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**THE GOD PLANT  
AND OTHER STORIES**

By

Valyn Derek Murray

B.A., Western State College, Colorado, 1981

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

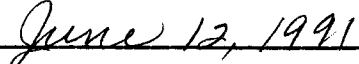
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1991

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## MACKAY THE DIVER

Even the very old who had lived nearly forever out there on eastern Colorado's high plain considered it an amazing thing how a hot and cloudless, late August afternoon could suddenly turn--change almost between glances up at the sky--into a thundering black monster.

The darkness on that particular afternoon started in the northwest, low against the rolling fields of wheat and cattle. And then the clouds climbed up and quickly blotted out the sun. They came like great, black sharks across the sky, swimming swiftly over the ripening wheat, which the wind bent into the waves of a rusty sea. Bolts of lightning flashed stark and crooked, measured out between the slow beat of thunder. The whole dark mass moved over the fields, gliding from farm to farm, coming forward a mile every two minutes.

Wayne MacKay pulled his truck to the side of the dirt lane and watched the storm approach. He pushed his thick bifocals up his great, hooked nose. The MacKay nose, they called it, for it had appeared on the faces of his sons and grandsons, and on some of the women, too. The wind blew through the half-opened window and played with what was

left of the coarse, gray hair on MacKay's shiny skull. He chuckled low as if he had been pawed by a favorite puppy. He loved the quick violence that washed over the flat and enduring land, summer and winter: the blizzards and the tornadoes, the dust storms and the cloud bursts. All these forces he loved, though for all their quickness, they were destructive and caused him extra work.

The summer electrical storm was MacKay's favorite of all the powers that raged on and above his land. Notwithstanding its noise and power, it was the most ephemeral of the storms--and so the most feminine, it seemed to him. She was quick to rise up in black anger to proclaim her secret energy across the sky, and just as quick to conceal herself in the soft shades and contours of sunset. Who was to tell, coming out of a solid, well-built house later at dusk, that she had ever been through? She came and she went, usually causing no harm. Afterward the sky was clear again. The stars came out and all was calm.

But now she was coming, and all was not calm.

"Oh you, you're an evil thing, my dear girl."

MacKay's easy voice offered this in greeting to the rising wind of the storm. He was as pleased as he had been in several weeks. But then, frowning slightly, he took exception to his own words.

"Evil? Well. . . ." he started softly, apologetically,



speaking out loud to God, who, according to MacKay's trim Protestantism, was always listening. He chewed on his tongue for a moment. "No, I guess I wouldn't mean that exactly, seeing as she's as much as your own breath. It's just that she's so. . . ."

MacKay left off, hoping God understood. The right word would not come. It never had. Very often, in conversations between his heart and his mind, he had called her, the lightening storm, evil, or something like evil. And though he had always felt uneasy about this, he had never been able to find a better word in his plain vocabulary to name so frightening and so beautiful a force.

He gazed out across the mile of rolling, ripe wheat stretching to his place. From where he sat, his place was a mere dark clump, an island of trees in a sea of endless fields and pastures. His house was hidden in those trees, along with the barn and the corrals, protected from the wind that rushed otherwise unchecked across the wide-open country.

For the first time in months MacKay caught himself imagining for just a second that his wife Eilene might be watching out the window of her protected house for his truck coming home along the road. And in that same instant, before his mind had time to correct itself, he recalled those summer evenings just before she died, when they would sit together out on the porch enjoying the

still, cool air, swatting the occasional mosquito, and watching the sun dissolve into night.

He got out of his truck and waded into the wheat. Into the wind and the dense, grainy ocean. Something drew him out there and he yielded easily to the force though he knew he should get home before he got soaked.

The crop was tall and husky; it grew up waist' high. Soon he would start combining--something he had always looked forward to, no matter that he had been doing it for more than sixty years. Thinking about it made him feel young. Driving the big machine was like sailing--sailing a yellow ocean. He had his stereo and his Coca Colas. He had his snacks and his air conditioning. It was a fine life.

Wading was fine, too, the lightning now flashing overhead, the first heavy drops beating down on his cap, the wind picking up, bringing the strong smell of damp earth and ozone.

MacKay stumbled and nearly fell, but laughing it off like a clumsy youth, he ignored the rain and jogged further out into the field. It all somehow reminded him of when he was a boy, thirteen years old, pale and skinny. It recalled for him the sea. His father had died suddenly, kicked in the head by a horse, and he had been sent to stay with his aunt Sarah, who lived by herself on the far away coast.

He had not thought about that for a long time. But now it came back, vivid and disturbing, like an old, bad dream. And for the first time in all the years since that summer by the ocean, he wondered why it was that he had been sent away.

A coughing fit shook his body and he stood for a long while in the middle of the field with his eyes closed, catching his breath. When the fit had eased he opened his eyes and straightened his glasses. Turning slowly round on the heels of his boots, he was unsure of where he was. The wheat was like the water of the sea. It had a depth to it like the sea, a density that concealed and closed in. MacKay felt claustrophobic. It was the same uncomfortable way he had felt long ago swimming in the ocean. And yet that great body of water, its vastness and its dark depth, had from the beginning of his stay on the coast that summer cast a sort of spell over him, appealing to something inside, drawing him near.

The boy spent most of his time on the beach just watching. Now and then he ventured out, the tow sucking the sand out from under his clutching toes, the frothy water growing colder with each step. Always he turned back when the water reached to his waist. That was far enough. He was certain he would die if his feet lost

contact with the sand--if the water rose up to his neck and lifted him away from the earth--if that was all that was left of him: his head sticking up out of the gray, rushing foam.

One day, however, he was forced to swim out into the deeper water. A younger child playing nearby lost his beach ball in the surf. The strong breeze blowing out from shore that afternoon quickly took the ball out of the crying child's range.

And Wayne MacKay was after it. Wildly he swam with the stroke he had learned in the creeks back home. At first he thought he was gaining on the small red ball, but then it took a bounce on a wave and the wind caught it full again. After that he knew he had no chance. But still he swam, harder than ever now that he had finally broken away from the shore.

On he went, empowered by a wonderful feeling of anger crying loud in the muscles of his arms and his legs. And for some time, stroke after stroke, he turned his mind off. Only the rhythm of his breathing and the sound of his arms splashing through the water came to his consciousness.

Slowly, though, painfully, the anger in his muscles turned to fatigue. Stiffening, he shifted to an easy breast stroke. The water out there was calmer, quieter. Stopping suddenly, he realized the sea out there was

colder. It was much colder. He pulled his feet up into sight--up out of the cold. The beach ball was gone. And it did not matter anymore, anyway. He turned around and saw that what did matter was that shore was a long way off.

Just then something soft and warm brushed against his leg. Instinctively jerking away, he realized it was only a piece of seaweed floating by. But what else was out there, he wondered, drifting around with him in that cold, black water?

Launching furiously for land, he was suddenly sure what that thing might be. At any moment his father's pale, bent body would come bobbing up out of the murk. He would be naked and the side of his head would be caved in and blue where the horse had kicked the life out of him. His blue lips would open exposing black teeth, and he would speak, revealing, finally, why the boy had been sent away to the coast.

"No!" he cried to drown out the words the corpse might utter. Swimming hard, he pulled his imagination away from thoughts of his father. Now he was certain that there was, indeed, something in the water with him, but it was not the body of a man. It was black and quiet, and it circled beneath, coming closer. And what frightened him most, what frustrated him, was that he could not see the form of the beast that stalked him. He could not tell how

far away it lurked: whether it sat down there, far below in the frigid gray, feigning indifference, or nipped at the knuckles of his swishing toes.

With each swing of his arms he pulled two feet closer to land. Land, where he would be out of the reach of the invisible thing that even then was maybe close enough to swallow him whole. The sobbing of the little boy who had lost his ball came floating out to meet him. Shore was that near--a baby's cry away.

But no one else was there. Nobody had come out to see what the commotion was all about. After he was snatched, he thought, swept up in the jaws of the charging monster and dragged down to the bottom of the ocean--after he had ceased to struggle, ceased to breathe, ceased even to see, and was eaten leisurely by the black, uncaring thing--then would the mother of the crying child come out onto the beach and say something like: "Oh, what a beautiful afternoon! Look, baby, look at the pretty blue waves."

Now the water was getting warmer. Into that warmth he pulled, and he thought what a waste it would be if he were caught then, just when he was about to touch the sand. But his toes did hit the earth, and he ran up onto the beach--far up where the sand was soft and hot and safe from the incoming tide. Shaking the salty water from his hair, he jogged awkwardly on to his aunt's house, not

looking back.

He wanted to--to see if the thing he had felt was out there. But he knew that even if he turned and saw nothing--no huge dorsal fin, no giant tentacle--that would prove nothing. It was out there all right. He need not look. It waited there just beneath the surface of the waves.

Many times in the days before he left his aunt and returned to the farm to live with his mother, he went back out to the sea. But those times he stayed on the beach, content to soak in the sun and watch the waves from a distance. And in all the rest of his life he never again visited that ocean, or any other, though he carried with him always the remembrance of the muddy surf and the salty taste.

Deep inside he carried also the fear of that terrible blackness that had come so near as he swam out there in the sea's cold water.

Fear of the water itself, however, soon passed. In fact, in the next few years his body bloomed and he became a powerful swimmer. MacKay the diver, they called him--the young people who gathered at the big swimming hole in the creek, just below his mother's place.

Yes, MacKay the diver. Tall and brown, he was a wonder then, afraid of nothing, leaping out from the biggest rock. Of that crew of boys who came to jump from

the pool's highest banks, he was the only one who would do a swan. His wet, black hair plastered back away from his tanned face, his arms spread wide and fearless; he would hold his back arched until the very last moment, and then he would disappear with the barest hint of a splash. And always he played the crowd, staying under as long as possible, making them worry--especially the girls.

One hot, end-of-the-summer day, when the work was done and everybody was out there swimming in the creek, Eilene Pervine fell in love with MacKay the diver. He could tell because she seemed so angry when he popped to the surface of the pool unable to hold his breath another second. Almost a minute before that he had let go the air in his lungs, shooting it up in a burst of alarming bubbles.

It was magical, MacKay thought, how Eilene's wrath, whether real or feigned, worked to make her all the more beautiful. For just a moment her loose red hair raged like the August sun and her pale, blue eyes flashed jet black.

He climbed out of the water and stood near her, drying himself in the sun. Out of the corners of his eyes he admired her as she sat there on the edge of a blanket, her long legs tucked up under her pouting chin and small freckled nose, her slender feet playing in the sand. She seemed not to notice him now, though he stood so close, in



fact, that he dripped water all over her.

Continuing to pay him no attention, Eilene tied a floppy, faded yellow bonnet over her hair. Standing there, ignored, MacKay the diver began to doubt what he had seen in the girl's features only a moment before. Her face--her eyes, her small freckled nose, her lips--hid in the shade of the broad brim of her hat. Even sitting so near, in averting those eyes and those lips--and with them the very expression of her being--she became quite invisible. Invisible and unavailable.

Next to so huge an absence, MacKay was shocked by the loud stupidity of his own presence. He wished he could wave his arm and un-create himself. That would be much better, he thought, than simply falling dead where he stood. Then this horrible misunderstanding of his could never have happened. It too would be un-created. He concentrated hard on never having been.

Then he heard her voice. It was playful and soft, and in it there was just the hint of a Georgia drawl, confident, aristocratic. Ostensibly, the words the voice spoke were not directed toward him; and yet surely, his delighted ears told him, its melody was for no one else. The voice coaxed him back to being.

"Look there, dear," she said, nudging the girl friend who shared her blanket. "Oh, just look at the shapes." And pointing to a cluster of tall, puffy thunderclouds far

to the north, she glanced quickly up to MacKay with eyes that were pale and calm and kind.

MacKay imagined those eyes looked for him now, worried and wondering why her silly old man did not come in out of the storm. But no, he remembered . . . and, anyway, the storm was almost past. In a few more minutes the low sun would again be out. He stood there in the wheat and watched the clouds move away as quickly as they had come. It was such an amazing thing.

In that moment, he became aware that he was not quite alone in that field of wheat. Hidden and incongruous in the midst of the vibrant, golden expanse he felt the presence of an un-living, uncaring thing: the dark invisible thing he had almost forgotten all those years. It had followed him from the sea, across a thousand miles and sixty years. And now it was circling nearer, closer than ever.

"It's you!" MacKay cried out angrily, sensing that he had been lured into the field just as he had been drawn into the sea years before. "And you . . . you have me again," he whispered, terrified.

The beast must have grown older, he thought, like himself, and more serious. Long ago it had only been playing--simply revealing itself. Now it was hungry; he

could feel it.

Turning, he started slowly back toward his truck. A hundred yards of thick wheat stood between himself and the road. Side to side he glanced, and back behind, but nothing was there. It was then that he realized that maybe the thing was not behind him, or even to the side-- maybe it was out in front, cutting him off from escape. Still he went forward, cautiously, slowly. What else could he do? And with each swing of his legs he moved two feet closer to the truck.

Wayne MacKay was almost there, almost out of the wheat, when he finally, for the first time, saw the shape of the thing he had only imagined his whole life. It seemed to grow more intensely black as MacKay moved just a step nearer. He darted suddenly to the right and the dark beast just as quickly covered the move. His feint to the left was again easily countered. Outmaneuvering this being that had tracked him down over many miles and many years seemed impossible. Even the thought of charging back out into the wheat he immediately dismissed. No, he would run no more. And, besides, he perceived that the shady form was quite inert as long as he himself remained perfectly still.

But holding still was difficult. Laughing nervously, MacKay swiveled his body as if to look away, all the while watching slyly out of the corner of his eye. The beast

turned also, offering its own profile.

"My God!" MacKay cried.

There, projecting from the head area of the otherwise generally round outline of his lifelong enemy, was a long, hooked nose. MacKay balanced there in the humid air, afraid even to think, lest the truth grow more complete, more terrifying. He turned again to fully face this most deeply hidden fear of his life. All hope had disappeared.

Precisely at that instant a subtle glow of red sunshine came to life in the center of the dark shape before him. The light grew steadily more intense, finally illuminating his own image. "Lord, Lord," he whispered, moving his hands forward and over his head, as if he might leap head first into the marvelous new scene floating there in front of him on the shiny, black side of his truck. And then, growing suddenly weary, he knelt down with a relief that beat painfully in his chest.

Unsure whether he saw it there in the reflection on the black metal or dreamed it, it seemed to him that as the slow pulse of thunder faded in the distance, the sun set in a clear horizon, silhouetting the islands of trees on the open prairie. The stars came out and all was calm.

The End

## WAITING FOR THE MAN IN THE MOON

When Jacob Benoad woke and went to the window, the mud was still coming down. For three weeks it had been raining mud--ever since crazy old Eli had arrived. And it showed no signs of easing up.

Jacob peered out through the brown morning--out to where, if his eyes had been capable of piercing the thick rain, he would have seen where the buildings of his village ended and the desert started, stretching out further than anyone alive had ever gone.

Anyone other than Eli, perhaps. And that old man claimed that there was, in fact, a whole kingdom of people out there on the other side of the huge empty space to the east where only the great stone-eating dragons were able to survive. Eli called that other world the real world, saying Jacob's village was just a tiny region where God had allowed time to stop for a while after the immemorial incident everyone had been taught to call the Big Bang.

The Big Bang. Eli took particular joy in that term. And one day when Jacob had asked him why, Eli had turned to him with just such a twist on his face that Jacob knew the

old man had been waiting for the question.

"They liked to use that expression in what you call the days of Science," he had answered, "to refer to the beginning of all things. What's funny is that you're right--just as right as they were. The problem is that this village of yours is neither a part of the beginning of anything nor an end. This place is nowhere. It is no time." And then he had started laughing, refusing to say more.

The sun had hardly risen and already Jacob could hear, coming up out of the mud to rattle the pane of his second story window, the first few tentative taps and tinklings of metal on metal as Eli and his sons began another day of work on what was beginning to look an awfully lot like a space ship. Jacob smiled and went into the bathroom. Standing naked in front of the cracked full-length mirror, he turned slowly round, checking himself, as he had done every morning of his life, ready to tweeze out the new finger, arm, or toe that might be sprouting where it probably should not.

"And how do you know," Eli had asked him the day before, "that in looking at yourself morning after morning this way, without fail, that you have not missed the horrible growths you fear? It works that way, you know," he had said. "We easily accept the appearance of ugly appendages in our lives."

Jacob could still hear the very voice of the old man--

the words and even the sense of the words--but, like much of what Eli told him, he was not sure quite how to take it. He shook his head and gray hairs floated down into the sink. He looked good. Very good! he thought to himself--for twenty-five. Silver had come before baldness. That was a positive sign.

"And why shouldn't it be so," he asked aloud, a bit defensively. After all, both of his parents had lived far into their thirties. He stood to go at least as long.

Looking into his fragmented reflection on the broken glass, he remembered his parents. There was his mother's noble jaw and high cheek bones. There were her eyes, blue and long-lashed. Her, they had called striking; and Jacob, too, might have been handsome, except that there, right in the middle of his face, was his father's nose.

In all truthfulness, it was more like a tusk than a nose. A tusk arching out and down. It was a nose that set Jacob apart, just as his name set him apart--just as his father had been set apart from others in this small town without a name. They had called the elder Ben Noah a bad sign, those villagers who feared all signs from God; and they had said he was the last of an evil race. Well, apparently not, now that they were saying the same thing about him.

"Maybe I am the last," he ventured as he stroked his magnificent nose with one hand and shaved himself with the

other. "Aaaawck," he screeched. "I am the lone eagle."

Eagles were magnificent flying creatures that existed on the other side of the desert. Eli had told him about them.

Indeed, there was no reason for him to believe that he was not the last. After all, he was alone and not likely to marry. In that town that had forever despised his line, there had always appeared a mate for the one son born each generation to the Benoahs. But that marriage had not materialized for Jacob. Once, years before, he thought he had discovered the right one. Only fifteen, tall and pale like his mother, she had dark hair and the deepest brown eyes. But that girl had fallen ill and died suddenly shortly after her father--a man apparently hated even more than Jacob's own father--was elected Senator and sent on a mission into the dragon-infested desert.

Out of the bathroom Jacob trotted, his silver hair slicked back from his smooth, white forehead. He dressed quickly. Eli was waiting. From under the sink he grabbed several small packets of bait and shoved them into his coat pockets. Then he went out into the brown morning.

"Yeah," he said aloud to himself as if answering a thought in his mind, and he reached for the umbrella leaning under the eaves of the house. It was dry. He slammed it hard on the stone porch steps and reddish flakes fell away in a heap.



"Yeah," he repeated, "she was beautiful." Smiling at the memory of his lost, young would-be lover, he found he could not discover anywhere in his mind her name. It was not important. So singular was she in the space of his life, and so sure was he that she was the only possibility of marriage that he would ever get, he saw no use in going through the mental exercise of labeling her as one among many. Like his village, which existed without peer in the known world, the memory of his lost love required no title. It was her image that he cherished, that he kept hidden away where no one could take it from him. This image visited him those times when he was especially aware of his loneliness, usually at night just before he fell asleep.

And his mother, too, no less beautiful in his memory than the girl whose name he could not recall, had also during the last few weeks made appearances after he turned off the lights. Leaning over his bed, as she had done when he was very young, she whispered to him the old story of the man in the moon. He had gone away just before the Big Bang, this man who children knew was now in the moon. Everyone knew this, even adults, because everyone had been told many times as a child. Usually it was the father who told the story, but Jacob's father, for some reason the son had never understood, did not believe such a thing should be repeated. And so his mother had whispered it to him secretly, had hid it in his mind at night as he floated

between consciousness and dreams.

Taking his haul bag from its nail that brown morning and grabbing the Louisville Slugger, Jacob, as if finally waking to the day, stepped away from his roving imagination and went out into the mud. A spirit of irritation descended upon him. Slogging across the yard, he could not figure the cause of it. Too much dreaming, he supposed, and his mind flipped quickly through its load, attempting to locate the problem. He was surprised at where his mind settled. A bothersome detail. Each time the ghost of his mother came to remind him again of that old fairy tale his father had hated so much, it was Eli's face on the side of the moon he saw as he drifted off to sleep.

Was it possible that the man in the moon was real? And could it be that he had come back and was living right next door? But would the man in the moon be building another space ship? Would he go away again? So soon?

Even before he had crossed the street Jacob was sure he could smell the coffee brewing in the Zacuminc kitchen. The old man was out in the yard yelling something indecipherable to his sons, who were noisily banging away on the shiny craft. Their work was conducted under a quilt of giant tarps sewn together and stretched out over a frame of assorted lengths of plumbing pipe to form a kind of lop-sided canvas garage some sixty feet long, forty feet wide and thirty feet high.

"Morning, Jacob!" came Eli's raspy voice, now aimed at him.

"Your zipper's down!" Jacob yelled back, having just yesterday learned from Eli himself the proper term for that device on the front of men's trousers. He was as yet unsure how well the old man could hear. Indeed, Eli seemed ancient. His white hair hung from his huge head in great tangles down past his shoulders; and out through a red-rimmed hole in his thick beard came a frequent deep belly laugh, a roar that seemed to Jacob like a million-year-old echo emerging from a great crack in a mountainside.

"And orange bananas are still bananas on Tuesdays," said the old man.

". . . What?" asked Jacob after a moment.

Eli came forward a step and put his lips to the younger man's ear.

"I said, 'Don't fool yourself!'"

Some said he was born before the Big Bang, but that seemed far-fetched to Jacob, though the man did appear to know a lot about Science. He was a weird creature who had appeared with his wife and children out of the desert one afternoon, pushing a huge wooden cart heaped with pieces of shiny metal, and surrounded by a dusty herd of strange animals. The family had quietly moved into a building on the edge of town and then noisily started constructing the

spaceship.

Everyone said the strangers lived entirely on grasshoppers and honey. Jacob knew this was not so because he had eaten bread and drank coffee with them a number of times. He was the only one who dared visit the house. In fact, mornings with the old man had become a habit.

As he entered the yard, he looked over toward the ship. Eli's several sons scampered here and there, in and out of the odd-looking craft, busy as ever. He guessed the rockets of Science must have looked something like Eli's. He was probably using the old parts--parts that had somehow survived the Bang and had lain out there in the desert, untouched by the dragons, until Eli came along and hauled them into town.

"Come in," said the old man, taking Jacob's bag, club, and umbrella. "Breakfast is up."

The house was a wonder, even more than the ship outside. There was writing everywhere, printed on cards hanging from the walls and filling the books that lay in stacks all over the place. The books, too, must have come from the desert.

This was Science, Jacob knew, and he was frightened by it. But he also felt the magical, mysterious lure. Everything in those books was connection to the past. And in there with all the bad and all the confusion, Jacob thought there just might be something about himself. A

secret urge had lately begun to itch within him. In spite of himself, he had started to wonder about his ancestors-- where they had come from and why they had settled in this village. His fear fought silently with his curiosity.

As owner of those books, Eli had a strange power. It was the power everyone in town was grumbling about, and not so much the awful noise issuing from his garage. Jacob--he was hopelessly drawn to the white-haired old man who had walked out of the land of the dragons, toting a pile of books and a bunch of rocket parts.

"Let me read something to you," Eli said, bringing the coffee and rolls to the table. He had with him also a large, old scroll. Jacob had heard some from it already-- concerning the days of God and Science--but now his fears rose up. The people were growing tense with the need to do something about the crazy old man, and Jacob himself, though he had always been an outsider in his own village, thought it best that day to stick to safer conversation.

"So," he said, taking a sip of coffee, "I'll bet you Yogi Berra didn't do baseball in this weather."

"Play," Eli corrected. "He didn't play baseball in this weather."

"Yeah, I'll bet none of those guys played in this shmuck."

"That's muck."

"Whatever."

"Jacob, Jacob, Jacob," groaned the old man, "I feel sorry for you."

"Eli, Eli, Eli, tell me more about the Yankees. Or the Dodgers. But I can't handle the other stuff right now."

Just as he always did when he got serious, Eli spoke to the ceiling.

"The people shake in their muddy boots," he complained, his eyes closed, "thinking they might understand."

Jacob took it that he meant the village as a whole.

"Understand what?" he asked. "And what's that got to do with me and baseball."

"Take this mud for instance," Eli said, pointing out the window. Spreading jelly over a hunk of coarse bread, he let the younger man consider the mud.

"Have any of you ever thought about what might be causing it?" he asked.

Jacob wondered if Eli knew the villagers believed that it was the old man himself who had somehow brought on the mud. And he had to admit, it did start pouring the day after the new family wandered into town. Casually, he looked around for where Eli had hidden his things.

"Tell me more about Joe Dimaggio. Or the Sultan of Smut."

"Swat!" cried the old man.

"And the lights in your houses?" he continued. "And the water out of the faucets? How do you think those things

work? Well I'll tell you, they don't work just because they're supposed to. Let me tell you something: In the old days there were tall buildings that reached up so far into the sky you couldn't see the tops. They stood there, lining the streets, like a row of baseball bats balanced on end. And until the Bang itself, they never tipped over. It was impossible how they stayed upright on the good days, let alone how they held against the earthquakes and the wind. But they did. And you know why?"

Jacob shook his head, trying to imagine the long rows of enormous baseball bats.

"It was grace. It was grace then and there's still a little left today. But just a little. And only for a short while. Jacob, all the plumbers and the electricians and the carpenters--the creatures who built your houses--are dead now. You live as you do, ignorant and blessed, because of grace. Even the paint on your houses refuses to peel in this land of nowhere."

"Grace! Eli, you're so mezithetical."

"Metaphysical. Metaphysical," Eli insisted, and for a while he munched silently on his toast.

I tell you," he resumed, "people in the old days were not such cattle as some I see around me now."

"Cattle?"

Eli popped his forehead with the top of his fist, remembering there were no such things as cattle. "Kikes,

then," he said, grimacing at the word, "the things you hunt. Dead kikes with no curiosity left. They didn't take everything for granted. Not that they always came up with the best answers."

"The dummies wiped themselves out, didn't they?" exclaimed Jacob.

"After a while they did, sure. But for a long time they cared. Sometimes about the wrong things, I'll admit."

"They were stupid, I would say. Why worry? What is is."

"And who are you? Doris Day?" teased old Eli, forgetting himself. "Oh yes, I know, 'nothing matters.'"

"And you know very well. . . ." Jacob was cut off by the other man's harsh laughter.

"Listen to him, Marti!" he cried to his wife--a short crinkled old woman with big white teeth, who never spoke when Jacob was around. She went on with her baking, paying no attention.

"This young man has no idea what it is that causes a rocket to shoot up into the air, and yet he believes it will do just that. Because what will be will be."

"Eli, it's just that there's no cause for the mud. I refuse to get worked up about it. But, believe me, I'm the only calm person around here. Everyone else thinks you're the reason. It hadn't rained for nearly a year before you came, you know. And then you showed up out of nowhere,



along with a whole wagon-load of Science. At first they all thought you were the man in the moon. They thought you'd finally come back to fight God. Now they think you're just one of his curses."

"It's strange," Eli muttered almost to himself, "that they always make God and Science enemies."

Jacob found the Louisville Slugger, along with his bag and umbrella, under the sofa.

"Yeah, well, anyway," he said, getting to his feet, "I figure if you are the man in the moon, neither God or anyone else has anything to worry about. I gotta go."

"Wait!" commanded the old man, standing, fierceness in his voice.

Jacob saw, as if for the first time, how large and powerfully built Eli really was. He could not help but picture the old guy swinging a baseball bat.

Eli's voice softened a notch. "You don't know what you speak of when you talk of this man in the moon. Listen! There is one coming whose shoes I am not fit to tie."

"Are you angry with me?" Jacob asked, somewhat alarmed.

"Angry? Why should I be angry with anyone? You people don't know your ass's rear from your own. And besides, it doesn't concern me."

"What's an ass?"

Eli stared, exasperated, at the younger man without speaking.

"Then I guess I'll see you later," Jacob offered.

Eli's terrifying aspect eased and he even smiled a little.

"That bat," he said, "I didn't give it to you so you could go out and kill things with it."

"Eli, it's my job."

"They used to call them pets, you know, in the old days."

"What's that?"

Eli sat down and leaned back in the chair, remembering. Suddenly his eyes shut tight, the sides of his mouth drooped down, and his nostrils squeezed together. It was as if he had just smelled something really awful.

"You kept them in your house," he said, the sour look still on his face. "If you were happy, you scratched them under the chin. If things were going badly, you kicked them in the rear!"

Gleefully, he stood and booted an imaginary pet across the room.

"These days, if you're afraid of God," Jacob said, raising his bat, "like everyone around here, then you pay someone to go out and THONK! (the bat came down on the sofa) a bunch of them on the head. Then you can burn them up on a big open fire and hope God will smell the smoke and leave you alone."

"Why do you do it, Jacob?"

"There's too many of them, anyway. They'd come around and be biting people on the ankles if I didn't keep their numbers down."

"No," said the old man, "that's not what I meant. Why do you do it? Why is it that they've picked you?"

"I don't know. My father did it, and his father. They need somebody to do it."

"They need someone special."

"Eli, let's not get into this again. I'm nothing special."

"Yes you are, Jacob. Yes you are."

Eli turned away and gazed for a long, uncomfortable while out the kitchen window. Jacob was afraid. He wanted to ask him what he saw--out past the rain and the miles and miles of rocky desert. Then, suddenly, the old man was staring at him. The bat jumped from his hand and rolled under the coffee table. He leaped back, startled and embarrassed.

"Leave the bat there, Jacob. Stop killing those little beasts. God has smelled your fires, and it's not nearly good enough. He wants something else from you."

Jacob knelt and reached under the table. "What do you mean, he wants something from me? They're not my fires. I just light them." He found the bat and stood. "I'm not the one who believes in God."

"That's where you're wrong, Jacob. Admit it. You're

the only one around here that believes. And they know it. That's why they picked you. They don't believe in God, really. They never have. It's more like hate and fear. They're just playing it safe while they wait for the man in the moon. Don't you see it, Jacob? You're their priest."

"I can only guess what you mean by that; but I'm absolutely positive you're crazy. I got no more time for this. See ya. See you, Mrs. Zaccumink!"

Eli's crinkled wife looked up from her baking and smiled. Jacob pressed out through the front door.

"Yeah, Jacob, my son," yelled Eli, "I'll see you later. But in the meantime, think about this: The moon is only a pebble in the sky. It's only there by grace."

What the heck was that supposed to mean, Jacob wondered. He could never get away from the old guy without some cryptic farewell being heaved after him. And then the words would keep returning, bothering him like some pesky dream with a meaning that floated just out of sight.

He hurried down the road, turning to take a last look at the ship. The sight of it--huge and shining against the dull morning--recalled the story the ghost of his mother had lately returned to tell him. It was the part about the rocket that had blasted off to the moon and had never come back. There had been some kind of famous man in the craft. A great man--a peacemaker, a healer, a leader. He had many names. Melchizedek was one. Messias and Elvis were

others. He had gone away to the moon long before the Bang.

So maybe Eli wasn't the man in the moon. But he did have a spaceship, and Jacob wondered if he would ever be coming back if he really managed to get off the ground.

He turned onto a path moving upward into the heavily wooded hills above the village. Beyond these hills were high mountains. Nobody ever went there, just as no one ventured into the desert. Jacob strayed as far as anyone. It was his job. The foothills were where he did his trapping. There he was alone, especially since the mud had begun and the trail, steep and difficult anyway, had become almost impossible to negotiate. Strangely enough, the trapping itself had actually improved as the weather had worsened.

He went into the hills to trap, but he went there also to escape the town. People down below were always in a frenzy about something. Now it was Eli. And since Jacob had been seen often in his company, his relationship with the neighbors had changed. Not that they had ever cared for him, or he much for them. But now they turned away when he walked by. And his fee, which in the past had been hand delivered by Mayor Ben Esau Sunday afternoons, had for the last two weeks been crammed into his box while he slept.

What really bothered him was the news about Eli. It was the hushed gossip he heard lately wherever two or more were gathered. Of course they never said anything to him

directly; but often enough he was able to approach close enough before they knew he was there and shushed themselves.

It seems they really did think Eli had something to do with the rain. It was that contraption he and his sons were building, they said, that was the cause. But that was only a portion of their grievance against the newcomer. They honestly seemed to believe that he was some kind of enemy of the man in the moon. His presence in the village they took as evidence that the man in the moon was soon to return. Eli had stationed himself there to thwart that homecoming. And so they planned to get rid of him.

Jacob lost sight of the village as he moved up into the trees. The timber on the hills, dead longer than anyone could remember, still provided fair protection from the mud. Standing in strange contrast to the hue of the falling sky, the trees were encased in a paint-like growth of blue and yellow blotches. It was this coating, Eli said, that kept the forest upright and almost live-looking.

Eli knew so many things about the days of Science and about the present. But Jacob wondered if he could survive the future. Would he finish his ship and get out of there in time. He had not yet been able to learn exactly when the move against Eli would take place. It would happen soon, though; of that he was sure.

He slipped and slid his way to the first stop on the

line. The trap was empty and unsprung, though the lure was gone. Taking bait from his pocket, he reset the trap, a simple system composed of a wooden crate, a short rod to prop it up, and a bait pan tied to the prop by a length of string. Usually, when the animal came in and rolled around in the pan (something they truly seemed to enjoy, covering themselves with the dusty odor of the delicious bait), the crate would fall, holding the beast until Jacob arrived to beat it on the head with the Louisville Slugger.

The secret to the whole operation was the special bait. It had once grown wild on these very hillsides, but Jacob's ancestors had long ago destroyed it after noticing the kike's strong attraction to it. Now it grew only in the Benoah yard, a family secret. They had cultivated the stuff for years, and dried the leaves, storing them in sacks in the garage. The kikes seemed to like the dried product even more than the fresh. No Benoah ever had any trouble getting the little brutes into his traps. Jacob hoped his supply lasted until the mud stopped and he could grow some more.

The second crate was hidden behind a rock fifty yards up the trail. Hidden, though Jacob was certainly not concerned about concealing anything from the furry rascals. And there were no dragons in those hills, nor, for that matter, any other type of animal. No, it was the village folk he was worried about. He did not want them to find out

just how easy it would be to catch the buggers themselves. Of course this was part of the game he had inherited from his father--a game whose rules had never been spoken. What Eli had said was true, though he refused just then to admit it, even to himself. There was nothing special about the knowledge required to catch and kill the kikes. Even if the particulars of his job had been generally known, he would still have been paid to do the work.

As he approached the rock, that familiar high-pitched yowl the big ones always made reached out to him through the wet, brown air. When he got there the crate was rocking. Jacob readied his club and prepared to lift the box. But just then a strong wind came up and the wooden cage burst into flames. And there stood the largest kike Jacob had ever caught, on fire and roaring thunder.

"REMOVE YOUR SHOES!" came the booming voice of the burning monster.

Without hesitation, Jacob tore off his shoes and fell down on his knees. His club and umbrella became snakes and slithered away into the blue-green weeds.

This great animal was 40 times the size of the average kike. And this one had long, lightning-bright teeth. A dozen stars orbited around its head.

"What. . ? Who are you?" Jacob hiccuped.

"I AM THAT I AM!" The nearby trees exploded in flames and burnt quickly to the ground.



At that proclamation Jacob was filled immediately with the awareness that he had been waiting all his life for this great voice to make itself known. Far from being scared, he was elated. In a large way he was relieved. He believed. And he kneeled there in the mud, bursting with his new faith, wondering what he should do with it.

The decision was made for him.

"COME FORWARD!" commanded the amazing form.

Jacob managed to crawl slowly ahead. Suddenly, he was drawn up by his wrists and he found himself staring directly into the eyes of the terrible being. Icy flames wrapped around his body, melting away his clothing but sparing his flesh. The clear, bottomless eyes of the captor, Jacob realized at once, contained all Science. Eli's books and scrolls were nothing in comparison.

"WHY DO YOU PERSIST WITH THESE SACRIFICES?"

"I only . . . I only do it for them," Jacob stuttered, motioning toward the valley, his voice very thin.

"JACOB, YOU DECEIVE YOURSELF!"

Jacob was quiet, amazed at and curiously thankful for the being's knowledge of his name.

"IT IS NOT ENOUGH THAT YOU BURN THESE ANIMALS. IT HAS NEVER BEEN ENOUGH."

"Enough for what?"

"FOR THE GUILT."

"Guilt?"

"YOU LIE TO YOURSELF AGAIN, JACOB. LOOK WITHIN. THE GUILT HIDES THERE IN EVERY PARTICLE OF YOUR BEING."

Jacob made an honest attempt to turn his eyes upon himself. Of course he saw nothing. Or rather he saw the same dark fuzzy veil seen many times before when he had ventured to discover the meaning of the fears, doubts, and anxieties that surfaced now and then like small bubbles popping in his brain.

"Let me help," came the extraordinary kikes's now kind voice.

Suddenly the black veil was rent, and all the shadows stored up and hiding back there flew out together like a single dark poisoned blade, piercing forward to the front of Jacob's consciousness, awakening him to all the sorrow and all the disappointment, all the greed and all the hate, all the torment and all the rage of every man and woman who had ever breathed. And before Jacob could scream out in his immeasurable agony, the pain was gone. Strangely, almost forgotten. It had lasted less than one-billionth of a second.

"It is the guilt," came the words whispered into Jacob's ear, "of forever having bungled it. It is the despair that comes from falling short of the flight of your dreams and your fathers' dreams. Jacob, it is more than you can bear. And the darkness cannot hold it back forever."

With awful speed, the giant, flaming kike, if indeed

it was a kike, drew a sword from his waist. He pulled the sharp blade across his own right cheek. On Jacob's right palm he made a similar cut. Then he pressed his face to Jacob's hand and held it there. A burning sensation shot through Jacob's body, filling his arteries and his veins, pulsing almost unbearably hard in his lungs and in his eyes. Just before he slumped into unconsciousness, he thought he saw the blood red lips of the stranger form a smile. And there was something else, something odd about that face behind the calming grin. It was no longer the face of an animal; it was the face of a man. A man with shining white skin and coal-black eyes.

When Jacob came to the man in the moon was gone. Yes, he was sure--it was the man in the moon. Elvis, Melchizedek, Messias. He had returned. Jacob traced the now star-shaped scar on his palm and marvelled at the absence of pain. Eli was the one to talk to about all this. But running down the steep, muddy path, the sun now a low brown glow in the west, thinking nothing of his nakedness, he decided he had better go to the village first. Life had gotten strange since Eli's arrival, and Jacob was beginning to think something big was about to happen. He wanted to be a part of it.

As he entered the town, he could hear the people yelling the old man's name. "EEEEli!" they shouted. "President EEEEEli!"

President! That was the extent of their hate. They were gathered in the middle of the central field. Some stood more quietly on the stone steps surrounding the oval. Everyone carried an umbrella. The naked Jacob, who had left his own umbrella in the hills, wondered at these people who did not have the sense to get in out of the mud.

Ben Esau was standing on a wooden box calling for order. Jacob leaned against the big metal post at one end of the field, not daring to get close, but wanting to see what would happen. Everyone became silent and Ben started to speak. He was a squat little man with a huge voice. Except for the top of his head, a jungle of red hair covered his body. The big voice ran in the Esau family, making its members perennial village leaders.

"Well, it's started again," Ben said. It was as if he meant the mud, which of course had not stopped in three weeks.

"Yes, yes," the crowd responded in unison.

"And we have just the man to take care of our problems."

Everyone laughed.

"People!" Ben went on, getting louder, "I recommend the stranger, Eli, for the position of President!" Shouting this, he motioned to a nearby assistant, who unveiled a large arm chair hung with a red sash and decorated with glued-on broken bits of colored plates and glasses.

There was a lot of cheering and laughter about the presidential seat.

"And after we have a vote," Ben continued, "after the election, I say we send him on a mission. A mission into the desert."

Just as the crowd prepared to shout forth its approval, just before anyone could laugh this time, something happened to cause the gathering to become suddenly very quiet. Everyone noticed it at once. The mud had stopped. No one knew what to say. After three weeks of constant, maddening mud, it suddenly stopped. Even Ben was silent. He just stood there with his big mouth agape, staring up into the sky.

What happened next was the real surprise. At least it captured Jacob's attention. After the mud stopped, the clouds disappeared and out came the stars and the full moon, shining clear in the sky. There was a pause of about three heartbeats, and then, one by one, the stars vanished. Actually, as Jacob would always remember, it was more like the stars were plucked by a huge, invisible hand and tossed away. One at a time, they flew away out of sight.

By this time Ben had gotten down off his box. After a while--a very short while--the moon was the only thing left in the sky. And all the people watched, horrified, as it began to darken with the color of blood. Finally, dripping crimson, the moon, like the stars, fell away. Then

the clouds closed in and mud again poured from the sky.

Jacob ran to the center of the field. "All right! Ok!" he yelled. "Everyone here saw that, and there's no way Elf could have had anything to do with it. No way! It had to be Elvis himself."

About then Jacob remembered he was not wearing any clothes. But his embarrassment could not match his astonishment at finding, as he looked around at the startled crowd, that he was not the only naked person on the field. Actually, those around him were not totally nude. But the tatters that held here and there to their bodies could not be called clothing. It was as if some dreadful garment disease had spread suddenly, shrinking and rotting the cloth right off everyone's back.

But no one as yet seemed to realize his predicament. Each eye remained on Jacob, angry, accusing. They stood there staring at him, as if in all their apparent hate they could not quite determine who he was. That did not last long.

"It's him!" cried a lady wearing a decayed kike skin coat. "He's with the old man!"

"Get him!" they all screamed at once.

Jacob tried to run but they started throwing rocks. One hit him on the head and he fell to the ground. More rocks came and Jacob thought he was dead. The vicious mob moved in around him, kicking and spitting. The last thing

he remembered was them chanting: "President Jacob! Send him on a mission! Send him on a mission!"

He woke having no idea how much time had passed. He was sure, however, that he was spending far too much of that day with his eyes closed. He was in the middle of the field, seated in the huge chair with the red sash and the glued-on bits of broken glass. They had pinned a tin star to his chest. Blood caked the side of his head where the first stone had struck.

He remembered Eli. Had they gone after Eli? He slid out of the chair onto the wet ground. His legs did not want to work and he imagined the brutes must have used his head for a baseball while he was out. He got up and managed a pathetic little jog. After a while, the pain deadened and he was able to move faster, though he hardly saw the use. By that time they must have gotten to Eli's place. He ran on, certain he was going to get beat up again before the night was over.

But when he reached Eli's house it was as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened that night. He leaned against the front window. The lights were off inside for some odd reason, but he could see the whole weird family in there, illuminated by a single candle, sitting at the dinner table.

Jacob found himself almost disappointed. This was not the proper conclusion to the day he had just

experienced. Dried blood still clung to the side of his face. He reached down and touched the star on his chest. At that moment Eli stepped over to the window and motioned for him to come inside.

"Hmmm," he said, appraising Jacob's condition and looking at his right palm. "It's about time you got here."

The others had by then gathered around the young visitor. They smiled their big, toothy smiles and patted him on the back. Marti dabbed at his face with a wet towel.

"I've got a lot of news. . ." Jacob started to explain.

"Never mind now," said the old man. "We gotta hurry."

They all went outside, carrying Jacob with them, and rushed toward the spaceship. The canvas garage had been removed. Its remains were piled next to the craft.

Jacob tripped over a stone and fell to his hands.

"Sorry," Eli said, helping him up. "Be careful. The lights work no more."

Jacob realized suddenly, looking around, that all about him was a darkness like none he had ever seen. There were no lights anywhere, other than in the space ship, where Marti had lighted a lantern.

"Get in, get in," Eli commanded.

As Jacob went forward through the small entrance, he left a red handprint near the door with his right hand, which had begun to bleed. Marti grabbed the hand and wrapped it in a strip of white cloth. It was the first time



he had ever been inside the ship, and he was amazed at how much room there was. There were bunk beds along the walls, and great quantities of food filled the open stow shelves. And Eli had loaded all his books. The trip, apparently, was to be very long.

There was a confusion of screeching, mooing and barking as the old man and his sons drove a huge herd of animals through a larger entrance in the rear. When all the beasts and all the people were finally inside, Eli closed and bolted the doors.

Jacob sat down on a bunk in order to be out of the way while they prepared to blast off. He was momentarily bothered when his adoptive family began singing to one another in a language he had never heard before, but his attention was quickly drawn to the noise outside. The villagers had arrived. And they were in roaring form. Jacob attributed their tardiness to their having gone home to find new clothing. The dull thud of rocks hurled against the side of the ship echoed in his aching skull. Eli and the others hardly seemed to notice. They continued chanting in their strange, sing-song tongue.

"So, when are we gonna get out of here?" Jacob shouted suddenly. The crowd outside had him worried. He wondered if they might be able to tip the ship over.

"Let's get this thing off the ground!" he pleaded.

Eli turned and grinned at him. "Jacob, Jacob, Jacob.

This isn't a spaceship. And we're not going anywhere."

"So what's going on?" Jacob cried, now extremely agitated. Outside, they were shouting in unison.

"Send them on a mission! Send them on a mission!"

"He's coming here, Jacob," Eli said. "He's coming at last. He was only waiting for you."

"The man in the moon?" Jacob whispered, mostly to himself. "Elvis?"

"Jacob, don't you get it yet?" Eli said, shaking his head. "There is no man in the moon. There never was. It was a lie, a corruption of the truth. Even your father knew that. It was Messiah we've been waiting for. God himself, revealed."

"Messiah is not a man?" Jacob wondered aloud. "I saw God?"

Eli grabbed Jacob's right hand and held the bandaged palm up.

"You saw his spirit. He has left his mark on you."

"But why me? Why was he waiting for me?"

"Who knows," Eli answered, shrugging his shoulders. "He reveals himself to whom he chooses. Maybe it's because you wanted him to. And now they too have chosen you."

The sound coming from outside the ship had changed. The mob was no longer throwing things, and its chant had halted in favor of what seemed to be tiny, individual cries for help. What were they doing out there? Jacob wondered.

It was horrible.

"And this. . .?" Jacob yelled over the maddening noise, ". . .this is just protection from them until he arrives, right?" He hoped Messiah would get there pretty fast.

Eli grew very serious. For the first time he looked frightened. And yet his eyes twinkled like blue jewels. At that moment he appeared very young.

"Them?" he laughed, and his laugh, too, was now strangely anxious and youthful. "Them I worry about no more." He bowed his head as all noise from outside suddenly ceased.

Jacob rose from the bunk, terrified.

"What is it?" he asked. "Eli! Tell me!"

"Grace is gone, my son." Eli's eyes darted from brace to brace along the shell of what Jacob had mistaken for a space craft. "What length the season, I'm not sure."

"Tell me, Eli."

"This . . . this ship, Jacob, is protection from God!"

The End

## A CAGE ON INCREDIBLY QUIET WHEELS

Long and dark, Stride moved silently up the street. Behind him, attached by a long steel tongue to the bony fingers of his back-stretched hand, rolled Stride's cage on wheels. It was constructed of what appeared to be the sides of grocery carts welded together into four walls and a roof. This metal crate was attached to a wooden floor with huge, rusty staples. Four feet by four, the cage was maybe five feet high. The whole thing rode on a big, red wagon. It was the kind most kids have, except that this one was much bigger. And, instead of those tiny, hard rubber wheels red wagons generally clack along on, this one had bicycle wheels. Brand-new, incredibly quiet bicycle wheels.

Stride was better than six and a half feet tall, most of that in legs. With each step he and the incredibly quiet cage covered a couple of quick yards.

Up the block, Laura Scott sat out on the curb in front of her house. It was the morning of the ninth day of summer vacation, and on each one of those mornings since finishing the eighth grade, she had sat there on that same spot and

watched the sun come up. These were her very own minutes, she had decided: that hour before the children on the block launched out of their homes to start a day of running about and shouting. And the older kids, who later in the day would haunt doorways of the empty buildings across the street, were still asleep. She herself was no longer a child and she needed a quiet time when she could slip away from the house and be alone, only her thoughts and her dreams for company.

There was Stride, of course, who often appeared during that hour. But watching out for him was no particular problem. She could always hear him coming, the hard rubber wheels of the portable cage vibrating wildly on the rough pavement in the street and banging against the big, weed-filled cracks in the sidewalk. Once she had caught him trying to cut across some lawns, apparently thinking that would muffle the noise. But the yards were too rough and the cage kept tipping over on its side.

This morning, however, Laura did not hear Stride coming. By the time she sensed him standing on the sidewalk behind her, it was too late to run. It could have had something to do with those new tires. They were incredibly quiet. They were amazing. It would have been impossible for her to have heard Stride coming. Yes, she thought, it would have been impossible. And accepting this, she relaxed her tensed muscles and put aside the urge to flee.

She turned around to find that the cage was, just as she had suspected, equipped with a new set of wheels. Tilting her head back she saw the dark impassive face way up there on the curiously small head of the giant.

"I'm not running, you ugly creep," she said casually, and then she looked away again.

Stride moved around so that he was in front of her, casting his shadow across her eyes. She bowed her head, having now just in the last few seconds decided that she hoped he would pass her by.

"Go away," she said. "I've thought about it and I've changed my mind."

She had the right, she figured. And she guessed, anyway, that he probably would leave her alone. It was always kids she saw in his cage as he toured the streets. They cried at first for their mothers, and then they quieted down. Stride would grin stupidly as he walked up and down, all around the neighborhood. He always let the kids go after an hour or so.

Laura was no kid. She was almost fourteen, and tall for her age besides. Stride would never try to put her into his cage. He would tire of staring and then he would continue on down the street. Spinning around where she sat, she wrapped her long arms around her legs and pretended he was not there. It was strange she thought, as she looked across the well-manicured lawn to the drawn shades of her

house, that the mothers never came running when their children cried.

Oh how she hated that lawn. She despised its perfectly mowed lushness. And she despised the house, too, the way it tried to stand out against all the other cheap little houses on the block. Now it was light gray with dark charcoal trim. Her father painted it a new color each year. And the fruit trees: they were the biggest embarrassment of all. Like stray kittens following a little girl home from school, they had followed her mother home from shopping, along with bolts of material for new curtains, school clothes, and baby quilts.

One of Stride's huge hands suddenly clamped down on her wrist.

"Stride! you leave me alone!" she cried, still looking toward the draped windows of her house.

Stride did not answer except to pull the girl to her feet. His strength seemed even greater than his size would allow. With magical speed he spun her round, grabbed her under the arms, and lifted her off the ground. Laura looked into his eyes. They were like the lifeless glass eyes of one of her old dolls, only they seemed backed by some spark of dark intelligence. Kicking her legs wildly, Laura tried to beat the giant on the head with her fists. But Stride's long arms held her easily at a harmless distance.

"Not bad," he said in a dull whisper. "Not bad." He examined the girl slowly. His eyes moved up from the pink underside of her toes, past the struggling legs, bare up to her white cut-offs. Laura ceased to struggle when Stride's eyes had traveled up to and then stopped to focus on her belly, exposed where her blouse was hiked up by his grip under her arms.

"Just what are you looking at!" she yelled, and she wondered if he knew.

Stride's scrutinizing gaze avoided her own as he inspected her hair, dark and short. He smiled, seeming to focus finally on her mouth. "Not bad," he whispered again.

Hanging there, three feet off the ground, Laura wondered what the great beast thought he had caught. What was she to him, anyway?

"Hey, you ape, I'm not a kid," she insisted. "Can't you see."

Staring into those eyes again, she realized that he knew. He knew, all right. That was precisely why he had come for her. The thought infuriated her. She spat into his stupid smile.

Stride set her down, holding her tightly by the wrist. With his free hand he swung open the cage door. Laura screamed toward her house, but the drapes remained drawn and still. Maybe her father would have come if he had known. But he was off in another part of town, driving his taxi.



The cage opening was small and Laura managed to get her feet in front and spread so that she could brace herself against being shoved in. But Stride was too strong. He grabbed her legs, folded her in half, and tossed her inside. Then he slammed the door shut. He took up the long handle and began pulling the wagon down the street. Laura poked her fingers through the steel sides of the cage and tried to stand. But the pen was too short, and, after hunching there a few ignoble moments, she slumped to the splintered plywood floor, weeping silently, exasperated.

The giant turned around to look at his catch. From the cracks between her fingers, Laura watched him move. No hint of urgency showed in the slow rhythmic tightening and loosening of the long thin muscles in the backs of his arms and legs.

A block away Laura's best friend Roe Harper and her mother came out of their house. Roe was obviously upset. She had been crying.

"You don't tell him," she said agitatedly as the two got into their car. Though Roe spoke in a whisper, it was easy for Laura to hear even after the car's doors had been slammed shut. "I was stupid to say anything to you. But Daddy doesn't need to know."

Laura had not seen Roe for a couple of weeks. According to her mother, she was sick. The girl had missed the whole last week of school before summer vacation.

"It's Barry's money, anyway," Laura heard her say as the car passed the cage going the other way.

The eyes of the two girls met just then and held for an instant before Laura's turned away.

"You have no right to hold me," Laura called out to Stride in an ordinary tone, as if to make conversation.

Stride answered shortly: "What's right?"

"It's wrong, Stride."

"What's wrong?"

Behind them, little by little, step by step, ever so gradually, Laura's home, with its drawn shades and its manicured lawn and its fruit trees, disappeared in the humid morning light. Laura touched her abdomen--felt its new roundness, much fuller than the day before, she was sure. It was not so bad, she thought, as she rolled along neither against nor by her will. It was not so bad to give up. She closed her eyes and stared into the darkness.

When she opened her eyes, she found Stride had transported her to a part of town she had never seen before. A stiff wind raised goose bumps on her bare arms and legs. She grabbed a piece of burlap sack balled up in the corner of the cage and pulled it around herself. The streets and sidewalks were crowded in this part of town. Not that there was much movement. Almost everyone Laura could see was either sitting or lying down. Some few leaned against the walls or in the doorways of the shabby

buildings. Stride went along at his normal pace through this still, mumbling mass. Now and then he would reach out his long arm to shake the hand of one of these people. His palm would come back to his pocket filled with bills.

"What is this place!" Laura called out from her cell to an old woman squatting by the curb.

The woman seemed not to hear. In fact, no one gave notice to the girl in the cage. She glided along in the street. Glassy eyes peered, unblinking, right through her. The hard wind that had been blowing since she woke in this place paused for a moment and Laura thought she would be sick from the sudden stench of vomit, urine, and alcohol rising up. Flies came out from the folds in the tattered clothing of the people in the street and filled the air.

"Stride! move this thing!" Laura ordered. "Get us out of here!"

Stride's only reaction was to twist his face in her direction and show an irregular file of yellow teeth through which a buzz of flies came and went. And then the wind rose up again. The flies disappeared back into hiding, and the terrible odor disappeared. The cage rolled on, bouncing through huge potholes, empty bottles, and heaps of ripe, brown garbage. And for nearly a half block a naked old man, running along on all fours, kept pace with the wagon, biting at the tires and at the backs of Stride's white sneakers.

A sudden rush of air caused Laura to turn just in time

to see the whole top half of a dilapidated old brick structure slump over into the avenue. Limp arms and legs stuck out from under the debris. A single bare foot, completely separated from its owner, lay quivering on the pavement only yards from Laura's stupefied form. Stride had stopped the cage, though as it turned out, only to tie his shoes. Other than Laura no one seemed to have noticed the catastrophe. Or if they had noticed, they showed it in no measurable way. True, the naked old man on all fours had responded. The progress of his retreat down a narrow alley could be marked by the dying echoes of his bark.

The jerking of the wagon, as it resumed its journey promoted a small fearful sigh from Laura's throat. She promptly took the opportunity to amplify the sigh into a piercing scream of anguish.

"Daddy!" she cried. "Help me!"

At those words Stride stopped abruptly and glanced about nervously, as if anticipating the charging daddy. And, in deed, his eyes, along with the eyes of his captor, locked in on the sight of a yellow taxi cab, which appeared at the end of an alley as it passed slowly by on a parallel street two blocks away. The vehicle was too far away and had passed too quickly for Laura to tell who the driver was, but inside she knew. And she prayed that the cab would in just a few more minutes be speeding up that crumbling street to save her.

Laura's new enthusiasm was matched with an equal amount of zeal on Stride's part. Now racing furiously, he hauled the cage on wheels through an empty parking lot, across a gravel-filled partition, and out onto a side street heading away from where the yellow cab had been glimpsed. Laura stood in a crouch, desperately gripping the side of the cage as Stride drew her wildly through mounds of garbage and broken bricks. She felt as if the wagon was most of the time suspended in mid-air above the decaying streets of this utterly incomprehensible maze of corrupted buildings and weary people. And though she flew by at such a terrifying and noisy pace, passing on to who knows where, the sleepy crowd still failed to acknowledge her existence.

And her father had also failed to see. Else the taxi would have been there by now. No cage on wheels, after all, no matter how cleverly drawn, is a match for a speeding cab. Her father would have been there by now. And if he was not, that meant he had not seen. It was hopeless.

Laura looked toward the sky. The sun was at its zenith, noon, and chances were that her father had dropped his fare and was on his way home for lunch. He liked to do that--show up in the middle of the day to surprise her mom. Sometimes Laura would come in out of the heat to find them lying together on the couch, kissing. Right there beneath the portrait of Jesus. Childish. Shameful. It was maddening how they would sit up and smile only the least bit

bashfully. Laura had to laugh out loud, though, as it struck her suddenly now how much they looked alike at such times. Like children, neither male nor female. It mattered not that he wore a mustache or that she was seven months pregnant.

"I'm not a kid any more!" Laura's laugh turned abruptly back to a proper scream.

Stride, who had slowed some, simply turned and grinned. "Not bad," he said. "Not Bad."

Laura threw off the grimy burlap blanket and began to shake her little prison with such violence that it threatened to tip over on its side.

"Is that all you can say?" she sobbed as the wagon tilted back and forth to impossible angles. "You long-tramping idiot! 'Not bad.' What's that supposed to mean?"

She continued in her fury to rock the cage, moving round and round the square in an animal crouch. And then, stopping all at once at the door, she realized suddenly that the cage had never been locked. All along all that had been needed for escape was a simple turn of the knob. Before Stride could even drop the wagon's handle, Laura had leapt to freedom--had in fact managed with anger-driven skill to flip the cage off its wheels. And then she was off down an alley, not even bothering to look back to see if Stride was in pursuit.

Block after block, she rushed at world-class pace, changing direction at every turn, hoping she would arrive at some familiar place. And when she finally stopped, it was not because her stamina had failed her; it was because of something she had heard.

". . .my baby?" the voice groaned. "Have you seen my poor child."

The voice was Roe Harper's. And now, except for that single sad utterance on those streets which before had been so crowded, there was not the hint of life. Laura could not remember when the change had occurred. Even the buildings had changed. As tall and as ancient as ever, they now seemed not nearly so dirty, not nearly so worn.

"Roe," Laura called out cautiously, afraid that Stride might be near. "Where are you?"

Roe Harper, thin and pale, wandered out the tall doorway of one of the huge sterile edifices. Her ashen, worried aspect made her almost unrecognizable.

"Roe?" Laura wondered aloud. "It is you. But what are you doing . . . here?" Her eyes swept over the length of the aseptic street as she spoke.

Roe, who had come slowly and silently very near, reached out suddenly, taking Laura by the neck.

"Where have you put her!" she demanded to know. And then, though her hands continued to perform their choking motion, she looked away, now focusing on some invisible

demon on the sidewalk. "No, I've looked everywhere," she whined. "Where can she be?"

It was easy for Laura to break the other girl's weak strangle hold. She held Roe's wrists low by her waist and shook her surprisingly insignificant weight, trying to gain back her attention.

"Where can who be?" she asked in the steadiest tone she could manage. "Roe, tell me. What's wrong?"

"It was you," Roe answered, these words uttered without particular malice. And then she began to cry again. "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I let you do it."

"Roe, don't you know who I am?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It's Laura. Your friend."

"Sure, I know that."

"What have I done to you?"

Roe ripped loose from Laura's grip and jumped back several paces.

"I've changed my mind!" she yelled. "I want her back! Tell me where she is!"

Laura took a step toward her friend but was stopped by a new shade of absolute horror on Roe's trembling face. The frightened girl bolted down the street. The surprised Laura simply watched her go. Just before disappearing around the corner, Roe halted long enough to launch the faint challenge: "I am not a child."



The words had the effect of causing Laura to leap to the side just in time to avoid Stride's stealthy rush.

"I am not a child, either," she taunted, circling around the giant and his cage, and scurrying away through the narrow passage way between the two great legs of an enormous marble statue suddenly planted there in the street where only emptiness had been a moment before. The beautiful face of the stone figure gazed down on Laura with an impossible intensity of kindness and wisdom. She knew this face somehow--had seen it somewhere before, she thought. Maybe in a dream.

She pushed the dream out of her mind and shoved her way through the noisy crowd that had gathered around her. Stride's frustrated animal moans, coming as he tried to force his wagon through the gap between the statue's calves, were quickly drowned out in the din. All about women were shouting numbers at one another. A storm of brightly colored pills mixed with silver and gold coins blew back and forth above the heads of the agitated mob, never seeming to settle down into its hundreds of clawing hands. Laura made her way through the tangle of arms and legs, finally reaching a band of open space.

Across this small expanse of perhaps thirty yards were two other, much smaller, gatherings of people, these all young men, nude and silent. From either of these two tightly balled collections of manhood, which were separated

from one another by a few yards, traveled a single-file line of eight or ten young males. The two lines merged at the foot of a thin tower of steel, which stretched out of sight into the sky. There were rungs worked into the metal structure, up which the young men, coming alternately from one line and then the other, slowly climbed, one at a time, twenty feet of space between them.

Another climber had just started up the ladder when from above, hurtling down at a terrible speed and screaming like an eagle, one of his naked brothers appeared. The nose of this diver from the heavens came to within a quarter of an inch of the pavement and stopped. Laura blinked her incredulity as the fellow then slowly ascended back into the sky.

"Magnificent!" roared a woman next to her. She tossed several red capsules into the air and a new wave of shouted numbers washed through the crowd.

"Next!" issued the general cry.

And another diver came. This time, though, at the end of it, there was the sickening sound of bones crunching and life's air escaping as the man thudded head first into the street. He quivered briefly and then was still. Again, the whirlwind of pills and coins raged above the excited throng. The woman who had been so pleased with the previous jumper this time leaped about in anger.

"The bum," she shouted. "Now make him pay." She

pranced around, snagging yellow pills out of the air.

A team of men dressed in white had charged out to the naked corpse. Laura now perceived the thin, rubber line running from between the dead man's legs and up into the sky. One of the men in white pulled out a long knife and cut this almost invisible cord. It snapped loudly and sprang out of sight. The knife was then drawn across the dead man's swollen abdomen, exposing a treasure of silver coins, which the men in white cupped out with their bare hands and pitched to the assemblage of screaming women. The empty body was then tossed on a stretcher and carted away just in time for the next candidate.

On he came, the rubber line stretching out dangerously thin from his crotch and back up between his tensed thighs. Inches from impact the human projectile eased to a halt and then was slowly pulled back into the sky by the contracting safety band.

And so the weird contest went. Young, naked men went up; young naked men came down, some of them for good. All the while the animated audience watched, crying out its approval, spitting forth its disgust. A rainbow of yellow and blue, red, gold, and silver floated above. Laura ceased even to try to understand as she stood there at the front edge of this horde of spectators. For several minutes, in fact, she closed her eyes, taking the opportunity to rest, knowing that Stride would not dare

attack her here with so many watching.

"Not bad," came the familiar words whispered in warm, bad breath directly into her ear.

Laura jerked to the side, opening her eyes, ready to run. Yes, there was the dark giant, and there by his side was his cage. But this time he was not reaching out with those bony arms and hands to take hold of her. Instead, beaming down at her with that joyless smile of his, only one forearm was lifted at all, and at the end of it a long thin finger pointed off toward the great steel tower. Laura's wary gaze traveled slowly across the open expanse between spectators and performers. It shot back and forth between the two lines of naked young men, moving finally up to the front--to the tower itself, where, just at that very moment, the boy Laura knew best was stepping onto the first rung of the ladder.

"Mitchell!" The cry from her lips surprised even her. In spite of the fact that her legs were churning in the motion of a furious sprint, she moved no nearer to the tower.

"Girl, you can't do that," explained one of the women who held her back. "Settle down," said the other. "For crying out loud, it'll be all right."

Laura's legs continued to pump.

"Mitchell!" she wailed again. "I'm scared."

"Relax, Baby," Mitchell called smoothly, now high up on

the tower. "Don't worry. I'm experienced."

Higher and higher he climbed until Laura could no longer distinguish him with any certainty from the other tiny dots that slid upward into the sky along the thin line of steel. At that point Laura wanted no longer to be a part of the audience staring upward, waiting, waiting for the divers to come. On impulse she reached out and, with a high mighty kick, struck the unsuspecting Stride squarely and smartly exactly where his long, spread legs came together. She easily tipped his bent, yowling form over onto the ground, and then she made her escape back through the dense mass of women. This time they seemed to part before her, giving way, mouths open as if amazed.

Back behind and high above, Mitchell was about to take his turn, Laura guessed. She wanted to be far away when it happened. And she did not want to know the outcome. So she sprinted forward down the empty avenue, which grew noticeably quieter with each step. Up ahead, though still quite far away, were the familiar shapes of the high rises near her home. She was going in the right direction at last. All she had to do was keep running. If she did that, no matter how many strides it took, she would get there.

The streets and the sidewalks were hot in the afternoon sun. Laura ran in the grass when there were lawns, and at every water sprinkler she paused an instant to drink and to

cool her sore feet. She felt that even with the considerable distance she had yet to travel, her father could see her coming. He was home from work and had just finished mowing the lawn. He called to his wife to start supper because Laura was on her way. "French toast," he said, "because that's her favorite."

"Oh Daddy, oh Daddy," she sang as she trotted along streets now everyday-familiar. "Oh Mamma-Mamma-Mamma." And she promised herself she would do a cartwheel as soon as she reached that perfectly manicured lawn. Of course they would listen to her, she thought. There was no doubt in her mind. "They don't know any better," she laughed out loud, like a little girl. "Oh Daddy, oh Daddy, oh Mamma-Mamma-Mamma."

And then there was the honk of a horn from an impatient driver at an intersection. And there, across the street, stood Stride, real and tall and spreading that hollow smile. Laura leaned against the corner street lamp, her trembling lips mouthing the silent word: "impossible."

"Not bad," Stride said, gesturing with his hand for the sobbing girl to cross the street and come to him.

And, stepping from the curb, Laura realized, horrified, that she was walking slowly toward the cage.

"No!" she cried, backing off, "I won't do it. You don't own me, creep."

Now Stride moved forward with his cage, stopping only a

few feet from where Laura stood frozen with a poisonous emotion she could not name. Stride dropped the wagon's handle and opened the door of the pen. He then stood aside and waited, his dead eyes staring off to nowhere. He expected her to climb into that prison on her own. Laura was sick with disgust, and yet she felt herself again taking the first awful step.

"I'm only thirteen," she wailed.

This couldn't be happening, she thought, and she tried to put her mind on something other than the overwhelming desire to crawl into that wagon and fall asleep. A fleeting memory streaked across the recesses of her imagination. She latched onto the impulse with all her strength and fought to bring it forth into full view.

"Yes, yes, there it is," she exalted, standing fast on the hot asphalt. "And how silly."

But she clutched to it desperately, despite its silliness, holding her breath while it revealed itself complete in her mind. She sank down and sat on the curb. There it was: the matter of a cartwheel she had yet to execute across her father's lawn.

"My mamma loves me," she said defiantly.

She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around her knees. A city bus was straining up the street, coming her way. Stride would have to move, she thought. It was a matter of fact. He would have to move.

On came the bus, faster and faster, louder and louder. And Stride, seeing it at last, began to jog along in front of it, the wagon in tow. Laura saw all of this without opening her eyes. The bus shifted into a higher gear, and Stride sprinted wildly, his yellow teeth exposed to the gums. He had no chance. His cage, sucked up under the hungry bumper, was ground instantly into the pavement. And Stride was caught up seconds later against the bus' broad radiator screen and rushed forward out of the neighborhood.

"Not bad!" he cried. "I'll be back!"

After a long, long, silent time Laura dared to open her eyes. The street was empty. There was no long, dark Stride. There was no cage on incredibly quiet wheels. She turned and looked across the lawn to her house. The curtains were parted now to let in the morning sun. She rose and then, taking a running start, she bounced forward onto the outstretched fingers of her right hand. As her legs traveled overhead, she shifted the weight to her left hand and then leaped up again to her feet. She could smell French toast when she opened the door. Behind her, out in the street, a small child trotted by pulling a noisy, little red wagon. Behind him, on the other side of the street, the youths in the neighborhood were beginning to gather in the open doorways. And now there was a stranger with them. A man walking about among them, shaking hands.



Feeling her belly, Laura walked slowly into the kitchen.

The End

## THE GOD PLANT

The red Porsche sat crumpled on flat tires in the corner of the parking lot next to Ric's Garage. James Dean Graham leaned through the driver's side window and brushed his hand along the white leather bucket seats. The brown patches of his father's blood felt rough and dusty against his pale finger tips. More blood, dull in contrast to the car's bright paint job, speckled the cracked windshield.

J.D., as he was known, walked around to the rear of the vehicle. It had rental plates from over in Santa Fe.

Across the street a state patrol car came to a stop and then pulled slowly away. J.D. watched it go out of the sides of his large blue eyes. The black suit he wore fluttered in a gust of cool, early morning breeze. It was his father's suit, and it hung large on his thin frame. He buttoned the coat and pushed his straight, dark brown hair out of his eyes. Then he got into his own car and drove towards the outskirts of Los Huesos.

"Bones," he laughed to himself as he drove. "What a name for a place. More hueso than ever, I suppose."

It was almost three years since he had gone away to college in Colorado. The handshake with his father just

before he stepped on the bus that early autumn day was quick, unemotional, and firm, as if the two men were rivals who had found themselves in the awkward position of being introduced at a dance by the woman they both courted. It served as a civil way of saying hello and get lost at the same time.

Hugging his mother, and then his grandmother, J.D. had held proudly in his mind the scenes of future visits to Los Huesos. Indeed, if he ever came back at all, he would be very selective about whom he saw. There was no reason for him to guess that it would be his father who caused his return.

Three years later, driving slowly down Main, he shuddered at the thought of the irony, feeling in an instant the loss of all the control he had gained since leaving Los Huesos.

"Damned!" he yelled, hitting the steering wheel with the heels of both hands.

He had sensed the loss coming earlier that morning and had known immediately what he must do. When he told his mother he was leaving, that he would not be at the funeral, she had gripped his arm so tightly his hand had tingled.

"But you are dressed," she had cried. "He's your father. . . ."

Standing there and looking further into his mother's eyes than he had ever before allowed himself, it had been

nearly impossible to turn away. Not to hold her and say he was sorry: it was like all the other times he had not held her, had not told her what he desperately needed to say. And as with all those other times, he found a perverse joy in withholding from her his love.

He had quickly packed his bags and left without changing his clothes.

"I'll phone you tonight," he had called as he flew through the front door.

Now he accelerated as he neared the edge of town. Denver was three-hundred and fifty miles away. Far too much lonely time to think. He sped past the tiny grade school. Sand and bits of trash blew out from the yard and across the highway leading into the desert. For a hundred yards he let off the gas and coasted down the narrow road. Then he abruptly pulled the car to the shoulder and stopped. Slamming the door, he ran down the steep embankment.

Not far away a bare, white bluff rose up out of the flat. Actually, though people called it a bluff, it was more properly a butte, lone and slim, higher than it was wide, and flat on top. It was a queer feature on the land, which was generally level and brown. The strange heap belonged neither to the desert nor to the mountains rising in the east or the other side of town.

As a boy J.D. had for a while imagined that the butte was a huge, white spaceship from another planet in another

galaxy. There were giant aliens inside, sleeping, waiting for the right time to wake and take over the world. But it no longer seemed like a spaceship to him. It was simply high and steep and lonely, and he wanted to be on its table top.

The wind had died down some and the smell of the sage and the pinon floated in the dry air. Cactus shadows stretched out their arms to the west as the sun cleared the mountains. A streak of light ran across a lone set of coyote tracks in the powdery dust. The next moment, everywhere J.D. looked he saw the prints of nocturnal beasts, circling round, dodging one another. It was as if darkness was a wave that had receded exposing naked fragments of the night lying on the morning sand.

This was J.D.'s favorite hour. For just a short while the two worlds--that of the night and the that of the day--could exist together, one imprinted upon the other, a magical contrast. But as the sun moved higher in the sky, the night tracks would again become invisible, the bright light filling them up and washing them out.

J.D. approached the spaceship of his youth and was stunned to see beer bottles and the remains of campfires all along its base. His whole life nobody except himself had paid any attention to the lone white formation. It was an oddity he had thought the people of Los Huesos had grown used to and forgotten.

Cocking his head back and staring upward, he wondered if anyone had found the way up. Then he laughed with the thought that nobody could possibly climb high enough even to hurt himself there on the smooth east face. And that was where they would certainly try--the east face being the least steep of all the monolith's facets.

He ran around to the south side and burrowed into the tall brush growing up next to the rock. Still hidden there were the first cracks and indentations of a route that angled almost invisibly up and around a little overhanging knob twenty feet off the ground. Above the knob the way got slightly easier and continued all the way to the top. J.D. prayed no one had found another way.

He began to climb. On his feet were his father's black dress shoes, large and awkward in the faint niches. Still he made his way past the first and most difficult section. Breathing hard, white dust covering his father's suit, he rested above the knob and looked to the east, where the porch lamps and the kitchen lights of Los Huesos were still discernible against the brightening morning.

He forced himself on. The hand-holds became deeper and larger as he went higher. They felt familiar and good--like the handshakes of old friends. He remembered when his much smaller hands had first touched those rough cracks. He had run out there to hide from his father, who had beaten him and promised to beat him again if he didn't stay out of

sight. Cowering in the bushes at the foot of the white rock, he had seen for the first time the lower rungs of what was to become his secret ladder.

His moves were faster now, his feet and hands remembering the way, his mind along to observe--a passive passenger. When he came to the top, he was dizzy and his heart pulsed hard and fast in his raw finger tips, not so much from the effort of the climb as from the charge of anticipation about what he might find up there.

But, no, there were no signs that any human had been there since his own last visit. Relieved, but still breathing hard, he paced out the perimeter of the floor of his hiding place, letting the wind dry the sweat from his back and forehead.

The high perch was nearly perfectly flat and roughly square in shape. It had the space of a small bedroom. Sitting down near the edge of his airy bedroom, he drew his knees to his chest and turned his attention again eastward. The voices of Los Huesos came floating out to meet him.

He could clearly see his mother's house. It was whitewashed stucco with cedar beams that extended out into a long portico. To the side was the garden plot his grandmother tended in summer. Her house was just visible behind his mother's. Late fall now, all that stood in the garden were brown corn stalks.

The door to the house opened and a young boy walked out

to the street, where his friends stood waiting. J.D. recognized the small boy to be himself from more than ten years back. He was not surprised. Nor did it seem odd to him that his mother, looking more beautiful than he had ever remembered, stood leaning in the doorway.

Rita Graham was a small woman with delicate features. Her hair was black and pulled back into a ponytail. Her eyes were dark Mexican. The children waved to her and walked slowly up the dirt road. They were in no hurry that morning--it was a school day.

The new grade school stood in a field near the town, which itself seemed as old as the land. The building was made of white, imported bricks. Tall and square, it had few windows--these tiny and black. A deafening metallic ring issued as if from its center.

When the children got there the young J.D. watched while his friends climbed the steep steps to the door. He then sprinted to the drainage ditch bordering the school yard. Along the dry, gray, sandy bottom of the ditch he ran until he came to a low, wood-planked bridge. There he dropped to his knees and waited.

Dust filled his hiding place as someone jogged over the bridge toward the school. J.D. peeked out in time to see Victor Duran running up to the big door. He felt sorry for his tardy friend, but he doubted Victor would catch anything like the beating he himself was going to get when his father



found out he had played hookey again.

But that didn't matter he told himself; the important thing was getting out into the desert where the big rock was. He held himself back, though, waiting for those inside the classroom to settle in for the morning.

From every small window came the sound of children singing out the Pledge of Allegiance. Miss Brock's high, strained voice carried forth above everyone else's, becoming especially painful about every fifth syllable. Soon that would end and J.D.'s class would start in with History. Miss Brock would talk more about when Coronado came searching for gold.

Kneeling again, J.D. dragged his fingers through the sand between his knees. There was no gold there. Maybe if there were his father wouldn't be drunk all the time. But J.D. knew reality very well. All the mines in the mountains were shut down, Derek Graham was out of work, had been for some time, and there wasn't any gold around there. That was reality.

He had waited long enough, he decided, and he scrambled up out of the ditch. Less than two hundred yards away was the tower, a hundred feet tall and beckoning. Torre Vision, his grandmother Sandoval called it. The Vision Tower.

This and other things about the tower he had learned mainly while working in the old woman's garden. He loved that time of year when he turned the earth with a spade and

his grandmother watched from under the big, floppy hat she wore everywhere when the sun shone hot. He formed the rows with a hoe, and she showed him where to plant the different seeds at varying depths and spaces according to their particular needs.

Each morning he went to the garden to weed and water the rows. The old woman brought him iced-tea and newly-baked bread for refreshment. And while they rested in the shade, she told him stories. Torre Vision, she said, was once a lookout tower. When she was a small girl she had been told that men used to go out there to watch for outsiders.

"But they went there also to look into themselves," the old woman said one hot afternoon.

Her face was hidden in the shadow of her floppy hat. J.D. stood up from his weeding in the rows grown lush in late summer and received the handful of cherry tomatoes she held out for him.

"It has a good view," he admitted.

She was the only one who knew of his secret hiding place. He hoped she would say more.

"Sometimes they'd stay on the rock for days at a time," she continued, "eating little and drinking little. And they dreamed dreams they called visions. I've heard they got their strength from the seeds of a plant that grew in the south. In Spanish it was called 'la planta de Dios.'"

She paused as they both feasted on the little tomatoes. Strawberries, too, were ripening, and each day they enjoyed a few of these.

J.D. loved the small harvests of appetizers, but he looked forward most to when they would bring out the big collecting pails and take in the bulk of the garden's yield. It was the most beautiful time, he thought: the dark earth and the cloudless days that grew more intensely blue as summer faded into autumn.

"What does it mean?"

"Either of two things," the old woman smiled. "I like them both. 'The God plant' is one of them; 'the sole of God's foot' is the other. Take your pick."

Miss Brock said the Spanish used the "natural tower" to watch for attacking Indians.

Torre Vision rose up high above everything else on that side of Los Huesos. It seemed to J.D. that it drew him out to itself--that it called for him to come there. The boy sprinted to a clump of wind-blown sand and sage twenty yards from the ditch, paused, then charged again to a clump a little closer to his destination. In this manner he made his way slowly to the base of the rock castle, where he stood panting, looking back at the school, afraid Miss Brock

would at any moment come running out the door to grab him by the arm and tow him back into that horrible white building.

But the door remained shut, and J.D. hurried around the rock and ducked into the middle of a wall of thick bushes. He reached out and touched the first step of his ladder. The spacing of the tiny steps was perfectly even. Perfect for an adult, he thought, since he had to stretch pretty far to reach some of the holes. As he ascended he wondered if this was the same path the men seeking visions had used long ago.

By then he had been up several times, and each time he had cleaned the route a little, picking out the loose stones and scraping away the dirt and grass from the ledges and the cracks. So each time the climb was a little easier. He loved the rough feel of the stone on his skin. The first time his fingers had bled, but now they were becoming calloused and tough. And they were growing stronger, too, along with his arms and his toes and his calves.

"You're sure as hell stronger than you look," his father always said before he beat him.

There was a game he had made up to play on the rock ladder. He would hang from a set of hand holds, letting his feet dangle into space. This was to test himself--to see

how long he could go before jamming his toes into a secure crack. Sometimes he would imagine just letting go.

"I'll count to five," he would say to himself, "and then I'll fly."

And he would estimate how long it would take to reach the ground.

Pulling back to where he sat wearing his father's black suit, he knew very well that the ground was no more than a couple of seconds away. And taking off his father's shoes, he thought about the great James Dean, the real James Dean. Had he wanted to die in that car? Had he really wanted to die? And what was it his father used to say?

"I wish to hell I'd been in that car with James D."

He had said that a lot.

"I should have been there, boy."

Again his mind drifted. He made room for his younger self who had just arrived at the top. The small boy stretched out on his stomach and watched the town. His position commanded a good view. The people were tiny and funny, hurrying back and forth with their little bundles. Each had his daily routine to run through. One small figure--his father--walked a drunken tight-rope act down the alley behind Rudy's Inn, where his mother worked as a cook.

Once J.D. had asked his grandmother who his father

was. They were in the kitchen and he sat at the counter near the stove. The late morning sun shone through the window and played with the clear mixing bowl and the silver spoon his grandmother held in her lap. He had always enjoyed sitting and listening to her while the smell of baking bread floated through the house.

The question had startled her at first, but then she had understood.

"I am a sort of power you can use," she had said.

The old woman often spoke in a kind of riddle language. Over the years J.D. had grown used to it, had even come to understand some of it.

"The power of your whole family is yours. Your power is like the power of your cousins, but not the same."

She never used the word Anglo, but he had always sensed what she meant.

"Your father gave you a name, Nieto," she had said.

"It is yours. Don't let it drag you down."

The drunk disappeared behind a building, and J.D. tried to imagine the man who had come down from Colorado long ago to ride in the rodeo. Actually, he knew very little about his father's past, and he was not even sure he was really from Colorado. There were never any visits from blond grandmothers, uncles or aunts. It was entirely possible, for all he knew, that his father had fallen to earth from the moon.

But J.D. felt certain his father had been on the rodeo circuit--there were the trophies and the pictures in the den. He was thin, then, with hair still thick and blond. That was the look of the rodeo cowboy. Of that vision he was proud. He tried to remember if the change had come when the mines shut down.

"Me and James D came along at the wrong time," the decayed cowboy would proclaim. "Better if both of us had died in a war or a revolution or something."

For a long time he had been saying that, and J.D. had guessed early on that his father was somehow ashamed to be a part of that generation of men who had reached maturity too late for Korea and too soon for Vietnam.

"Where am I going?" he would call back to Rita, who cared less and less. "Why, out with my buddies--my war buddies."

There would issue an evil howl of laughter and then the door would slam. Until the next morning he would be out with other men who had no jobs and nothing to do.

An ant crawling on the rock near his feet moved into his thoughts--thoughts that flew back and forth between the different events in his life. It was absurdly unclear to him whether he was a young man remembering the sensations of boyhood or a boy somehow sampling the emotions of an

adult. He found himself lost without control in a whirl of moments that had crept out of ordinary chronology.

But ceasing to wonder about this phenomenon, he studied with fascination the ant that had climbed so far above the desert floor. It moved slowly as if tracing its way through a maze. Its antennae stretched in an attempt to find a clue to the correct course floating in the air. It was an alien, J.D. thought, high up out of the desert, surely not aware of how far it had come. It was like a grain of sand exposed on all sides to the wind. It understood nothing. The sun beat down on it.

Picking up a pebble, J.D. crawled to the edge of the tower's flat top. Lying on his stomach, he extended his hand and let fall the small rock. He counted:

"One-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand . . . ."

. . . Three days and nights up there on the rock without food and water. He had told his mother he was going hunting. Of course she didn't like it that he was going out by himself, but she couldn't stop him, and his father was drunk asleep.

The first days were easy. The activity of the town, the migration of the geese and the tourists, the passing over of the clouds and the sun--these had been plenty to



maintain his attentiveness. The first two nights and the third day were more difficult. The nights because it was so hard to stay awake, even with the wind and the hardness of the rock. The day because those things that held his interest at first had lost their novelty.

The third night was an ordeal. No longer was falling asleep the problem; he wished he could sleep so that he might escape the nightmares of his waking mind. Were these the visions he had come there for? The moon and the stars spoke to him, sternly questioning him about his being there. The ground creaked and the rock swayed. The night buzzed as if electrified.

He felt naked.

And he was afraid like the time he had tried peyote and had been terrified by a thing he could neither picture nor name. That time he could not run away because the thing was inside his head, eating away at his brain. And this time he had to sit there and endure the dizzy, crazy fear because it was impossible to climb down from the tower in the dark. There was no escape. He waited for the sun.

"Where is your magic seed?" the moon asked.

The question echoed in the dark.

It occurred to J.D. that maybe there were magic seeds down there in his grandmother's garden. He imagined that he could see in the dark and that he was able to climb down from the rock. And there, in the far right corner of the

garden, was a black, furry bush he'd never noticed before. Moving closer, he saw that the bush was heavy with tiny white balls of fruit. In fact, he realized as he stepped nearer, the balls were eyes--yes, the glistening eyes of his mother and his sisters and his grandmother. And in the middle of the white eyeballs were black pupils.

As he went to pick one of the balls, he stumbled over a troublesome mound of the garden's soil. The buzz of snoring came from beneath the heap of dirt. J.D. dug into it with his bare hands and found his father lying there, sleeping off his drunkenness. The man's eyes popped open suddenly, and they were blue like his own.

"Oh, J. Dean," called the pesky moon, "where'd you get those big blue eyes?"

Sitting there with his father's shoes on the rock beside him, J.D. remembered from somewhere that blue is a recessive trait in eyes. Then there had been another, he thought, another back somewhere in his mother's and his grandmother's line with eyes like his.

Blue was the color of the sombrero his mother made him for the Cinco de Mayo parade. It had silver buckles around the brim. The shirt was white with ruffled sleeves, and the pants were gray with red stripes running down the legs.

The leader blew his whistle and the procession started up Main.

He was part of a group doing traditional Mexican dances. At each of the stops in the parade he went through the moves he had been practicing for weeks. After the first few dances his self-consciousness fell away and his body moved on its own. He let it take over.

All of Los Huesos danced. Laughter and singing were the voice, and drums and guitars and brass horns were the rhythm of the loud merriment. Everyone wandered around with food and drink from the booths lining the street.

The troupe came to a halt in front of the church. Waiting there was J.D.'s family. He could hear his mother's laugh as she talked with his aunts. The Spanish they spoke was spice in the music and the noise of the street. On the steps of the church were his three sisters and his grandmother. Apart from the others, under a tree, sat Derek Graham.

They did a hat dance, and there was a point at the end of the routine where J.D. had to twirl his taller partner by the hand. Always in practice he had hit her on the head with his elbow. But this time, standing extra tall, he spun her around perfectly.

From the church yard came the cries of the crowd's approval. Even the boy's father moved closer. J.D. thought he had never been happier. But that emotion vanished as he

turned to continue up the street and something hard hit him on the chest. Egg yolk dripped down his shirt and onto his pants. An older boy he knew from school stood laughing on a store roof across from the church. Some in the crowd laughed also.

He looked to his mother, but she had seen nothing and was again talking with her sisters. Ripping off his hat, he ran from the street and into an alley. But he was not alone. Hearing footsteps behind, he turned to see his father coming up the alley after him. Even drunk he moved amazingly fast, and he caught up and grabbed J.D.'s shirt, yanking him to a stop.

"James, I'm sorry!" he cried out with his bad breath. "I'm sorry, boy."

J.D. felt the sting of the man's gray whiskers on his face as he was pulled into a firm hug. It was the only time he could remember his father calling him James. The horrible warmth of the man's tears dripped down the back of his neck.

"That egg was for me, boy," his father was saying. "Do you understand?"

Not knowing what to do, he balanced there against his father's arms, eyes closed.

Opening his eyes, he stood up and looked down at the

church from his rocky perch. A long, black hearse pulled up in front. Other cars filled the parking lot. Out of one of the cars stepped his mother. His grandmother was there, too, along with his sisters, small and dark like their mother.

A few blocks away sat the wrecked Porsche, sunlight glinting off its bright hood.

"That was for you, too," J.D. cried softly, hoping his words would somehow reach the horribly lonely place where his father had gone to hide.

"Not for me," he said even more quietly. "Not for me."

The words were a chant to help him form his thoughts. The words said hello, finally, to a man he hardly knew, but who was, nonetheless, his father. And then the words said goodbye, pulling him up and away from the ruined car, placing him on the tower alone.

Down below the column of mourners entered the church. So far away, they were strangely noiseless. It seemed to J.D. appropriate. No sound comes from the dead, after all, and maybe for the dead no chatter should be made. He stood close to the edge of the drop, his bare toes gripping the rock. A sun-warmed breeze drifted up from below, stinging his nostrils with the odor of sage and pinon.

"Aaeiii!" he screamed, recognizing in the cry the sound of life.

As a sort of sign, he started to raise his arms above his head. Then he realized that those inside the church would not have heard his cry, nor would they see his signal.

The obscenity of his nakedness up there, high against the sky, all at once overwhelmed him. His toes spread themselves on the coarse rock as he began to sway. He hunched forward as if the enormous weight of the clouds had suddenly pressed down on his shoulders.

Far below, though he could no longer see it with his dizzy vision, the dust seemed to call for him. He strained to hear the voice, listening hard for the right words, listening for his name.

And while he balanced there, hunched over on that high, white rock--imagining now that the sun had stopped and that he himself hung suspended in the morning air, the sky pressing down from above, earth pushing up from below--a different voice moved subtly into his consciousness. A voice he had not expected. One sung out with many tongues. Floating out from the church, it grew more potent somehow as it came nearer.

Standing upright, his vision clearing, J.D. thought he could almost see the various strands of the great voice reaching out. And gathered near him now, wrapping around and bending up and away, each small voice--that of his grandmother and his mother, that of his sisters, uncles and

aunts--was like a branch on a huge plant spreading itself  
in the desert sun.

The End