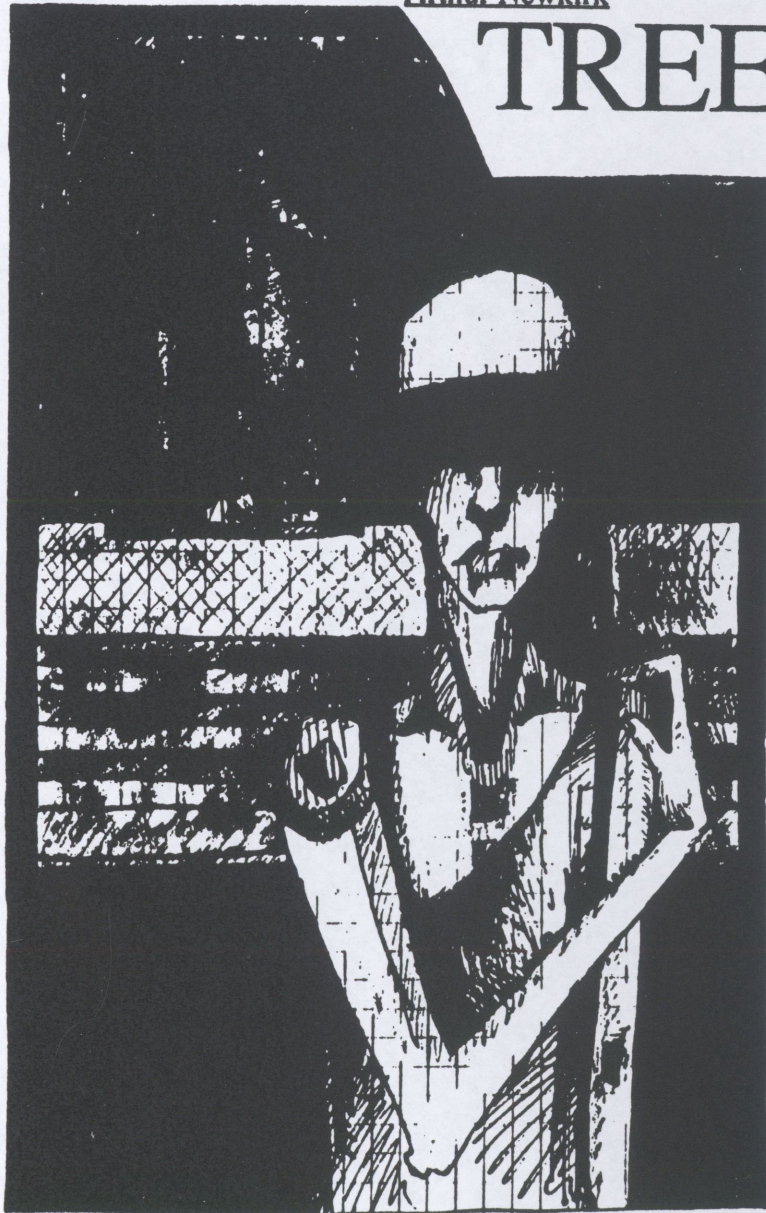


Arthur Newkirk

TREE



Vortex

are ~~it~~
word missing?

"There are those who, through no fault of their own, are unfit to live as wholly integrated, active participants in our technologically accelerated society. These like children to whom we are as kind and responsible parents. We must give them a place to grow, away from the clatter and fright of the Galaxy, where they may find peace with Deity as they understand her. It is for this reason that I request the following planets be classified as restricted technology areas, level of complexity commensurate with the cognitive capacity of a homogeneous culture group..."

-Elaine Barton

Exec. V.P. Development
Minutes of the Torvex, Inc.
Conference on Disorder
and Progress, 3/4/2118

The alarm, when it came, cut through a routine only observed in those days to allay the fear human operators feel watching the enigma of computer control. What it was, the machines said, was nothing more or less sinister than an unscheduled launch from Asylum KM49-4075. What the ship was doing there, and who might be aboard, seemed less important in those first few seconds than the mere fact of its electronic presence: a ship showed where no ship could ever be seen...

A.

Δ

Harry struggled with his boot. Eight quarts and two was ten, because you carried the one: little green circles on the foil tops of the milkbottles appear as backs of fingers ticked off the problem. Hope his alarm clock wasn't wrong, look out the window, nah, it's red dawn light and that fog under the trees that makes summer mornings cool and fun to be out in.

Tree

Realizes he's forgotten where he was in tying the knot in his (Left? Right?) left boot and has to go back to the beginning. Hold the laces... bring them together (this was the hard part!) and put the right lace (that was easy to remember—it was the only hand he could do it with) under the left lace, then switch hands. Pull 'em tight. Stop pulling when the boot grabs your foot like it did now. Make a loop—thing with the left side. Harry had to hold the... (laces? suggests Tree. vortex?...nexus?... a puzzled pause waiting for the right word to click, call it the...) center of the knot with his pinkie and make the loop with his right hand, then make a right side loopthing and slide the right side around and under. Pull 'em tight, and hope that you didn't pull them all the way through, trailing loose inches of lace uselessly on both sides of the boot.

Which was what had happened now, Harry realized miserably. He had been overconfident, and had begun to add eight and three bottles of milk halfway through the knotting. Now he gave a soft whimper that pinched his face up with effort as he picked the clot of laces apart to try again. Outside, he could hear the nuns moving around, waking up the others. He had to hurry.

Sister Jacqueline stopped outside, hand already in an arc toward the door. Inside, she could hear him, "Hold the laces...bring them together, this is the hard part." His painfully memorized instructions echo for a second her own morning prayers, cold and sleepy, kneeling on the hardwood floor by the bed. We are all servants in what ways the Lord sees fit. God bless these little ones. She smiles and leans in a little to listen,

waiting for him to finish before she knocks on the door.

The Bishop Creagan Home for the Handicapped sits off a slow rural two-lane blacktop in Harleysville, Pennsylvania, far enough north that Philadelphia is only imagination and a long, slow train ride. As far as Harleysville was concerned, the Home could just as well have been another empty, burned-out field. Nobody went near it, and nobody really much cared if the building was there, or it was not. It was tolerated with quiet surliness by the town because they respected Bishop Creagan, an immense fat man with a smiling red face who gave them whiskey and came from somewhere far west like Pittsburgh. People in Harleysville didn't care for the outside world in general, what with all this about war in Europe on the radio and all. Take the good with the bad. Radio, electricity, refrigeration—modern life, o.k., but these awful newsreels, and having to live with, well, retarded people in their town, that was going too far.

The Great Depression, just ten years in their past, had been a spell of unusually bad times for those who did business with the markets in Philly. Everybody survived, of course, but Ed Chambers who ran the dairy still owned less than half of the machinery he used. The rest was "bank equipment on loan." And when the regulars gathered at the Harleysville Hotel bar, Ed would point out that if he didn't have to rely on all this equipment, he wouldn't be up to his neck in debt.

It would be times like this, late half-drunk nights, after the Red and Blue networks had signed off, that someone who had probably had about as many as

Ed would snap back with a crack about Ed managing to get by by using them goddamn ^{cards} from Creagan. This never failed to get Ed into such a state that he would try lunging over the horseshoe-shaped bar to punch someone in the nose. Ed's lunging days were long over, so he very rarely managed to do more than knock over a few glasses, but that certain element of tension was very real, like a buried electric line that could fry you if you went digging in the wrong place. And it was too bad for Ed, thought Jacqueline, because the sad truth was that he really did need those ^{cards}...

"Hiya, Sister Jackie..."

Harry has surprised her at the door, caught with her hand poised to knock, a distant glaze over her eyes.

"Good morning, Harry. Uh...how did you...uh..."

"I heard you!" He smiles. Stops. Slowly sinks into a neutral state, only a faint sparkle of light in the eyes and a ghost of that animated grin.

"Time to go down to breakfast."

Ah! Breakfast! He immediately snaps back into gear. His head has stopped that annoying gray whine it gets when he has nothing to do. He doesn't tell the sisters about it, because they had said that your pains were nothing compared to how much Jesus suffered, so Harry shouldn't complain, because that wasn't the way to Carry Your Cross. Jesus suffered like they all did, but he was smart enough to say all those things about it in the gospels.

Harry was surprised when Father Anastasio had explained to him that Jesus didn't have a copy of the New Testament with him, because the apostles had only written it down afterwards. All those parables were just things he said to people

who were walking around, like the folks you meet on the sidewalk who you say "good afternoon" to. Only Jesus never just said good afternoon.

He always said things like Love Thy Neighbor, and His Father's Kingdom was Not of this World and was also Like a Mustard Seed. If he could do all that off the top of his head, and the most Harry can manage is a "Hi There" when he's feeling really swift, no surprise that they called this Jesus God. He must have been the smartest person who ever lived.

And those apostles, boy, they all had good memories, cause it must have been like Harry's friends here listening to Father Anastasio, trying to remember what he said. Harry would get into arguments all week about what Father said in the sermon on Sunday. Harry thought he could remember, but everybody else thought the same, and they all remembered different. Mostly they didn't agree with each other... but Harry was sure he was really right. The apostles must have been like Sister Jackie or the other nuns, who could remember for months and months if you did anything bad. And God was even worse. God was everywhere, and he saw everything, and he never forgot anything. Harry wonders what it would be like to know things, to have a Really Good memory like that. What would there be to remember? (How could you know what you've forgotten, asks Tree.) Harry tries to think about that, but the gray pain pokes into his head, and he's at the top of the stairs now anyway, and Sister Jackie has stopped, putting an arm across the bannister and telling him to remember to pay attention to what he's doing, walking down the stairs ahead of

him.

She should know better than that. He's no 'tard no more. Tard. He's heard the kids yelling that one at the bus, or at the Lake, sometimes. Idiot. Fucking moron, Tard, things like that, schoolboys howling across dusty afternoon roads, kids at the Lake, just far enough away from their parents to be brave. Not that their parents would even stop them...

It was three years (years? Christmases!) Three Christmases ago that he fell down the stairs when he first came here. Woke up and had this scar on the side of his head, Sister Jackie telling him he had fallen. Couldn't remember anything before that, something Sister Jackie called "amnesia." But he had been on his way here, she said, and he would be happy. And he had been, mostly.

Here was the tricky part. The stairs turned, and you had to keep your feet following the stairs, hand on the bannister (Always!) and foot on the step before you move the other one. He's not no tard. Not any more.

Breakfast. Good morning Julie! Julie, the cook, the only lady who wasn't a nun. (Or a tard, adds Tree.) Julie was a lay person, he knew that, she came to cook for them, and run errands for the sisters, and drive the Bus. The Bus! Tree loved the bus! They'd all get to ride in it after breakfast.

Guilty glance around, thinking about Tree, who Harry was too grown up to admit, and was almost ashamed to believe in. Tree had been there, inside his head, talking to Harry, ever since the genius lady had given him the card.

"Why don't you sit down, Harry."

"Sure, Sister Jackie."

Twelve (Harry can count them) places set with plastic knives and spoons. Harry sits down between Bill and Carrie, where he always sits, across from Mr. Harris, who has Sister Dymphna feeding him. Mr. Harris makes Harry think of a famous General. (Tree suggested Napoleon at someplace called St. Helena.) Harry saw Napoleon in the Sisters' picture-history book. Harry doesn't know why Mr. Harris should remind him of Napoleon, because he doesn't look like that picture, with his hand in his coat like he was hiding a candy from Sister. Harry loved a candy but the sisters would only let you have them on Sundays, and not at all during Lent which was a sad time because Jesus died at the end of it, and then you could eat candy again.

"How would you like your eggs, Harry?"

"On their backs with soft yellow." Harry hardly has to think about that, which is good because Julie is looking right at him, with those pale blue eyes set in dark ringed circles, like the eyes of one of those Husky Dogs that they had up in Alaska. She looked right into you, like a wolf. She could make Harry forget things with that look.

Since he got here, and especially since the genius lady came, Harry has learned if you said things over and over, you could remember them, and then you didn't have to think about it, they would just come out right when you started saying them. That's how Harry had learned his Hailmaries, saying them over and over whenever Sister Jackie asked him. Now he could always do them, except when thought about what it meant, like at the middle where it changed over to "Holy

Mary, Mother of God." You start thinking about what's coming, and you get lost and have to start over. If you didn't think, you could always remember.

That was the problem with the Stations, when Father Anastasio walked around the chapel in the basement and pointed to the pictures and talked about the horrible things Jesus went through in the last days. You'd know what was coming in those final stations, and you'd forget how to say your prayers. Especially the picture of Jesus going down for the third time. It reminded him of something the way Mr. Harris did, but this brought the gray pain when he thought about it, and Tree couldn't help.

"Here you go, Harry." Julie slides eggs onto his plate, and they said grace and took their vitamins.

Harry used to love the vitamins because they stopped the gray pain, which seemed to trickle in every night along with his dreams. Tree had made Harry stop taking the vitamins. That had been really hard. Harry had felt awful for weeks, and had cried a lot, all alone at night, when he could be alone. Tree tried to help, but Tree was just in his head, and couldn't hug Harry, which was what he really needed. Not the sisters' fuck-hugs, which didn't mean they cared, or understood. They didn't. Tree was suspicious of all of them. He doesn't let Harry talk to them about it. Julie smiles at him, and he smiles back and begins poking at the yellow with a piece of toast.

Sister Jackie had told him all about vitamins and how they worked for the cells in your body which were like the eggs you ate, only a lot smaller, and could send messages to put the arm on

other cells. He doesn't understand things like this, but sometimes, he'd see something, and it would just happen—he'd know. Just like Tree who would suddenly be there, telling him things.

Another glance around the kitchen table. Aside from Mr. Harris, who was being bibbed and coddled, the other tards were eating. The nuns were over in the corner drinking coffee, which Harry had tried and didn't like much. That really made the gray pain worse. Bill drinks coffee. Bills sits on Harry's right, and is an old man with gray hair who breaks down and cries like a little kid sometimes. He has a big scar on his chest. Harry remembers one time they were out swimming in Green Lake, he realized that Bill had a scar on his back too. It had suddenly come to him there, (treading water; with the voice of Tree) that something had gone through Bill, right through him from front to back like a knife through a roll. Harry didn't like that idea at all. It reminded him of the nails going through Jesus' wrists. A flash of blood out of the corner of his eye, and a feeling like falling, and he would shiver. He didn't like to think about those things. What happened to Bill? When had it happened? It hadn't been while Harry was here.

Three Christmasses and one Easter meant it was three and a half years. That was a long time not to be... what? Not to be doing something? What did he do before he came here? Marge the genius lady said: "You've got it locked somewhere in there." But he hadn't remembered for more than three years. (And wouldn't, for a lot longer if They had their way.) Why did Tree say that? Harry almost never thought about the future,

unless it was next Saturday if they were going on a picnic, or Easter, which you could count down to... countdown? Where did you get that word, Tree? Must be another makeup word, Tree was always telling him makeup words. He used to say them to Sister Jackie, until Tree convinced him not to.

Julie used to ask Harry to tell her stories every day when he first came here, and Sister Jackie still did it now and then, but she didn't really listen. She would pat him on the arm and say, "Now, Harry, there's no such thing as a 'quark bag' of dogs. You know the *real* word." "Pack of dogs." "Good." Harry could remember that like it was yesterday, because Tree had made Harry say the quarkbag makeup word over and over. It came back to him now, and seemed to be all mixed up with the idea of the yellow (Quark/Yolk, says Tree) yolk of the egg, only all fuzzy and in different colors and stretching out to touch all the other eggs, like the little eggs in your head putting that arm on other eggs, only much much much smaller even than those little head-eggs... smaller than the smallest things around... the smallest things, all multi-colored and whirling and stretching like rubber...

"Everybody ready? It's time to go." Julie casts a reproachful glance at Harry, who has, he must admit, been playing with his food. The nuns deal clothing, guide tards in and out of bathrooms, and eventually usher them into slanting morning sun light, through the smell of damp porch wood, onto the beautiful blue bus. Blue is the color of Mary's robe, painted on the side, standing on the globe with her hands outstretched, next to the few words Harry could read: "Bishop Creagan Home for the Handicapped."

Δτ

All things considered, it was a good morning for Bill to have pitched his fit, since Harry got to meet Cy.

They were driving along Route 212, like every morning. Harry could recognize those numbers. Tree'd made him look, over and over, as the bus passed those black and white signs, repeating the numbers in his head. Harry would have known the way even without numbers. He'd been working at Chambers' dairy for two years, and could remember the houses on the street the way you remember the Hailmary.

Bill had an important job at the dairy. He was the one who got to go out on the truck with Luke, Ed Chambers's brother, and put the bottles into the little wire racks for each house. Sometimes Harry had tried to talk to Bill about that, but Bill was hard to talk to. He kept forgetting who you were. He was really, really good at arithmetic, though, and could count way up into the hundreds. He always knew the answer to, "How many days left to Easter," when Sister Jacqueline and Carmela would ask. He could even do the hard fractions the sisters talked about sometimes, like the three parts of God, which were called thirds and added up to one. Harry doesn't think he'll ever understand that one, and Tree won't help.

But Bill wasn't much fun to talk to, even though he knew all his numbers, because he would always start crying. You'd be sitting in the living room listening to the radio, and he'd start to say something really interesting, and then all of a sudden, his face would get strange, and he'd start to cry. Tree had pointed this out to Harry, and suggested it was the

same thing that was happening to him when he had the gray pain. Harry had never thought of that, that other people could have the same things going on in their heads as he did. Especially the gray pain, which Harry had assumed was the punishment for Venial sin. Harry thought maybe God knew something Bill wasn't supposed to talk to anybody else about. But if that was true, why would God make Bill know it in the first place?

It was just here, at the intersection of Springdale Avenue where the bus turned off for the dairy, that it happened. He had been thinking about the time when the genius lady gave him the card...

Δτ

She had come through just over a year ago. (That's what Tree says.) Harry wouldn't question it. He doesn't question what Tree says, or what Tree is. He's happy to have someone who talks to him. Did she bring Tree? Was Tree in the card?

She sits next to Harry, under the bridge, in a tight brown dress—a lay person—smiling at him. She had thick glasses and was the same as Julie, but different. They talked the same and even moved the same slightly...odd...way, but they circled around Creagan for the day Marge was there like dogs sniffing each other's asses. Harry could tell about things like that, even back then. She'd gotten permission to take Harry out on a walk.

"Are you lonely, Harry?"

"No, Marge. I'm friends with the Sisters. I'm friends with Bill and Carrie."

"The sisters, yes." Marge smiled at him. "I've spoken with Sister Jackie. She says you're very good friends."

Uh-oh. This made Harry real nervous...he wasn't supposed to talk about this.

"Yeah. I like Sister Jackie."

Marge crawled up and knelt with her legs around his. She reached out to touch his face, then her hands slid down his sides and came to rest on his lap.

"You like Sister Jackie like this, don't you?"

Harry couldn't understand. Sister Jackie must have told, but she said not to tell anyone, especially Julie. Harry did what Sister Jackie asked, which usually meant Doing the Thing with her. Harry enjoys it, but can't imagine what it's like for Sister Jackie who has something different—a warm throbbing thing that wrapped around him. (Wrapped around, and tight, like a boot, says Tree.) She would moan and get all wild, and at first, Harry wasn't sure if he was hurting her, or she was acting or what. But she came back a lot, sometimes with Sister Jessica, and they would do things, things with each other, things with him. Harry didn't understand, but Tree made him remember. He had *fucked* them, said Tree, who told him it was good and would help him remember more. But after he'd *fucked* them, Harry wished they wouldn't right away put on their habits and disappear. Harry would have liked to talk to them... maybe even fall asleep there with them, all warm and habitless and happy.

Marge sat there, smiling, her hands on him.

Then she pulls her dress over her head, and there's her body, freckled and tan, not like the thin, statue-white bodies of the sisters, but full, just a hint of...what? ("Zero G," "clanging makeup words in his

head, "Spacer...Gravity sag...spacer muscles.") All Harry can do is stare, breathless. She kisses him, whispers in his ear.

"KM 49-4075?"

She grinds clockwise, settling as he inches into her: hot corrugated friction like sinking your arms in summer sand at the Lake.

She looks into him, eyes inches away. A stare like Mr. Hoskins, looking into his soup for bugs, before he'd scream, "Fuck me!" and throw it across the room. Mr. Hoskins always saw bugs in things. It was awful when you went to the lake with him, because he would have a fit and start screaming "Fuck me!" and thrash around in the water, and the sisters would have to drag him out of the water and put a spoon in his mouth and... She's talking to him.

"Feel it, Harry...feel it...remember me."

Remember. Flashes. Facehand...almost got it...smile...

"I know you, you bastard. Locked in there." A pause. She rides him, looking for recognition. "You won't know this body. You'll know who I was... You will. I know you will..."

And she began touching him, with her tongue in his mouth, and his hands, seeming to be under someone else's control, (What am I doing?) found things to do, excited, everything getting narrower and the light turning blue, first edge of dawn from space, just coming into orbit, crescent like the moon under Mary's feet, blue and curved light, narrowing, just coming into orbit, impossible dark mass rolling up into light, bluer, narrowing, curved, coming into...orbit...earth...coming...

corrected?

Just at that bright moment: the first whisper of Tree.

Then the vision fades. And Marge, lying there, cuddling for a few minutes, gives him the card. Just a little rectangular paper she tells Harry never to let anyone see. He's supposed to eat a teeny piece of it once a week, and not more. That's real important, she tells him... not to eat too much. She kisses him, and says something strange.

"I love you Harry," and she's gone.

Harry had done what she said. Like going to Communion, he took part of the card every Sunday since. The first few times, it had only made the gray pain come, and really bad, so bad that Harry had to lie down in the middle of the afternoon, and Jackie would come ask if he was sick. But then, one time, it was different. He got a tight feeling in the back of his throat, then he felt strangely warm, and all the colors got bright, and Harry felt like he could understand things, big strange things that had been completely confusing—like why the sisters were doing what they were doing, or why they were sisters, or what Catholicism was all about...

And Tree was there, a name that suggested itself for the voice appearing in his head, slowly becoming louder over months of card-Sundays, prying, suggesting, joking, trying to get Harry to remember things. Desperate that he could never seem to hold onto things after the paper had worn off. Five minutes when you'd eaten the paper was like weeks and weeks. Harry would see places, things that couldn't exist. Often it was huge spheres in velvet darkness, hung out in what seemed million-mile depths; fila-

ments of light through patches of cloud, a soft glow twinkling up from networks of bright dots which thinned and thickened, seeming to give order to the space below.

And here, out where Harry imagines himself, steel houses, shiny and cold like the trucks that haul milk down to Philly. Doors into a place he remembers as his, and fragments of image—hands, certain windows, a woman's smile, smells of leather and the sky before lightning, a glass breaking in a brilliant light, cold, a blue spiral—and others, half-silvered tangents rising to whisper and kiss consciousness, hissing away through every color and shape of the mind's afternoon. These pin, rack, drag him, amid Tree's muted pleas for memory, toward some sense of the miraculous in every day's objects.

It was in one of those Sunday journeys, just yesterday, that Tree had given Harry the idea of soaking a thumbnail-sized piece of the card in water and pouring it into the jar that Bill kept his artificial teeth in. It would be interesting to see what happened to Bill, and Tree thought that it might be a way to get out on the milk truck. Since Harry was the only other tard who could count, Tree reasoned, he had a pretty good shot if Bill caved in. Tree didn't explain why that should happen, but proved accurate about the result...

Bill pitched forward screaming. His head hit the next seat back, and blood, bright red and moving, sprayed across the aisle. Mr. Hoskins started screaming, "Fuck me! Fuck me!"

Bill's head swung back against the window, spiderwebbed it, and bounced

Vortex

off. He stared stupidly, snarled, and began whacking his head into it again and again, sending granular cracks out around the bloody impact smear.

Two sisters, Harry can't see who, close in on Bill. Julie is trying to get the bus to the curb, with frantic glances over her shoulder, cursing and hauling on the big steering wheel. Bill turns from whacking head into window to leap at the nuns, sending them bloody down on their asses, rolling as the bus stops, like damaged animals, this red all over them from Bill's head. He's climbing over the seat now, grabbing for Sister Dymphna but Julie has the bus all stopped and she turns around, Tree says watch real close, and there's

this thing in her hand
and a sharp buzzing noise, and Bill
WIAP →
jerks back into his seat like he'd been pulled on a rope and Julie tucks something away in her sweater.

Something that knocked Bill down in his seat, all the way from the front of the bus.

How the fuck did she do that?

Something Harry can make out, now that he knows it's there, a shiny glint. She's got something there that Put Away Bill.

Bill sat there, eyes wide open, but not looking at anything. Blood runs down his forehead into his left eye, into the black part of the eye you look out of, but he didn't even blink. He just kept staring. He had been Put Away. The two sisters who had been tossed across the bus by the comic book Bill grabbed this new thing Bill had become and folded it up in his seat with a blanket over it, and Julie

(What's that under her sweater?) started up the bus again. Everything went back to normal, and if Harry hadn't practiced remembering things, he would have been like everybody else, staring out the windows as if nothing had happened. Even Mr. Hoskins had gone back to looking for bugs.

Sister Carmela came up and sat next to Harry. he likes to sit in the front seat on the right...and watch where they're going. Nobody else wants to sit there.

"Harry?"

"Yes, Sister?"

"I know you and Bill have been talking about what he's been doing at the dairy..."

"Yes, Sister, he's been teaching me to count."

"I know. And Sister Jacqueline says that you've gotten good at it, too. How would you like to go out on the milk truck with Luke? You've met Luke haven't you?"

"Uh...yes. I like Luke."

"Well, you know we've been telling Luke about you too. This has been coming for a while now."

Harry didn't think he liked the sound of that. Things that went on behind your back had a way of turning out bad for you, like when the doctor and the sisters would go off and talk before he came in and gave you an injection. If things were good, why would people bother to hide them? What was such a big fucking secret? He'd heard Luke say things like that, "Big Fucking Deal" and "Wha'sa Fucking Problem?" This was the way people talked when they were serious, and weren't tards. It all had to do with fucking. He knew all about that too. Fucking was what you did with nuns.

"I can count up to twelve, Sister Carmela," he says hopefully. "We know. Sister Jacqueline has told us."

Her hand is on his thigh.

"Sister Jackie said..."

"She's been telling us how well you count. This is your big chance, Harry. Bill isn't feeling well this morning."

"Bill was Put Away..."

Oh, God, why did he do that? She gets that same cold dog-eye look that Julie always has, and says, real quiet, "What do you mean, Harry?"

"He hit his head on the window! You covered him up with a blanket!"

This seems to reassure Carmela, who nods and strokes his leg.

"It's alright now, Harry. He's just not feeling like himself this morning." She smiles.

Yeah, thinks Harry, right now I don't think he's feeling like *anything*. Tree giggles.

Why did the nuns get so strange whenever he said anything they didn't expect? What was it that made them look at him like that? Harry wondered what they'd say if he ever asked them a question like that. He never did, because it would take too long to make his mouth move to the sounds he hears in his head. That was a whole other process, like making numbers add and getting your hand to write them. He doubts if Sister Carmela would even begin to understand this.

"Does that mean I get to go out with Luke?"

"Yes. You're going to get to ride on the truck! Won't that be fun?"

He smiles and nods. Fun. The further from Julie, the better. The further from that Thing for Putting Away.

$\Delta\tau$

It wasn't as easy as he thought. He had to sit in the back of the truck, adding bottles of milk, one at a time, often up to as many as six or seven. (Just keep the last number in your head while you add the next one.) God damn it, he knew how to do that, but kept slipping under the pressure of performing for this person he'd only "Hi'd" once or twice, standing in the doorway to the capping room. Harry had spent the last two years in there with the rest of the tards, putting the little foil caps on the bottles. Luke just hung around, waiting until they finished for his run to the markets, drinking from a shiny silver thing he kept in his back pocket. (Like the genius lady's card?) Sometimes he'd say things to whichever one of the sisters sat and watched them, and she would get all red and shush him. But sometimes he and the sister would disappear for a long time, and you could relax and stop capping the bottles until they got back...from fucking in the barn, said Tree who pointed out that at those moments, Harry could simply walk out, just chuck the caps and slip out the side window, away from the dairy and off into the woods. Could he do that? Sure, but where would he go, except back to Bishop Creagan?

The truck smelled like stale milk, and the strange sour bluesmoke tang the bus has that makes you nauseous after a while. But Luke drove with the front door open and talked a lot, and Harry just let it all roll over him, light, Luke's voice, flashes of tree color from the windshield, crouching in the back holding on to the steel indent of one of the wheels, adding bottles and thinking about Julie's dangerous thing.

"Doctor Sacks' house," says Luke, "Six quarts of regular."

Six quarts...one hand and one finger. One and one. That was like...one five and one one. Like the way after you counted up to ten you had tens and ones. Harry holds up five fingers, racks bottles, holds up one finger and racks the bottle. One? One...two. Fives? Suppose twos were tens? What would hundreds be? What a weird thought. Tree? (Position to the...) What? (Thing that was tens to the number of places to the...) Right? Left?

"Eleven bottles," says Harry, absently, still trying to figure out what it would be if twos were tens.

Luke picks up the wire crib with six bottles, and smiling at the distracted tard, whistles off toward the sleeping Sacks home. "If twos are tens," says Harry aloud, "Then one is one, but two is ten. Three is eleven...and four is twelve..." He stopped dead. "But I can't have a two..."

"A hundred," says a little voice outside the truck.

"Yeah," Harry agrees, still staring at fingers...now six...

"It's the position to the left of the zero. That's the power of two." It's a girl's voice.

"Power of two?"

"The number of times you multiply two by itself."

"Uh...multiply?" Tree kicks him.

"Where's Billy?"

Finally, he gets a clear look at her, standing in the middle of the street, with the yellow line behind her, and the doors of one of the Other Churches that the sisters told him about. Harry keeps looking at her and then looking away...because

she's bald...and blind.

There's a black cloth wound around her head, covering the place where eyes go, and instead of having long hair like ladies do, her forehead slides from black bandage back into a glossy, dimply curve, slightest edges of depressions on the top where Harry could almost imagine pieces of her skull coming together, if such a thing were possible. Harry, realizing he's staring, looks away again, then realizes how silly that is... she can't see him, after all...

She looks so young, standing haloed in the morning light, chiseled out of the mist-colors of the street behind her. It occurs to Harry that she is the most beautiful woman he's ever seen. She tilts her head to the right, fixing him with her ear.

"Bill was put away," he says quickly, just to see how she'd respond.

"Oh," she says, sad but at the same time, distant, like she's play-acting at not really caring. "Who are you?"

"I'm Harry."

"I'm Cy. Why did you say he was put away? You don't work for Them, do you Harry?"

"I work for the dairy...but I'm from..." It dawns on Harry that he should be embarrassed about being a tard from Creagan...his voice chokes up and he can't say anything.

"You're from where Billy was?"

He tries to say something, anything, but nothing will come out...if he opens his mouth, he knows he's going to cry. He hurt her friend. He feels stupid and tired and lame.

"Were you a friend of Bill's?"

"Yuh...yeah." Swallow...that wasn't too bad.

"What's the matter, Harry?"

"Uh... Well, Bill and I... you know where we're from, I mean what we are... you know..."

"Oh, Harry," she chirps, "that's where I'm from." She nods over her shoulder at the church... and by squinting, Harry sees a sign which Cy reads: "Hugh Duncan Dalsiel Vocational Center for the Handicapped."

Handicapped? That sounds like... must be... just like Bishop Creagan... Balloons of laughter burst up from his chest, and his head feels as if it's just disconnected from his body.

"Oh," is just about all he can manage.

They hold there for a moment, poised in the morning's buzzing ascent, the thrumming of the truck's motor keeping the air itself alive, dancing.

"You're beautiful," says Harry.

"Thank you, Harry." She smiles; perfect dimples appear under the bandage. "Could I see you?"

"How?"

"Just come here and let me touch you."

Harry hoists himself up from among crates and slides out the back door. The early sun rolls warm waves through the damp streets... from the houses, Harry can smell coffee brewing, hear the clatter of breakfasts, the air clear and sharp after the sour steel box. Her face, up close, is pale and translucent, and she smells faintly like... flowers... her hands, soft and warm, gently close on his face... and a ripple of shocked recognition runs through her body.

"I know you..." she whispers, but he already knows that.

And deep inside, Tree is muttering, murmuring a warning: "This is too

much... they'll never let This go on."

Tree says to see it like they will, in a long view from one of those screened-in porches: Two people with different pasts; parts of a scattered puzzle come back together again. And Harry knows that she knows it. He reaches out and gives her a hug, which she returns.

"Hi," Harry whispers in her ear, rocking and hugging her, "Hi, hi, hi..."

Harry wakes up from a dream of that touch, his right hand trailing up the wall behind his bed. It had started in the kitchen of Creagan, middle of the night, no one up, just Harry and Tree, talking. Tree for the first time seemed to be a real person, somebody outside his head. Can't remember how Tree looked, but Tree's responses sounded familiar, like someone Harry has met, or... like himself? Something left from long ago, something he'd written? A message? Messages... in... a book? But it's talking to him. He's talking to... fragments of his... own code... hidden in the eggs? quarkbags?

He's trying to explain to Tree, and as words come unfolding, his mind detaches from the kitchen; he's in a big church, like the Cathedral sisters showed them in Philly, but no statues, no tabernacle, just a place people sit. Mind. Words. Messages. Got his right hand raised.

"It was true, there were things that moved faster than light... they moved in parallel fields. But what we were was electricity... electricity was our field..."

Harry begins to feel a sparkling, tingling blue sensation spread through his body. His hand is surrounded by a co-

rona of electric force, streamers of current rising from it like slow-motion mist.

"...and the field was..."

Harry's afraid, now, of the next word. He knows that once it is said, once he brings it to reality, there is no turning back. He knows he has to. The phantom energy surrounds him completely, like the secondary of some massive coil, raw power, rolling thunder through his nerves...

"The field was *her*." Mary's foot on the Moon.

A glimpse behind the illumination; his past joining, the field of Being. Mind, her mind, not Cy, but Cy part of it... bigger—bigger than wordmind's space, an in-itself too complex to be carried back by the finer-grain waking self... but something that lurks, intensely *real*, part of yet not him. Not Harry; not Tree.

Harry snaps awake, the charge slowly dissipating, draining as the covers, the wall, the normal paints and textures of the room reclaim his mind. His heart is clanging like an alarm clock. He wonders if accepting this, leaving his head open to this strange burning pattern could cripple him, blast him, leave him like the others. He knows it could. But he has no choice. He knows, now, some new secrets, hers and his own. And he lies there in the darkness, hours to go until wakecup call, thinking about things differently.

It was almost a month before he got to see Cy again. The sisters, who had been enthusiastic, suddenly changed and said Harry shouldn't go out on the truck. Since Bill got better after a couple of days, Harry and Cybele, which she said was

what Cy was short for, were effectively separated, which seemed to be the end of that. Harry spent the time imagining Cy, and she started eating pieces of the genius lady's card.

She could get out of her house in the afternoons, which she spent down by the river that snaked past the back of Chambers's dairy. Harry, however, had to wait until Luke got lucky with one of the nuns. He did his best not to do the Thing with Jackie—without arousing suspicion—and he didn't have too tough a time. He just didn't want to fuck nuns anymore. He thought about Cy while he fucked Sister Jackie and it began to be over for him long before it was over for her. Not, he imagined, that Luke was much better... but Luke must have unique attractions all his own, and the silver flask probably helped.

"Harry," sez Cy, "Does the shining paper make you see things?"

"It makes me understand things." He's slipped away on this damp Tuesday afternoon, the sky a low gray cloudscape, the trees here by the river misted and dripping. Cy found the dry spot under the footbridge, and they sit, backs to the wall, arms around each other, listening to the sound of water and their own voices reflected from the beamed walkway overhead.

"It makes me *see* things," says Cy, vaguely, hopelessly.

"You mean like... when you dream?" He remembers *Her*, "Things that aren't real?"

"Those, yes. But also things that I think were real. Things I think I saw." A deep breath, "I don't think I've always been blind."

"What do you mean? I mean...you...what happened?"

"I don't know. I don't remember. It seems like before I was here in Harleysville, I was somewhere else. Somewhere...somewhere I did things. But I was just a kid, I can't figure it out, like it's all mixed up."

"I was that way too, at first. But the paper helps. You know that genius lady, Marge, that gave it to me? I knew her from somewhere, that's what she said."

"Somewhere?"

"Not from around here." Out, says Tree, Out *there!*

"The paper makes you understand that?"

"The paper makes me see things...out there."

"Out in..." Cy turns her masked face to the sky, "Even though I can't see it, I feel it. Up there, at night, there's a moon...and the emptiness of wind in the dark...the stars...I remember that."

"Could I..." Tree tells Harry to go on, this is important, but he doesn't want to, senses Cy stiffening as she gets the drift of his question, "...could I take a look at your eyes?"

"Why?" It comes out in a soft, little-girl voice that doesn't even sound like it's coming from the same person.

"This stuff you can remember seeing...it's like...maybe because you could see this stuff, because it meant something, they had to do something so you didn't see it. It would have made you remember the things we're supposed to forget. The things They want us to forget."

"Harry...I trust you." She reaches back to untie the bandana, hides her face

in a tilt for a second, then gradually turns to him.

"Oh, Cy..."

Taken up across the bridge of her nose is a pale mask of skin; there are no eyes, no lashes, no openings at all. Around the edges of this sightless surface, faint pink joins, and the marks of clamps somewhere in the past that held the flesh together till it knit.

Someone had taken her eyes because she could see.

Someone had taken his mind because he could think.

Someone had Put them Away.

Δτ

Harry was being very careful when he went down to the laundry room to disconnect the alarm. Tree told him to. Tree was talking continually now, a second mind-thing in his head that saw and heard and touched the way he did, but put it all together differently. He can hear Tree noticing and thinking even when he's not, if he listens hard enough.

He had the lamp cord from his room, and the knife Luke used at the dairy. They were so dumb to leave him alone like they used to, thinking he'd sit and cap those stupid bottles while the sisters were off fucking. They were stupid, and now Harry had everything he needed.

Tree is in his head here, a ghost voice, telling him how to do this difficult thing. Harry and Tree had argued. Harry didn't think he could do it yet, even if Tree was there to help him.

"Do you want to save Cy or not?"

That's how Tree finally wore him down. With logic. Tree had shown that They, the people with Capital Letters

who Put you Away would have to break them up, keep them apart. There would come down from (The Front Office? Tree can't be precise about that one...he showed it to Harry as fragments of not quite images, the way a street in your dream will have a house full of monsters next door, when you know it's only the Sheriff's home.) Front Office would issue "instructions", and a situation would be created where one of them would disappear, or there'd be a horrible accident. Harry knew, and Tree didn't even have to tell him this, that it was Their distaste for killing that made his existence even here possible...but they could be pushed too far, and whatever point at which reason would outweigh mercy was fast approaching.

If it had not passed already. For the last three nights, Julie had come to his room, after the Home was asleep. Not for fucking, no, not her, never. No, she had come with a long needle that she put into Harry's arm, hurt like a critterbite. She made him lie back in bed and began talking talking about what he really wanted to do...what he really wanted to do with Cy. He really wanted to go down under the bridge with her and: "Find a rock. A big, heavy rock, Harry. You know how big. Yes, you have to pick it up with both hands. Okay, now where is Cybele? Yes, she's sitting over there. Maybe she's talking to you. Keep talking, as if nothing's happening...and quietly, slowly and quietly, walk over with the rock..."

She had told him to forget, and he probably would have a year ago, but not now. Not something like that. He knew he wouldn't do it...He couldn't, but the voice she was trying to put in his head

might. The Julie Voice was still a long way off. He could hear it, during the day, when it hit something he thought about, but it had no force, it never Felt like Tree. It would, though, said Tree, if she kept up with the needle every night. She was operating on her own, without orders, so she had to make it look natural, accidental. Still, he had to hurry.

He finds himself in the dark, among soapsmelling white porcelain and piles of faintly dirty habits, and the odd, foul clothes of the tards. He could smell Mr. Harris's underwear. Stand on a soda crate and start scraping insulation from wires on the window over the dryer. Now scrape the other side. Pull a few strands out of the lamp cord. Look. Pull a few more. Make sure they're the same (*resistance*) size.

Here, says Tree, is the tough part. You have to get a good contact with the piece of wire from the lamp, and get it on both bare spots at the same time. Harry whimpers and tells Tree he can't make both hands move at the same time.

"Fine, you take the left hand, and I'll take the right."

No, he has nothing left but to try it, no going back now. He concentrates, focuses on the shiny blue-silver spot, and *moves*—and his right hand, flashing out in tandem, brings the other half home. The circuit is complete.

...And he's OUT.

Night woods smell beautiful, a secret sweet damp-earth spring memory from childhood. Childhood, and Earth. Earth. And trees. Harry loves the Trees. Tree and Harry...trees... Treeletters, leaf words, something very old about being out here among the trees in the Dark,

something Tree is very happy about. Tree shows him a picture recently remembered: Tree glowing, round leafword spots connected with power's branched pathways. A big silver Tree rising on a glowing column. The way to remember what they took from you, if you can, is to climb to the top of the Tree. Harry thinks about Her, and Cy...

Dark in here, and Harry can't see where he's going. He's worried about the dog, nasty barksy little monster at Dalsiel. Cy knows he's coming, but there's nothing to be done about the dog. He'll have to take care of it... and before it wakes everyone up.

Cy was remembering things too, now that she had Jemnifer. Jemnifer had awakened from the paper, and had become much faster than Tree. Cy told him about her, so he told her about Tree, and then the two of them started talking, leaving Harry and Cy to stare at each other, reduced to snared animal twitching as Voices from some other time and space took them over.

A glimpse of a moon up there, and stars. Stars, boy, big and round and curved, curving everything, pulling everything like a net. Harry can't wait. Tree and Jemnifer are going to take them all out there. They know where the Things are. Harry wonders if there are more people here who were also other people other places. Unless they found their Tree, how could they know? Would they even know their Tree, Tree is asking.

Harry is busy trying not to fall down a ravine which seems to have appeared before him all too suddenly, at the bottom of which he can hear a brook chuckling merrily, "Fall down here and break your

leg. Fall down here and break your leg."

"Fuck you," he whispers, skipping sideways down the embankment. Just beyond the brook is the backyard of Cy's house. He can already hear the dog, sniffing and whining.

They wouldn't be finding Julie for a while. She'd come into his room that night, with another long sleepy needle full of the Voice. He had let her put it into his arm, and then, before she pushed the Voice in, Tree had killed her. His left hand whipped out—there was a *WHUCK* of collapsed cartilage—and she clawed at her throat, unable to scream. Harry pulled the needle out and caught her before she hit the floor.

"You shouldn't have done that to me."

Her husky-eyes are wild and blank; she's trying to suck in air, to get something out: a scream for help, a plea, anything. He heaves Julie on the bed, straddles her, and rolls her on her side, pinning her arms with his legs. Nothing to it, just grab her head, *twist*, a snap, and she pees all over herself and stops moving.

He reaches under his shirt and takes out the thing she used on Bill. "This," says Tree, "is a stun pistol."

And that dog is about to get Put the fuck Away.

Δ

Figures begin moving through the early morning, hunting. Folk with clean clothes and strange accents, knocking on suspicious rural doors. They want Harry and Cybele; the Two are nowhere. One thing is clear: There's a ship off world with two dangerous people, and Someone, Somewhere, has got trouble on their hands.

-30-

something Tree is very happy about. Tree shows him a picture recently remembered: Tree glowing, round leafword spots connected with power's branched pathways. A big silver Tree rising on a glowing column. The way to remember what they took from you, if you can, is to climb to the top of the Tree. Harry thinks about Her, and Cy...

Dark in here, and Harry can't see where he's going. He's worried about the dog, nasty barksy little monster at Dalsiel. Cy knows he's coming, but there's nothing to be done about the dog. He'll have to take care of it... and before it wakes everyone up.

Cy was remembering things too, now that she had Jemnifer. Jemnifer had awakened from the paper, and had become much faster than Tree. Cy told him about her, so he told her about Tree, and then the two of them started talking, leaving Harry and Cy to stare at each other, reduced to snared animal twitching as Voices from some other time and space took them over.

A glimpse of a moon up there, and stars. Stars, boy, big and round and curved, curving everything, pulling everything like a net. Harry can't wait. Tree and Jemnifer are going to take them all out there. They know where the Things are. Harry wonders if there are more people here who were also other people other places. Unless they found their Tree, how could they know? Would they even know their Tree, Tree is asking.

Harry is busy trying not to fall down a ravine which seems to have appeared before him all too suddenly, at the bottom of which he can hear a brook chuckling merrily, "Fall down here and break your

leg. Fall down here and break your leg."

"Fuck you," he whispers, skipping sideways down the embankment. Just beyond the brook is the backyard of Cy's house. He can already hear the dog, sniffing and whining.

They wouldn't be finding Julie for a while. She'd come into his room that night, with another long sleepy needle full of the Voice. He had let her put it into his arm, and then, before she pushed the Voice in, Tree had killed her. His left hand whipped out—there was a *WHUCK* of collapsed cartilage—and she clawed at her throat, unable to scream. Harry pulled the needle out and caught her before she hit the floor.

"You shouldn't have done that to me."

Her husky-eyes are wild and blank; she's trying to suck in air, to get something out: a scream for help, a plea, anything. He heaves Julie on the bed, straddles her, and rolls her on her side, pinning her arms with his legs. Nothing to it, just grab her head, *twist*, a snap, and she pees all over herself and stops moving.

He reaches under his shirt and takes out the thing she used on Bill. "This," says Tree, "is a stun pistol."

And that dog is about to get Put the fuck Away.

Δ

Figures begin moving through the early morning, hunting. Folk with clean clothes and strange accents, knocking on suspicious rural doors. They want Harry and Cybele; the Two are nowhere. One thing is clear: There's a ship off world with two dangerous people, and Someone, Somewhere, has got trouble on their hands.

-30-