., his face alight. “Marly, can you imagine what’s going on inside that cloud? There’s more energy building up in there than in a thousand steam locomotives.”

“Looks like we’re along for the ride — in the caboose.”

“Call it rather the ‘observation car,’ “ corrected the Curator. “The only problem is, we can’t observe what’s going on *inside* that mass of condensation as it becomes a thundercloud. We can’t see or feel the turbulence caused by mighty updrafts and downdrafts, the friction of the dust and air molecules generating more and more static energy — adding to the enormous buildup of voltage and pressure inside the cloud.”

“I just know that fucker’s gonna zap us,” I swore to Mr. C. “This gazebo must look just yummy to that monster.”

“Lightning can’t get at us here,” he reassured me. “When the time comes, that tall pine would be more likely to reap the honor. Or be reaped.”

“When the time comes!” I exploded, watching the cloud swell and grow above our heads. “It looks like our time is up right now. Faraday cage my eye. There’s nothing between that cloud and us but hubcaps.”

“There’s also air,” he chuckled. “Clean, dry air is an excellent insulator. But after a while, the pressure of the negative voltage in that heavily-charged cloud mass will build up to a point where it will overcome the value of the insulating air. Then something will have to happen; relief will come in a giant flash, a flow of electrons, as the positively charged earth discharges current toward the cloud.”

“Toward the *cloud*?”

“That’s right.”

“My God.” I stood up and began looking around my feet. Were we about to get shafted from below? It took him a few minutes to get me calmed down, using himself as an example of tranquility.

“And now I expect your next question will be: What does all this have to do with being born again?”

“It was on the list,” I admitted, “but down a ways, past the questions of life and death.”

“Then let’s look a moment at the human mind,” said the Curator agreeably. “Try to picture it in three parts: the cloud up there (conscious mind), the earth below (subconscious), and the insulating gap between them.

“Now, on most days the weather is fair — the conscious and subconscious co-exist calmly. Then, one day, for whatever reason, instability arises. Some disturbing thought

or emotion begins to grow. A cloud of mental conflict burgeons. The electrical voltage of the brain, which before was an easy, relaxed current, begins to increase toward an intolerable level. Emotions such as jealousy, hatred and desire exert more and more pressure inside the conscious mind.

“The pressure grows. As in a storm cloud, something must happen to relieve it. Either the mental storm will fade away and calm will return, or a flash of insight will occur. When this happens, the information hidden or forgotten in the subconscious leaps across the gap into the conscious mind in a dazzling arc of light.”

“I don’t understand,” I interrupted. “Isn’t it the *reasoning* part of the mind that reaches across into the subconscious?”

“No, it only seems to. Actually the discharge is from the subconscious into the conscious, from the earth to the cloud, so to speak. And as with real lightning, this flash of enlightenment bridges the gap by following the path of least resistance. Look! Did you see that?”

His question was lost in a thunderclap. As he’d been speaking, rain had started falling nearby. I’d been watching it advance toward us like a great, grey elephant leg. Then suddenly lightning had flickered down it between cloud and earth.

“Did you see how the electrical discharge took the jagged path of least resistance, through the rainstorm?” the Curator asked me. “Water is a good conductor of electricity. Exactly the same sort of thing happens in the mind. A flash of insight often uses some sort of ‘conductor’ or ‘lightning rod,’ to help it overcome resistances between the subconscious and conscious.”

“Water on the brain?” I punned wickedly.

He pretended to consider this, then shook his head. “No, that might short-circuit the entire mind and cause a mental break-down. Mental conductors are usually dry — psychiatrist probings, evangelical entreaties, the inspirational words of gifted teachers — these are the sorts of conductors which help persons receive flashes of insight.

“These bursts of light, that we actually do seem to see at these moments, are nothing more than arcs of chemo-electric current bypassing our mental resistances, crossing the gap Mother Nature has carefully placed between our conscious and subconscious minds to keep us in animal ignorance of our past and, by so doing, of our true natures. It was this sort of flash that Paul saw when his tortured mind suddenly found relief through empathy with the martyred Jesus.”

“So that’s what happened tonight to Reverend Matthews?”

“Exactly. Like Paul, he was unable any longer to bear the growing pressures of some terrible guilt. His problem was all the more acute since he felt unable to identify with Christ — a sorry plight for a minister. Yet, happily for him, Reverend Matthews was able to identify at last with someone. It was no accident this someone was William Barnes, the smooth-talking young man who had acted out the reverend’s own infant fantasy of patricide.”

“I don’t believe it can last,” I said. “I bet that when the reverend wakes up tomorrow he’ll have forgotten all about Barnes.”

“He may remember Barnes,” said Mr. C. “What he’ll forget — has already forgotten — is whatever he saw so briefly in that flash of light. As in similar cases, he will forget the truths he saw and transfer his love to the lightning rod, William Barnes. This very human failing is Mother Nature’s way of preventing mankind from ever fully understanding itself, of keeping it animal, jealous, competitive and *surviving*. The only trouble with this, as I pointed out earlier, is that these human traits that once helped our species survive, now work toward its destruction.”

“Then you believe humanity is doomed? There’s nothing to be done?”

“Not necessarily, Marly,” he said, his eyes beginning to shine. “What if someone came along who had discovered a way to bridge the gap between our conscious minds and the truths hidden in our subconscious minds? I mean, what if someone found a way to make those flashes of insight *last* — last long enough to enable persons to grasp the truths buried in their minds and rid themselves *permanently* of their self-destructive neuroses. Do you see what would happen?”

“A lot of shrinks would be filing for unemployment compensation.”

“But what about the rest of humanity?”

It took a moment to imagine such a liberated world. “I guess folks’d be a speck happier, wouldn’t go around killing themselves and family.”

“Wouldn’t feel competitive, either sexually, professionally or politically,” nodded the Curator. “Would honor their fathers and mothers.”

“Not covet their neighbor’s ass.”

“Would leave the oil in the ground and the skins on the seals.”

“The tusks on the elephant and the whales in the seas. You really have found out how to do this?” I asked, impressed. “You know how to bypass Ma Nature, outwit evolution and Oedipus?”

“A simple question of engineering, not psychology. I have the algebra worked out already. I see it as a kind of potion.”

“Looks like you aiming to be a Messiah yourself,”

“In their hearts, all men want to be Messiahs,” he confided. “They want to beat the system that has been imposed on them by their fathers and proclaim their message to the world. All I need now,” he added thoughtfully, “is a live guinea pig.”

“Try the mice,” I suggested. “There’s one in there I noticed having trouble with his pa.”

Mr. C. smiled. “It would be a neat trick if I could pull it off, wouldn’t it, Marly? Can you picture a world of men that are uncompetitive, worshipful, meek — in short the very world that Jesus desired and prophesied but was unable to create?”

“You’d be King of the Zombies.” I looked around at our grey companions. “Like them, only with lightbulbs in their eye sockets.”

“An interesting observation,” he nodded. “All mankind would then be programmable to act out whatever I wanted it to.” He chuckled. “I’m only joking, of course.”

“Of course.” His joke had chilled me; I could see the soul of Oedipus shining in his eyes too. Was there no hope for mankind after all?

The rain was drumming on our metal roof, the lightning flashing and the thunder crashing. Somehow I didn’t feel afraid now as before; did my life seem less dear?

Eve hadn’t moved. Rain gleamed in her hair and on her face and breast. She gazed ahead of her like the carved prow of some brave ship held fast by its wooden nature to ply the seas and break the waves. After our strange conversation, I needed to return to some familiar shore. The raindrops ran down her cheeks and there was some desperate silence in her eyes. Watching where she looked, I sighted a familiar land.

I thought of all the women I’d met these past seven years. Ophelia, dying of incomprehension, while her beloved Hamlet brooded on the need to kill a man who’d killed his father, who’d done the job he wished he’d done himself; Desdemona, victim of two jealous men; Linda Rosen, still caught at square one, trying to get past a monster mother to reach her father’s love.

“So tell me,” smiled Mr. C. “Have I answered your question about Reverend Matthews?”

“Yes.”

“All right. Now it’s your turn. Explain to me why Mrs. Charles popped that poor fellow with her handbag.”

His question jolted me by its facetiousness. The explanation for that act went back half a century, though it was hard to imagine Mrs. Charles as an infant. But, to be polite, and reply promptly and directly to my boss, I said, “She thought he’d slept with Linda Rosen.”

“Had he?”

“No. You should know he hadn’t.” I looked with annoyance at Mr. C. “I don’t think that Mrs. Charles really believed he had.”

“Then why on earth did she whack him?” asked the Curator with irritating persistence.

How stubborn the man was. Couldn’t he even *try* to understand? He’d just spent an hour explaining the same problem as it applied to men.

“She was probably getting even with men for a lifetime of condescension,” I said with some feeling.

The Curator laughed. “You see? Women are irrational, oversexed troublemakers. As the great Freud himself asked, after studying and treating them for thirty years: ‘*Was will das Weib?*’ What does a woman *want?*”

“Listen,” I said, “how come you know so much about men and so little about women?”

He chuckled. “Marly, you mustn’t think I know everything. For instance, I

haven't yet found a way to *prove* that nothing exists after death."

"Maybe you could check it out by dropping dead." (No smile.)

"That's a drastic step for someone who doesn't believe in an afterlife," he shrugged.

"Well, maybe you should listen to those near-death experiences folks were talking about today. You were in the museum, and you haven't read my transcriptions yet, but they were talking about seeing shining figures dressed in white holding out their arms in welcome."

"I've heard of such things, but don't know what these strange tales indicate. Suggestibility? Hallucination? Who knows? Near-deaths occur too infrequently and at random for anyone to investigate them methodically. No, no one has ever proved what, if anything, lies beyond the crescent moon — not I, not Barnes, not Jesus."

"These folks said that on the verge of death they felt at peace, like they understood everything." The fragment of yellow fruit glistened in Eve's hand. Was peace what that woman felt when she bit in and mortality enveloped her?

"If so," said the Curator, "we have a lot to look forward to in death. But I deeply doubt it. Until I have such an experience myself, I'll continue to take these shining white figures with a grain of skepticism. As for one's life flashing past when life is, or seems to be, ending, that did start to happen to me once, so I believe it.

"But now it's your turn," he continued. "You still haven't explained women to me. It's obvious, of course, that they suffer from a reverse of the Oedipus complex, that their infant desire is to replace their mothers and marry their fathers. Rabbi Goldstein's daughter was a perfect example of that. And then there's the penis envy...."

"Whoa," I said. "Hold on. I'll buy the big O, but not the other."

"Resistances," sighed Mr. C., shaking his head. "You've simply blocked the memory." He looked at his watch. "It's very late. Why don't we call it a night?"

"Just a minute," I said. "We had a deal. I'm going to explain women to you right now."

"Oh, I thought you just had. Well then, tell me quickly why you women always want to compete with men, possess men, drive trucks like men. I'll tell you why, Marly. It's because you envy that which makes us men — our penises."

"Don't be so vain," I objected indignantly. "Linda Rosen flying a plane is no harder to understand than a man going off and getting his ass crucified. Why don't you just try to understand?"

I had to talk fast because suddenly Mr. C. was sighing and glancing around the garden and drumming his fingers on the railing of the gazebo.

"Fine," he said, as soon as I'd stopped. "You've explained everything perfectly. Now let's go and get some sleep."

"No," I cried. "I'm explaining, but you're not even trying to understand."

"You've told me nothing at all so far," he said. "You haven't explained why

woman gave man the forbidden fruit, or why a woman of fifty such as Mrs. Charles paints and powders her face like a clown. Women have always been greedy, demanding creatures and completely unreasonable. Men have always tried to put them on pedestals and love them, but they leap right off.”

“Damn right,” I shouted. “We aren’t going to wait up there for you dumb snakes to pay us a visit.”

The Curator stood up. “So that’s your explanation of women and your opinion of men. Fascinating.” He looked at his watch.

I couldn’t believe it. He was going to bolt. “Speaking of resistances,” I cried, “how come you can’t understand women when you can understand everything else? What did *your* mama and papa do to *you*?”

Mr. C.’s face was crimson. “How dare you mention my mother! She was a saint. Never was there another woman who could take her place. As for my father, when this museum belonged to him it was nothing — *nothing*! It was I who built the Garden of Eden, I who designed the snake and Adam and Eve. All my father ever had here was a Gutenberg Bible and a rusty sword.”

These words of his seemed to open doors of understanding in my mind. “Now I see,” I told him back. “You’re so big on the Oedipus complex, and now I see why. You’re not a savior of anything, you’re just another victim like Christ and Barnes and Freud and all of us. If our Oedipus complexes doom humanity like you say, then humanity is surely doomed, and not you nor anyone can do anything about it.”

“*Quiet*, Marly,” he commanded in a roar. “Be still! I’ll tell you one thing, young lady, I’ll be glad when you’re out of here. I’ll be glad tomorrow when you’re gone.” He stopped speaking. We stared at each other.

“When I’m what?” My voice was so quiet now.

“When you’re...” His mouth couldn’t repeat the word.

My heart was pounding hard. “Am I taking the Sunday bus? Am I leaving here? Going home?” I looked at my watch. Sunday was today.

“I don’t know,” he muttered, not meeting my eyes. “Perhaps.”

“Or something else? I’ve been feeling a change coming, and a few hours from now they’ll pull that respirator plug.”

“I don’t know.” Coming nearer, he put his arm around my shoulder. “It’s very late. You must be tired. I’ll turn off the garden and walk you to your room.”

My mind was in turmoil. I told him I wasn’t going to my room, I didn’t plan to sleep this night. “I have work to do.”

“I understand.” He paused, looking at me thoughtfully. “I’m sorry, my dear, that we had those angry words. I’m sure you weren’t trying to hurt me.”

A laugh came to my lips. “No. I’m sure you weren’t either.”

Slowly we walked back through the garden. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, walked silently behind us. Snake brought up the rear. We left them by the tree and went

out into the cold night.

Back at the office I put on a tape and the earphones and started to transcribe. Perhaps some day, reading all this, he'll understand what he can't now. I won't let his hasty words get me down. There's still so much to do before bus time.

Chapter Seventeen

*This desert land lies 7000 feet above the seas,
yet on a daily parcel service route;
each morning, backpacking our supplies,
Ms. Sun treks briskly o'er the eastern butte.
When we awake and open up our eyes,
already there, spread out around her knees:
cactus, pylons, creatures, rocks and fruit.*

— Marly

Sunday morning. There is some wind. Down by the wash the golden elm leaves chime like distant bells. The air is so clear, I can see across the horizon into Texas and down to Louisiana, my birth state.

All morning there's been church music in my head, psalms and hymns, hallelujas and weeping. Sometimes it's so loud, I know a change is coming soon.

A few hours from now the Albuquerque bus stops here. I've made a room-check of our guests. Already disappeared: Randolph Smith, Messiah and John John, the Pierces, the Hussions, the Frinks and the Rosens, except for Linda. Undecided: Rabbi Goldstein and Mrs. Charles. Definitely wanting the bus: Reverend Matthews and Linda. I plan to take the bus too, so that makes three for Albuquerque.

I'm homesick this morning. When I close my eyes the hymns inside my head wail like wind around a storm, crying for a lost child. Lightning flashes, and in its sudden light I see some long-forgotten part of me trying to return.

I open my eyes and there is the office, the motel, the red and yellow land. Just now Linda Rosen went past the window and waved. She is going for a walk before bus time. Her face wore a new look, full of resolutions.

I hate her. Randy wanted me before she came. I could have spent an hour in his arms, my thighs embracing that big cock, living in the moment. Now that moment is gone by, never to return. I ask: Why did he come looking for her last evening, full of concern? Why did he bother? Who is she that some loose traveling salesman will bother for her?

So I am full of envy and hate, spite and curiosity.

I found the snake hook and lifted out the three local snakes, then put them in the

field box and closed the lid. The box chattered with tail warnings. One thing about all snakes, they do not say goodbye. They never say hello or look at us with kind and trustful eyes. Rattler mothers are reptiles with milk in their fangs.

Holding the chattering, buzzing box I was walking along the dirt road when I found Linda Rosen sitting on a large stone, sunning herself. She heard the box.

“What have you got there?”

“Rattlesnakes. Time’s come to let them loose.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“They askin the same thing.”

I set down the box. She looked at it thoughtfully, her face full of why.

“They are my flock of white doves,” I told her. “My thousand balloons. In this dry land we make do with what we got.” I sat down on another rock, but didn’t open the box yet.

“I see. Tell me, have you any idea where one might find Randolph Smith?”

“Trav Sales?”

“Yes,” she said in her stiff voice.

“Last I saw, he was headed toward the little boys’ room.”

“When was that?”

“Yesterday eve. Just before you folks had your family reunion.” (Smile.)

I could tell by her face this memory was wry. She sat a minute looking at the wood box. “I guess I’ll never understand men,” she sighed.

That made me laugh. “They just like us inside,” I told her. “Exactly like us.”

“Maybe that’s the reason then.”

“I thought you learned one lesson or two last night about the way we ladies are.”

She shifted on the hard, yellow rock. “I did. Last night everything seemed clear. Were you listening?”

“I caught some.”

“Well, last night I felt as if my whole life had changed. Everything seemed explained. When they told me about that *twin* ... my God ... everything became clear. And my sister’s accident. They’ve been blaming me my whole life for things that never were my fault.”

“And so now it’s all cleared up and your whole life is changed. Now you can go love, get married and have kids.”

“That’s what I thought last night. Then this morning I woke up crying, just as if nothing had changed at all.”

“Why were you crying?”

“Because Randy hadn’t been there. I felt so alone and abandoned. He’d promised to help me confront them, but he never showed up.”

“What was he supposed to do?”

“Just be there. Just be near me, be on my side against them, maybe put in a good

word for me, in my defense. Well, I always knew you can't depend on anyone but yourself."

I looked at her curiously. "So nothing is changed, even with learning about your sister and the twin. You still crying over being born an unwanted girl. I think you're too careful. You should go out and have some kids."

"No. I know I wouldn't know how to love them."

"You can't know that. Things are changed now."

"Nothing's changed. Last night, for a moment, I thought I was free. I thought I hated them utterly, my parents and my sister, and that I could go my way and never concern myself about them again. I felt that any love I had for them had been destroyed."

"And today?" I asked.

"Today I don't hate them any more. I'm hoping that I don't love them. I hope that I'm free of them, but I'm not sure. In any case, I don't plan to attend my sister's funeral. When I reach Albuquerque I'll head back to France."

Her eyes looked very hard. I saw now that the resolutions in her face were all bitter ones. What she had learned last night was too terrible to handle alone. If she had ten resistances before, now there were one hundred. Even Trav Sales would not try to close a sale against such odds. Suddenly I didn't hate her any more.

"Look," I said, "about Randy. There are a few things you should know."

"Don't tell me. I don't want to know anything. I needed him and he wasn't there."

"But he..."

"I don't want to listen. Please. Forget about it."

How strange, I thought. Her whole life she suffered from things nobody would tell her, and she still wants not to know. I looked at the snake box. "Were you lovers?"

"That's just the point. We weren't. If I'd slept with him I could maybe understand his disappearing act; men dislike easy women. But I thought..." She paused and a tear sparkled in her eye. "I thought we were sort of ... friends." Her face went red and she took sun glasses out of her pocket and put them on. "*Men*," she said bitterly. "They always seem to belong to someone else."

She was so unhappy, like someone on a desert island, dreaming of dear home across the sea. Right then I decided it would help her understand a lot of things if she could read the transcriptions of this weekend. I didn't have time before the bus to type the whole thing over again, so her gain would be our Curator's loss. He'd be furious, but I was on my way out anyway.

"Listen," I told her, "I have something for you to read. It'll explain a lot of things to you."

"No thanks."

"It'll explain why Randy didn't come."

"I know why," she said bitterly. "He's a stupid, insensitive snake. He said he'd

come and he didn't. Finito. I don't want to hear excuses."

She was so hurt and scared, like a little kid, abandoned and wanting help, but pushing it away. She hadn't slept with Randy, so I could understand why he had worried for her. Everything was normal. Men were still snakes, revenging their mama's cold-blooded rejection of them on all women. So Linda was now no threat to me, only a good cause. Maybe if she read all about this weekend, it would change things for her. But how could I arrange it?

I moved the quiet box with my foot and heard the rattles. The sun was so strong. I closed my eyes and suddenly was back in that strange storm with singing wind and lightning in my brain.

I was sixteen again, I was fifteen, I was fourteen. My whole life was unwinding backwards in my head, flashing before my closed eyes: noises, glances, expressions of surprise, strangers' backs, cars starting in the night. And suddenly it all was clear, those looks, noises, glances, sights. My mother! My body went hot and sweaty, pain in the armpits. I gasped aloud.

"What's the matter?"

I opened my eyes and the filmreel stopped. Linda Rosen was looking at me with concern. "What's happening?" she said.

"My mother was a whore," I told her. "My own mother. I just realized it."

"Your own mother?"

"Isn't that something?" I felt a rising joy and excitement inside me.

"I suppose," said Linda dubiously.

I covered my eyes with my hands and it started again. That day my mother met Al. She was so mad. She threw him out and locked me in my room. But that look that passed between them when their eyes first met. Now it flashed by once again. She *knew* Al. She already knew him.

"Al was my mother's pimp too," I said aloud to the air. I laughed with excitement. "He'd been her pimp too. I see it now."

Poor Linda looked so puzzled. I hopped to my feet and started to jump and dance like some crazy woman around the snake box.

"Why does that make you so happy?" Her words wrapped around me as I spun.

I stopped dancing, dizzy and breathless. "Because I always thought I was so bad. I felt so wicked and sinful. But just now everything came together and I realized *she* was one. My own mother." Another flash struck. "She was always so religious, so God-fearing. So moral. Only now I see, she was the sinner, putting the blame on me."

I picked up the snake box and started running along the road. "Come on," I called back. "Come on. I'll let them out down there."

"I'd like to see that," she said, getting to her feet. "But let me know before you open the box."

"They more afraid of you," I shouted back. "This time of year you almost got to

kick one to get bit.”

Linda Rosen ran after me and caught up on her long legs. By then I'd had more flashes. That day my dad walked out and never came back. Suddenly it was so clear. He'd found my mother with another man. I never did know what went on that black day. She told me dad had left because I was rowdy and didn't eat my food. I wanted him back so bad. I ate so much, I grew fat as a cow. All through school I was the fattest girl in gym class. But he never came back to us. And one day, when I was sixteen, I stopped eating. Nobody could make me eat. I got bone thin, but I still wouldn't eat, wanting to go out like a flame. Then I met Al and fell in love and he showed me how and who to eat, and he was the first supper.

I was walking down the road with my whole life flashing backwards through my mind. All the things I could never understand, the good and the evil, were coming clear.

“Let's walk to the top of the rise,” Linda said, so I left the box to pick up later.

“From up there we should see the wrecked plane,” I told her.

Her head spun around. “*What* wrecked plane?”

“Some biplane. It crashed out that way yesterday morning.”

“It did? Was anyone hurt?”

“Both pilots were at the motel.”

“I didn't see them.” Her voice sounded disappointed. “How did they crash?”

“Flying low and slow in a turn.”

“That'll do it,” she nodded. “They were lucky to survive.”

“Pilot's name is or was Barnes.”

“*Barnes?*” She stopped in her tracks, considered a moment, then went on walking. “I used to know a pilot by that name, but it can't be the same one. William Barnes. He was the best pilot I ever flew with. The plane was just a stuffy old Cessna 172, but,” she smiled, “when he took the controls it became ... an eagle.”

“Don't sound much like this Bill Barnes. Most eagles don't crash.”

“No. Anyway, the Barnes I knew is now a millionaire. He started writing a lot of spiritual craperoo and hasn't been off the best-seller list since.”

“Well,” I said, “it's starting to sound a little more like our *the* William Barnes, unless there are two millionaire pilots named that way. He also goes by the name Messiah.”

Linda shook her head. “The Barnes I knew couldn't have crashed that way by accident, and I can't imagine why he'd have done it on purpose. He was a fantastic pilot.”

We followed the road up the rise and looked out over a desert plateau of yellow earth and piñon trees. Our eyes searched the land, but could see no wrecked plane.

“What color was it?”

“Gold, with red crash helmets.”

“It might have broken into little pieces. Biplanes are usually made of wood and fabric. Wait.” She pointed her finger. “Isn’t that someone over there near that juniper tree? He has something on his forehead that reminds me of flying.”

Sure enough, it was Barnes, wearing his goggles pushed up. He must have left the motel when I wasn’t looking.

Messiah was sitting crosslegged, tapping the ground with a grey cholla stick and looking at the sky. As we came nearer, he heard our voices and got up, recognizing only me. Linda wasn’t too sure about him either, since some years had passed. I reintroduced them.

Her name meant something to him. “Don’t I know you?” he squinted.

“From France. Flies. Writes poetry.”

“Gee whiz,” he exclaimed. “Linda. Sure I remember you. Hey, I didn’t know you were here.”

“Arrived yesterday. They say your plane crashed. Flying low and slow in a turn. Naughty naughty.” She shook her finger.

Messiah laughed. “Do you see any crashed plane?”

We glanced around once more for good measure. “Negatory,” admitted Linda. “Where did it go?”

“Up there somewhere.” He waved a zigzag at the sky with his cholla cane. “My friend John John took it up. I’m waiting for him to return.”

“Well, that’s good,” said Linda. “I didn’t think you’d crash. Not you. Not low and slow near the ground.”

“But I *did* crash,” Barnes smiled. “Yesterday. The plane was totaled. Golly, Linda, don’t you see? The crash was an illusion of yesterday; the reality of today is that the plane flies.”

“Ah.” She looked at him very thoughtfully.

Barnes moved away and began to pivot, turning faster and faster, holding the dry cactus cane at arm’s length. “No plane, no John John, *ergo*, they’ve gotta be flying somewhere together. Pure logic.” He stopped spinning, but kept smiling.

“You know,” Linda said after a moment, “I’ve glanced into a couple of your books.”

“Then you understand what I’m saying.”

“What *are* you saying?”

“About illusions and reality? That it doesn’t matter if you crash into the earth with your airplane because everything is an illusion anyway and nothing is impossible if you know it’s possible. Things only seem impossible and final and frightening because most people see them from the wrong space-time perspective. Did you visit the Eden museum?”

“Affirmative.”

“Wasn’t it a nifty show? But kind of sad too. Rediscovering the Bible is like finding a mastodon frozen whole in the Arctic ice cap. It gives you an idea of the glory that once walked the earth, but at the same time all you’re left with is a vast mountain of decaying meat.”

“Your eagle talkin like a turkey buzzard,” I told Linda, but she paid me no mind.

“I take it you think your spiritual flesh is more alive than what the Curator dishes out.”

“Golly, Linda, those words both mean the same anyway. Alive, dead, they’re both illusions. No one can say what life is. A soul can’t be created or killed, just borrowed and returned. Ask Reverend Matthews about immortality. Did you meet him?”

“Very briefly.”

“He came to my room last night, a poor, confused soul. I never saw a man so ready to be turned on to the truth.”

“Listen,” said Linda, “to change the subject, because I’m just not into this kind of craperoo, tell me, how’s your family? I remember you once said you had three sons.”

“Four now. My family’s doing great.”

Linda took this news a little wistfully. “That’s where I sort of envy you,” she said. “I don’t envy your ... uh ... literary success, or your financial success, or your fame. But I do kind of envy your family success. Four sons! How fantastic.”

“I try to be a good father,” said Barnes modestly.

“Well, you were lucky being born a male and having sons of your own. Fathers get along so much better with sons than mothers do with daughters.”

“True,” smiled Barnes, “My dad and I got along great. He died Friday evening.”

Linda looked shocked. “I’m so sorry.”

“He’ll be back,” said Messiah with a tight smile. “Not in the same form, of course, but he’ll be back. Nobody really dies.”

Linda took this gospel with an odd expression. “Well, I hope you’re right, for your father’s sake, but I wouldn’t stake my life on that philosophy. “

“I already have.”

There was an awkward silence as they observed each other across this deep and sudden gulf. Then Linda turned a little to the side and looked up at the sky. “No sign of your plane.”

“Not yet.”

“Was he carrying a lot of fuel?”

“My airplane doesn’t use fuel.”

“No gasoline?”

“No, nor oil either. You don’t need fuel to fly if you *know* you can fly. John John knows. He might stay up all day.”

“Listen,” said Linda, “are you sure we’re talking about the same thing? You don’t mean he’s flying a *glider*, by any chance?”

“No, it’s a regular piston engine. But don’t just take my word. Ask Matt the Apostle. He understands now that fulfillment isn’t a matter of believing, but of *knowing*. Once you *know* you can do something, such as fly, you can do it.”

“Then why don’t you fly right now?”

Barnes laughed. “One does need wings. I’ll wait for my friend to return with them.”

“Maybe I will ask Apostle Matthews about this,” said Linda, “gasoline prices being what they are. I’ll probably see him on the Albuquerque bus. Are you coming too?”

“I flew in, I’ll fly out.”

“Gotcha.” She paused and they looked at each other all over, as for the last time. “Well, Bill, lots of luck. I really mean that. You’ll need it.” She suppressed a smile.

“You too,” he grinned. “Remember, ‘low and slow in the turns.’”

She laughed. “I’ll remember.”

We started walking back toward the road, but by a slightly different way through the chollas and grama grass. “Not that way,” Messiah called after us.

“Why not?”

“It’s quicker the way you came.”

“Same difference,” Linda shouted back, and we went on.

“I saw a five foot long diamondback rattler over there a while ago,” he yelled after us.

“Probably an illusion. Thanks anyway.”

We’d gone maybe five hundred feet when we came to a lot of tire tracks. A truck or jeep had been there, and some cars. Footprints were everywhere. A wadded up cigarette pack balanced lightly on the dry earth.

“Who and why do you suppose?” asked Linda. “This is the farthest corner of the earth.”

I didn’t know either, so we walked around like two detectives after clues. Linda pointed to where something large had been dragged over the ground. “I wonder what it was.”

I shrugged. Then a shiny object caught my eye. Bending down, I pulled a broken piece of wood out of the sand. “What’s this?”

“That’s a propeller tip,” said Linda, taking it in her long fingers. “You see where the metal edge was torn away? That’s the sort of prop a biplane would have.”

“Could his plane fly without this piece?”

“No. But don’t worry. His plane isn’t flying. My guess is that it crashed right here and the authorities came and hauled it away on a truck. “

We turned to look back toward our now distant friend. Messiah was strolling off in the other direction, cholla cane on his shoulder. His face was toward the big sky.

Walking back to the road to get the snake box, Linda put her hand on my shoulder.

“I shouldn’t have been so hard on him,” she said. “His father just died, after all. It must have been a terrible shock. And then crashing like that.” We walked on. “You know,” she said, “I’ve been thinking. If they’ve postponed Sandy’s funeral, maybe I could still...” The rest of her sentence was lost in thought.

“Girl,” I said, “I do think you should take along the pages I’ve written down. You’d learn a lot about how things are and what’s been going on. There’s just a few last paragraphs to type up. I’ll do it soon as we get back.”

“Is it bulky?”

“Like a box of typing sheets.”

She looked disturbed. “How will I carry it?”

“I’ll tie it with tape and string and pink ribbons. I’ll even carry it with me on the bus and hand it to you in Albuquerque. When you’re finished reading, I’ll sneak into your room and take it back. It won’t be no trouble at all.”

“All right. But I can’t promise anything.”

Her face was overcast with frowning. We left it at that.

Chapter Eighteen

I typed up Linda-and-Messiah as soon as I got back. The Curator was not around. He’s making up the guest rooms this Sunday. I was glad he was off keeping busy. Just one hour before bus-time I picked up the boas and hooked out the non-local rattlers and put them in the field box. Our plateau is two or three thousand feet too high for these species. They would die if no one took care.

I carried them outside, into the beautiful day. I have never known such clear air. The green Albuquerque bus was driving along a ridge forty miles away, right on schedule.

Walking down the drive the flashes of my life began again. Ten, nine, eight. When I was seven, daddy gave me a doll. Mama was so angry: Why had he given Marly a gift when mama wanted things, and when her son and other daughters did too?

She told me I must be very careful because someone might steal that pretty doll. I was. Mama said put the doll in the window so it could see out. It seemed like a good deed to do for Dolly. The doll was stolen from the sill.

Now, twenty years later, in a burst of light, I realize mama had planned it that way out of jealousy and spite. But the statute of limitations has run out on my infant days, and there is no redress or compensation for the indignities this child endured.

Thinking back carefully, I can say that the Curator is right. And if he is right, humanity is truly doomed. I have known some mothers who loved their daughters more than they feared them, but they did not love their husbands. I have known some fathers who loved their sons more than they feared them, but they did not love their wives.

And then I thought, my poor mama, what tears have you, too, shed on dark and sleepless nights. And your mama before you.

I carried the snakes down to the crossroads. There tragedy had struck. Someone (the Highway Dept.?) had come by with a tractor and scoop. They had shoveled the dune out of the road and dropped it by the roadside. Pale sand was scattered everywhere and flattened with tractor treads. All over the road and shoulder, red adobe earth stained the wounds.

One large, bleeding heap of sand was the most I could positively identify. There was a place on its brow where kind winds had soothed it. That part was pale, smooth and dune-like and gave promise of future recovery. Time, wind and sun would sort out the rest.

I climbed up on top, opened the field box and dumped the snakes. You guys stay here, I told them. Stick with the dune. Dune is moving southeast toward the Gulf. Blazing days you lie in its shade; freezing nights you climb inside and keep warm. Dune is heading for the sea, but you jump off at 3000 feet, or latest before it leaves the beach. If winds are good and you all stay off the major roads, you should be home by Judgment.

The snakes untangled themselves and wound into the sand. From there they all looked up at me, who was laughing at them through my tears; they were so serious, tongues darting from fierce snouts, tails rattling, eyes so full of fear.

At that moment I knew I could wait no longer. I had to go right then and type these lines. My time was sifting out. The noise inside my head was much too loud.

(I know I won't be on that Albuquerque bus. For the first time in seven years I feel an irresistible call of nature. I will seal these pages and give them to Apostle Matthews, who is standing outside, to hand to Linda on the bus. Though I think she will never read them. In our world it is easier to accept pain than kindness, ignorance than knowledge. Perhaps that truly is why we on this harsh planet do survive.)

I picked up the empty snake box, climbed down, then paused, turned back, and with my finger, on the dune's smooth brow, wrote M..A..R..L..Y.

Dune, I said, carry my name down to the sea.

And in a blazing flash of light I saw a shining figure reaching out for me. It was my earliest unreel memory: arms bringing this newborn infant into life.

If only time had been
to tell the Curator
what I'd seen.