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Graceful degradation

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GRACEFUL DEGRADATION

By

Ben Borneman

B.A., Hobart College, 1967

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

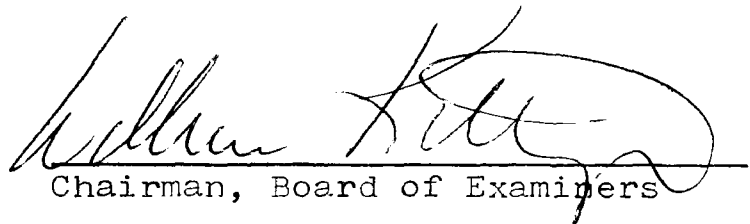
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

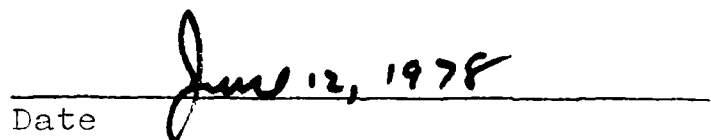
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1978

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"White light erased the horizon."

February 12, 1973

W. Rosenthal
55 Sutton Place
New York, New York

The Honorable Robert Lewis
United State Senate
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir:

I have learned that the Air Force is considering some litigation against Lt. Col. Jackson Starryck concerning his role in the Butte Affair and I thought you'd be interested in the following.

Sincerely,

William Rosenthal

William Rosenthal

Enclosure

I

The Liftshitz Phenomenon

Leonard Liftshitz pulls out his ID badge and holds it up to the stiff, scowling Marine guard as he drifts into the National Security Agency at 9 a.m. on Monday. Leonard is thinking about parity and increasing the data rate of the KG-59, so he doesn't notice when the guard nods approval of his entrance.

Five ten and, well, skinny, Liftshitz proceeds down the hall, his greying hair disheveled and greasy. He dials the combination on the door to his office and enters a reception area where a secretary is taking her typewriter ribbon out of the safe. The desktops are meticulously bare.

"Good morning, Lenny," she says. There is a maternal note to her greeting, but he nods without looking at her.

He dials another combination and enters his own green, windowless cubicle where he leafs through his newspaper while he thinks about parity and data rates and hopes that the KG-59 will work this time because he is exhausted from the two and a half years of solitary concentration he has invested in designing and building the KG-59 encryptor/decryptor. He would like to quit his 30,000 dollar-a-year job as an electronics engineer for the Agency but he can't. He has a blond wife and a blond five-month-old daughter.

With jerky motions he rises, steps up to a grey, chest-high stack of electronic gear and turns three knobs. The equipment lights up and glows red and amber. There is a crackle, then a hum.

Leonard turns another knob and Paul Harvey comes on the air.

"Page three," Paul says as Lenny dials the combination on his filing cabinet. His hand is shaking and he has to dial twice.

"Mr. and Mrs. Mick Pauli of Gulfport Mississippi..." Paul Harvey continues as Lenny opens a shoe box and takes the two grey boxes over to the stack of amplifiers, transmitters and receivers. He had gotten this far three times before only to be sent back to the drawing board when the machine couldn't unscramble what it had just scrambled a microsecond earlier.

Leonard plugs one of the 59's into a socket on the transmitter and the sound of Paul Harvey changes to the sound of a DC-7 at take-off. Liftshitz smiles with one side of his mouth then becomes serious. He's been working on this "crypto-box" for a long time in complete solitude. He's hoping that when he plugs in the other "59" Paul Harvey's dulcet voice will return. If it does, he can take a trip, a long one. He's got two and a half months of vacation coming to him but he's from the old school, Cornell;

he just wouldn't be able to relax if his job wasn't finished.

So Leonard plugs in the second 59 and sure enough, good old Paul Harvey says: "And they've been married for . . .;" Leonard hears no more. He smiles like a rescued coal miner, then sits on his chair and slaps his knee. He jumps up and hops and dances and kicks the door. He is a very happy man. When his elation subsides, he listens to the radio again, just to make sure that it's all true, and his elation vanishes as Paul Harvey says: "That'th right. Theventy-thix yearth today."

Leonard is not amused at the sound of Paul Harvey lisping. Leonard and his employer have a very expensive and complicated problem.

The 59 was designed to keep our friends and enemies from eavesdropping on our communications. It would also double as protection for our telemetry data links with satellites and other gear, protecting it all from spying or hijacking. It would be installed in the Pentagon and the White House. While a president might be able to accept the indignity of a lisp, the self-conscious mid-Sixties military would never accept a lisping chief of staff. Leonard loosens his tie and sets back to work with his teeth clenched; visably paler than ten minutes ago.

At midnight he remembers his wife and emerges from his cell to call her. He tells her that he will be staying at the office for a few days. Eating never occurs to him.

He sits in his cluttered office, filling legal pads with calculus, testing one circuit at a time. After forty hours of work, he establishes that the lisp doesn't come from any particular one of the 59's thousands of micro-circuits. It is symptomatic of the interaction between them all. All the circuits worked perfectly by themselves; it was when he put them all together that it happened. Like so many other things in the Sixties, it seemed to be an organic problem, and Leonard had a clue. He had lisped as a child. Speech therapists had said that they cured him, but Leonard suspected that they'd only cured his conscious mind. The lisp still lived in his subconscious somewhere.

As he entered his third day without sleep or food or water, Leonard tried to understand his creation organically, intuitively. He tried to visualize it as a whole and duplicate its process and find out where it had tied into his subconscious.

On the fourth day he sat in his locked, bug-proof office in Maryland and stared at the grey-green walls while he mentally scrambled and unscrambled various quotations. He'd take "a penny saved" and permute it into "a nypen vedsa," then substitute other letters until he

had nearly duplicated the machine's process with "k oplergrbgd."

On the fifth day after Liftshitz had entered his office the commander of the agency authorized a break-in. Liftshitz was dehydrated, malnourished, and completely lost in encryption space. A psychiatrist was assigned to his case, but all the young engineer could do was babble, "k oplergrbgd."

Then the psychiatrist had Lenny speak through the 59 and sure enough, he flipped the switch and, speaking through the encryptor, he asked Leonard how he was feeling. Leonard brightened at the resulting blast of DC-7 noise. He looked up and said "a penny thaved." The psychiatrist tried another idea. If someone could fix the 59's lisp, he reasoned, then Liftshitz might become unstuck, might somehow realize that his crusade had ended and re-enter the un-encrypted world. He brought in a consulting engineer from MIT who lasted for three weeks before quitting "for personal reasons."

Then they brought in a team of electronic engineers who took the 59 apart and tested it, then put it together and tested it. They took it half apart and tested both halves and so on but the root of the lisp was too simple; it could only be understood by intuition. The team wrote a report which concluded that a slight loss of dignity and two engineers was the price one paid for secrecy. They suggested that a lisp could be looked at as a prestige attribute. The

psychiatrist added that Leonard seemed to be incurable and the report was sent up through channels on October 18, 1967.

II

Promotion Party

Now picture the cafeteria at the Rand Corporation during July of 1969. Picture the see-through blouses, the platform heels, and the over-the-ear hairstyles. Remember that Rand was urging the United States, the Air Force specifically, to save a lot of time and money and "nuke" North Viet Nam into a deep water harbor. It was urging the defense establishment to forget its hang-ups and do its own thing.

So.

Dr. Alfred Barnard is sitting at a window table at Rand and looking fondly down at muscle beach. He seems wistful, like a lost puppy or a post-Watergate Nixon staffer. His plaid jacket is rumped, but his eyes are sharp.

"I'd like to nuke that one in the knit bikini," Dr. Al says. "You see the one I mean? Over by the swings?"

"Yep," grey haired General Stewart replies. The two of them return to staring out the window until Al slams his fist down on the table and speaks while the General continues his expressionless girl-watching.

"I think we're home free," Barnard says. The general turns to him.

"Barnard," he says. He looks down at the table, then forces himself to look back at the chubby psychologist. "I

hope you're right." Stewart does not think that Barnard is right.

"Sure," Al says, "you built some fine hardware, but it took a psychologist like me to get the total system going."

"Barnard," the general says and pauses. "Barnard," he repeats and hesitates. He doesn't know how to put this.

"What is it, buddy?"

"I guess it doesn't matter," the general says, "but I don't think it's gonna work."

"It doesn't have to work, it just has to get funded."

"I know," Stewart says and looks out at an eight-man pyramid.

"Come on, general, I think it'll work anyway. I think a combination of psychological stress and methadrine will get those pilots so high that they'll be able to take a sustained 15 G's and out-turn the bad guys in a dog fight. It's air supremacy. You know that."

"But does the stress really have to come from the computer?"

"Yes. The drugs aren't enough by themselves. We have to get them pissed off right when they start the intercept procedure, and we have to do it fast for lots of them at once."

"Well, you'll have one good pilot anyway."

"Kirkpatrick?"

"Starryck. He'll be here in late August."

III

Woodstock

Later in July of 1969, Lt. Col. Jackson Starryck was under orders to report to General Stewart at the Rand Corporation in Santa Monica, L. A. Jack had just returned from Viet Nam, from flying 100 fighter missions in an F-105, the nearly obsolete, low-level, nuclear delivery system that the Pentagon was using for the more suicidal bombing and strafing missions in Southeast Asia. Most of our F-105's got shot down in Viet Nam; they'd outlived their usefulness and become expendable, but they were the hottest single-seat fighter flying combat missions, so people like Jack Starryck waited in line to fly them.

When Jack pulled off the runway and into his parking spot after his 100th mission, his squadron greeted him with back-slapping and some champagne. Jack poured half of it over his head and drank the rest. He climbed out of the cockpit of the brown and green camouflaged rocket and took the next commercial flight home. He was hoping that a year or two at the think-tank would help him regain his equilibrium, hoping it would help him get over his constant fear that he was about to get blown up.

As his Pan Am 747 started dumping altitude for a stop in Hawaii, Jack was sipping bourbon and daydreaming wistfully, imagining himself chasing a pack of baying coon dogs. Then a

flash of sun reflected off the jetliner's wing and into Jack's eye. He thought that the 747 had been hit by a SAM. He fumbled with the arm rests, looking for the ejection triggers, thinking he was in his 105. When he didn't eject, he decided that he was dead, that he'd been vaporized, but then the stewardess shook him and he realized that he wasn't in a fighter and then he pinched his arm and it hurt.

"There you go," the stewardess said. "You had a bad dream."

"Hell, no," Jack said. "Wasn't so bad. You should see what happens when I'm awake."

As he walked down the gangplank at the Montgomery, Alabama, airport, Jack searched the crowd for his wife, Diane. But he could only see his parents among the gaggle of greeters who were leaning over the hurricane fence and waving. When he asked them where Diane was, they only told him that they had a barbeque all ready for him, and Jack assumed that Diane was at the party.

But Diane wasn't there; just a roasting goat and a roasting pig and a bunch of whiskey on a table under the oak tree and a hundred whooping relatives and neighbors who were all very proud of him. After all, he'd won the Silver Star and he'd shot down two Migs, but Jack didn't feel proud. He felt lost and no one would tell him where Diane was and no one wanted to hear that shooting Migs was mostly a matter of luck. It all happened so fast in planes that it was hard to

tell who had shot whom. Maybe it was just Jack, but it usually took him a couple hours after a mission to convince himself that he was still alive. Clustered in patches of shade, the men all wanted to know about the gook women, and the women just remarked that he looked just like his mother's picture of Captain Billy Starryck, the family's Civil War hero. Jack cornered his mother who would only say that Diane still lived in the old house, so Jack took his Dad's pickup and drove on over and found Diane reading a magazine.

They got right into their old argument. The one about Jack's flying fighters with Diane saying he should have gotten killed if that's what he was trying to do and that anyone who'd volunteer for a second tour in 105's must have wanted to get killed because "that's what happened to most of them." Jack said that getting killed was better than worrying about it and stormed out to the garage to check out his motorcycle. He'd kept squeezing an imaginary trigger through the barbeque and all. He did it the way other people would grind their teeth. He'd been firing imaginary heat seekers at his friends and relatives whenever they pissed him off by asking about things he couldn't explain even if he had felt like explaining them.

Then his father phoned, urging him to come back to the party. He wouldn't understand that Jack didn't enjoy the barbeque, so Jack just hung up and tried to explain to Diane

about why he didn't want to go back to his parent's place and then he tried to explain about the little nukes that he may, or may not, have been dropping in Nam. Or Cambodia.

Diane put her magazine down on the side table and asked for a divorce and Jack said, "T'hell with y'all." He got on his motorcycle and headed north because north was longer than south or east, and west seemed too far. He reached New Jersey eighteen hours later and stayed in an officer's club. The next morning he drove into New York City and right over the curb to a phone booth at 49th and 5th where he looked up a phone number. Jack was hunting for a place to hide.

Can you picture five-foot eight-inch, 145-pound Jack Starrayck with his trail modified Harley (Hawley, as he said it) Davidson Electra Glide; replete with rebel flag and coontail, standing in a grimy grey phone booth in the center of the Big Apple? He's flipping through the phone book, looking for someone to talk to. Can you see him shuffling around in the booth while a greasy pimp in a yellow safari suit watches one of his girls play with the Harley? Jack is still wearing his flight suit, complete with pilot's wings and officer's insignia.

He's calling the brother of an old buddy. Larry Denker is Capt. Richard Denker's brother, but Jack's buddy, Richard, is spending a month's leave in New York City just now.

"Yeah," the phone said.

"Larry?" Jack said, "Larry it's Jack Starrыck."

"Hey, how are ya Jack? What was your last name again? Larry's in the bedroom." The party had been going on for weeks, devouring apartment after apartment like a school of piranhas.

"Jack Starrыck. I'm in the Air Force with Larry's brother Richard. We stayed there a couple times."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, Jack Starrыck. Larry's brother ejected out of my ship. Tell him! He'll remember."

"Jack Starrыck! This is Dick! It's so noisy here. Jack. Where are you?" Jack said, "New York City," and Denker said, "Where?" and Jack said, "Hold on." He looked at the street sign and said, "48th and 5th Avenue," and then Denker said, "Hold on," so Jack kept feeding dimes and quarters to the phone. He stopped pedestrians for change until his old buddy Richard Denker pulled up to the curb in a cab and waved and yelled.

Jack had been a pilot instructor in Texas when he'd met Denker. Denker had been a student pilot until one day when he ejected from their training jet on final approach. It had been a clear day and the plane was operating perfectly until Denker started squirming around on the seat to spread his cheeks. "What's the matter," Jack had asked as Denker pulled the triggers, applying 15 G's to his button, riding

the rocket seat hundreds of feet above the plane while Jack struggled to keep the twin jet T-38 under control. By the time Denker had folded up his parachute and walked back to base, across three miles of flat, knee-high, airport siding, everyone was calling him "the asshole" and the nickname stuck.

Jack hung up the phone. Denker came lunging from the cab and embarrassing Jack, hugging him harder and closer than Jack would have liked as horns honked and the cabbie approached to demand his fare "before a cop comes along and gives me a ticket for blocking the fuckin' bus stop." Denker paid him, and the noise subsided to the usual mid-day, mid-town cacophony.

"I'm so glad you called," Denker said.

"Well, yeah," Jack said. Denker wasn't exactly in drag, but there was an air about him which made Jack feel awkward. It was the choker and the one-and-a-half inch heels, the third shirt button unbuttoned and that particular cologne.

"It's lucky I answered the phone, Jack. I don't know most of those people up there--Larry doesn't either." Jack was just staring, smiling amicably. "Fairies are so irresponsible. I'll probably never see any of them again. They might be gone when we get there."

Rural southern born and raised, Jack winced while trying to conceal his reaction. He remembered Larry as a straight young broker, but sometimes it's hard to tell.

"Let's get some coffee or something; let's go sit down and talk. Maybe a drink," Jack said.

"Okay," Denker said. "There's a Schraffts a few blocks down on 5th. They have ice cream and a bar. Or we could just go back to the party."

"Schraffts," Jack said and he got on the bike and Denker got on it too but then Denker got off and said that he didn't want to go to Schraffts. Jack said he'd thought that Denker was only "latent" and Denker said that he was "that" too. He had to be at least latent or they'd pull his security clearance and ship him to rural Texas. He couldn't help it if his brother was gay and he was "sensitive." "What's the matter? A party's a party."

"Tell you what," Jack said; he stepped off the bike into an eddy in the heavy pedestrian traffic. "We can flip a coin."

"We could compromise," Denker said. "We could go to a straight party." The stream of pedestrians was nudging them closer to each other and the bike as one person after another pushed into them.

"An' I could just keep going north," Jack said. He got back on the Harley as Denker brightened. "Think I'm jus' going to take off," Jack said. "Don't need anymore aggravation--don't know--maybe. Maybe I'll just head out to LA and find a place to live."

"You're assigned to L.A.? To Rand?"

"Sure am, why?"

"I am too. That's wonderful." While Jack wasn't sure how wonderful that was, it had changed the subject. Jack started the engine. Denker hopped on the back and started talking about life in L.A., about his favorite bars, beaches, and concerts as Jack just drove south on 5th Avenue, driving as a form of meditation, driving instead of being angry or confused about Diane or Viet Nam or little nukes or latents.

When they reached Washington Square, Denker was telling Jack about how he'd been the first pilot to land against traffic at LaGuardia without a license and just recently he'd made the first complete U-turn on 3rd Avenue between one and five in the afternoon. "I just wanted to see if I could do it," Denker said, and Jack said that he "knew the feeling." Denker told Jack about Bald Eagle hunting in Wyoming, about how he was clearing 100 dollars on a feather and Jack asked him if he wanted "to be dropped off somewhere." Denker was enjoying the ride. He was enjoying holding onto Jack, so he said, "Not yet. Let's take a ride," and Jack said: "Okay."

Then Denker said, "Make a right on Canal Street," and Jack made a right and they drove along the West Side Drive and looked at the ships and the piers and the river, enjoying the weather as they drove past the Cloisters and all the abandoned and stripped cars. Then they were in the Bronx

with crumbling Brownstones and bent old ladies in hair nets. Then they were in Westchester with trees and lawns as Jack continued to loosen up and Denker rested his head on Jack's shoulder and gave him a squeeze.

"Break your wrists next time," Jack said as Denker leaned back, giggling effusively, one arm on Jack's shoulder, the other in the air.

Traffic was heavy but Jack was operating in his fighter pilot mode. He was cutting around cars and riding between lanes, taking imaginary shots at all the Lincolns with his imaginary gattling gun. He drove down the gravelly strip between the left lane and the divider, signalling his turns, looking more like a polo player than a biker as the sunny August day propelled them around all four loops of a clover leaf. Denker quivered and peered out ahead, around the pilot's shoulders, then ducked back and repeated that he was clearing 100 dollars each on eagle feathers.

It was one of those rare days that had followed two days of rain with a fresh northerly wind that blew the clouds and smog out of the freshly scrubbed air.

Traffic got heavier after Westchester and they finally had to ride off the pavement. As the traffic slowed to a crawl, Jack had to be more attentive to the wobbling bike, so he started to become irritable again. Then Denker said some-

thing that Jack didn't hear and Jack said, "What?" again. He was trying to sound nice.

"Wasn't important," Denker said.

"Something about the F-12?"

"Yeah, I said I hope you don't have to fly it but if you're not going to listen to me then maybe I hope you do. Shouldn't tell you anyway."

Jack looked out at the jam which was proceeding at about five mph, a few motorists walking along with it, knocking on windows and visiting their neighbors. Denker faced Jack.

"Stewart's in over his head," Denker said. "I've been doing the technical stuff for him and I wouldn't fly in that thing. It's tied into the system."

"What system?"

"Stewart's system. Stewart's and mine. It shoots the missiles after the command center and the planes are gone. You know the 'go-code' after everybody is fried. Hard-wired to the F-12's. It does the flying. It's going to be satellites. Time division data linked to a little demodulator in the ship. Can't jam it and it'll take most EMP's. We're gonna do the final programming next month."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Electromagnetic pulses. A lot of gear blows out when a Nuke goes off. Even a hundred miles away."

Denker had been talking faster and faster.

"Well, whatever it is, it's fine with me," Jack said. "I just do the flyin'."

Denker was looking over Jack's shoulder at a group of about 50 young adults who were scattered across the littered thruway landscaping. There were muddy Harley Davidsons and bright nylon tents all over the place. Hairdresser scruffy with leather jackets from Bonwits, some of the bikers were lounging and drinking. Others were wrestling, playing horse-shoes or scooting around on their bikes, all of them pausing now and again to look over at the traffic jam, taking it in as if it were a concert. There was leisureliness to their activities, randomness and a metered pace to their movements which suggested that these people were not on a tight schedule. It all suggested to Denker that he knew them from somewhere.

Then Denker spotted the "Eat it" inscription and the tailpipe logo on one of the jackets and slipped, unnoticed, off the bike and into some shrubbery when he remembered where he'd seen that motto before. It belonged to the Sutton Place Harley Davidson Association and Denker had some very good reasons for not wanting to run into them.

Seems that Denker's last encounter with the Suttons had ended with an "If we ever see you again" ultimatum. The Suttons wanted to break Denker's wrists. They identified Bald Eagles with the currency and didn't approve of Denker's

feather operations, his moonlighting as an eagle feather fence in L.A.

Jack sensed that something was wrong. He stopped the bike and looked back over his shoulder. He ran his eyes along the four-lane parking lot then looked down at the ground and over the other shoulder. He ran the bike around in a 180 degree and surveyed the landscaped embankment, muttering and slapping his thigh. Richard Denker was gone. Jack yelled, "Dick, where are ya?" and listened, then tried to pick out his friend from among the assortment of beatniks, preppies, and civil rights folksong types who were milling through the jam, passing cigarettes and sharing food and wine. Longhairs were singing and playing their guitars but there wasn't any horn honkin. Some of the Suttons were meandering between the parked cars, accepting gifts from one car and passing them on to the next, smiling and waving what used to be the victory sign as others carried wine and grass down to the highway from the tents.

"Welcome to Woodstock," they'd say (it sounded like chanting, like a communion service). "Need some dope?" "Electric wine?" "Hey, the people in the green pontiac have some dynamite hash," or "Hey, stay away from the purple acid friend." And the spirit kept spreading as motorists got out of their cars and took off their shirts, jeans, and whatever. They danced to any one of the numerous guitar,

recorder and handclapping circles that drifted along the pavement.

LSD was behind most of the frivolity. There was Sandoz LSD in the Bali Hai and it was a balmy day and three-quarters of the people on the thruway were headed for the nation's first real rock festival, the first one to break more than 20 laws and enjoy it. There was a new policy in New York trooper circles today. It was a last minute, workingman's sort of policy. The state troopers were outnumbered and they didn't know how to bust so many people at one time or what to do with them afterwards. It was the first day of the Sixties, the first open, televised admission that our laws are circumstantial.

Lt. Colonel Jack Starruck backtracked back and forth, the bike idling in second gear, out of time chugging, Jack searching and watching. When a girl, riding on top of a stationwagon, took off her blouse, Jack watched her and dumped his bike. A Sutton with a thick beard, red eyes, and bushy black eyebrows knelt next to him and offered him a hand but Jack got up by himself. He smiled and thanked the Sutton for the offer.

"Sandoz?" the biker said. He was holding out a bottle of Bali Hai. His diction was precise, clear.

Jack picked up his bike and then accepted the bottle, searching the label for "Sandoz" and saying "Thank you" like

he'd been taught to back home. "Thank you" because he'd been taught to by his mother.

"Pure Sandoz," the biker boasted. "We were riding to the concert but we hit this jam so I decided to spread the sunshine here. Got a contact high goin' up and down the thruway. You can see it. See how everybody's smiling. You don't hear any horns do you? You know what this jam would be like without the acid? There'd be fist fights. Look at those guys; their car's overheated and they're sitting around relaxed, getting a tan." He laughed. His face was even brighter red than it had been; his wild, blood-shot eyes open to Jack. "Have some more," and Jack said "Thank you" again and took another hit of electric Bali Hai then scratched his scrotum, shifting his weight, not knowing what to say. Jack finally offered "Real fine day," and the Sutton looked away, laughing when he saw "TITS" stenciled on Jack's gas tank. He went over to inspect it. "Those Cireine forks?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure are." Jack passed the bottle back and searched the hill. "Don't stock 'em in Selma. Had to go to Birmingham."

"Yeah," the biker said as he passed the bottle back, his eye catching Jack's for a second. He circled the bike, poking and probing, reaching the rear bumper where the Craig Air Force Base decal stopped him. He stood up with a wry

grin, his eyebrows lifting as he realized that Jack's uniform wasn't a costume.

"Well, Colonel." The Sutton had become formal. "Glad you could make it. It's going to be a good concert." He offered his hand. "Bill Rosenthal," he said.

"Jackson Starryck," Jack said as he tightened his grip to match Bill's handshake and Bill tightened his grip and Jack tightened his grip some more. "What concert?" Jack asked.

"Doesn't matter," Bill said. "Have some more wine," and Jack had some more. Then Bill had some more and then the bottle was almost empty. Jack finished it all spare a-quarter-of-a-thimble full which he offered to Bill.

"Let's get some more," Bill said. "You can meet the club."

They proceeded toward the tents while Denker crouched behind a ewe tree and planned his getaway.

"I guess I'd better explain this," Bill said. "For one thing we're smaller than most corporations. There's 63 of us and we're disciplined, within limits. We don't have the overhead either. I guess my grandfather saw what was coming, what with everything they're doing to the conglomerates even. They gotta pay corporate taxes and worry about anti-trust suits. We're all rich to start with. We just make investments and pay capital gains. Federal contracts mostly. A little

two million company gets a fifty million dollar contract and we get the capital gains."

Jack was walking abreast, still carrying the empty bottle and feigning attention with an occasional "uh huh" or "yeah" while his attention was directed inward. He was getting that detached feeling that he got sometimes ever since his daddy had fired his shotgun across the front seat of the pickup at a nigger. Even after little Jack's ears had stopped ringing, he'd had a hard time concentrating whenever things became unfamiliar or threatening.

"My grandfather organized his trust fund around a religious group," Bill continued. "The Brooklyn Knights. The charter's like a conglomerate except every member corporation is a person too so we're technically a church. Everyone contributes his assets to the church and the church supports him. We invest the endowment. Non-profit and we get to push the old corporations around a little. Maybe it's not completely legal, but we keep moving."

"Yeah," Jack said, "Moving."

"And the money doesn't matter so much; what matters is that we help each other. Most of the members are pretty strung out when they get to us--drugs, alcohol, don't know who they can trust. That's the way the world is these days. They just need some rules, some values. We get them on a controlled chemical diet and offer an environment where it's all right to be rich. I end up doing most of the work but

what the hell. I'm high now and it's worth it to see them getting off." Bill was silent for a moment, watching the jam. "I'd deny all that if they asked me," he added and Jack said "sure" as he stared at the thruway, absorbed in the radiant Detroit colors. His eyes were very dilated, and it seemed like Bill was miles away.

Bill nudged Jack, "Look at Hank Eisberg over there, he used to just sit on his porch, drinking scotch and watching the ocean. Every night he'd take some coke and go to the bars. We pulled him and his car out of a pond. Driving in that kind of shape is just self-destructive.

"Hey, what's the matter?"

"War." Jack mumbled. He was almost crying.

"How long were you in Nam?"

"Yeah, guess I was in Nam, Cambodia anyways--two years maybe--meant the other war, the Civil War. Not gonta be over till me an' my folks are dead, grandfather died at Shenendoah. Mom cries about it but Dad's worse. He just gets this look."

"My great grandfather was against the Civil War," Bill said. "He was in textiles. I'm not sure about Nam."

Jack told Bill about how Diane had reacted when he volunteered for his second tour in Nam.

"Told her I was goin' back to Nam and she asked 'what in?' so I said '105's' and she said 'You volunteered, you

really volunteered--Jack you volunteered,' an' kept savin' that till she locked herself in the bedroom and cried into the pillow so's I couldn't hear her, and I went over and got back yesterday and she said she wanted a divorce, so I said, 't'hell with yawl,' and rode up here. Didn't know where I was going, just followed the biggest road and ended up in New York City, so I called Denker's brother."

"Richard Denker's brother?" Rosenthal asked as a long shot.

"No, Larry Denker, his brother," Jack said. "It was right around here but I can't find him. Been losing a person a day. Diane yesterday and Denker today. Y'know I started telling Diane about the little nukes and she asked for a divorce. Air Force sent me to a psychiatrist when I asked my commander about those little nukes. I was just curious about what we were croppin'. Psychiatrist listened anyway. Said I was okay. Well, he didn't say I was okay. He said I was okay if we really were droppin' nukes and that he didn't have a high enough clearance to find out 'cause I figured that my orders to Rand said I was okay, but I don't know. Maybe I made it up, maybe Denker. . ."

"Rand?" Bill said with rising inflection. An inside source at Rand could sure help with aerospace investments.

"Yeah, Rand," Jack said. He was hallucinating a beautiful black amazon. He'd seen her before: usually after bombing missions, after low-level runs at northern factories

ever since his ship had been hit by flack and he'd tried to punch out, but the seat didn't fire and he slowed to 300 knots and somehow managed to climb out of the plane. Jack had had 700 mikes of Sandoz today.

"Rand?" Bill repeated. His eyes hardened. He was thinking about his principal, about his bucks and Jack's professional life and about which plane was best for what and the Denker system.

"Know anything about the Denker system?" Bill asked.

"Know about the Stewart system but that's classified," Jack said. Jack remembered that the Stewart system was a bunch of satellites that did the targeting after everything else was nuked to an ionic plasma that glows and pours. He remembered that Denker was working on it. There was the connection with the F-12, too, but as Jack tried to picture the Stewart System satellites in space the acid turned it around and he pictured himself as a ruby and emerald covered satellite emitting red and green laser signals to a glowing earth. It was very beautiful and he liked the feeling of floating in space. It was so easy and relaxed.

"Do you think the Stewart System and the Denker System are the same one?" Bill asked.

"I don't know," Jack said. "Who cares. I sure like those emeralds."

"I've heard both," Bill said. "But what I really want

to know about is the real-time imagery. Is it as good as the old photo-recon satellites? Why would we need it if the phased array radar can follow their garbage trucks? Why would they need any more optical resolution? Are they trying to read over peoples' shoulders? What for?"

"For?" Jack was elsewhere. He sent a laser beam to a nearby satellite and received a flashing response. He did a 360 degree and a barrel roll in acid-space while Richard Denker crept down the real-space hillside.

"I thought they'd stop funding that stuff when they could keep track of the missile sites. Must be doing something different. Who's got the contracts?"

Jack saw a nuke go off. It was just out of range of himself, the Denker System satellite.

"Wow," Jack said.

The nuke was Jack's acid-space interpretation of his motorcycle. Denker was starting it up. Jack had translated the real-space lights and engine noise into his own personal vector-space, his fighter pilot's world where someone was always tryin~ to blow you up.

Then there was a barrage of nukes as someone yelled "Denker," and the gang started their bikes to take chase.

When Rosenthal started his bike, when he dropped it into first and ran a circle around Jack before screaming up the highway, Jack felt a direct hit. He felt a white hot neutron barrage dissolve him. He decided that he was dead, that he'd

been ionized. He was a cloud of ions dispersing into space. He didn't mind particularly; he'd been expecting it. Like they say in Nam; "Those ground-to-air missiles can change your life."

Then Jack drifted around the galaxy, shifting his center of consciousness from one of his ions to another, his various parts drifting in wide hyperbolas and ellipses, in parabolas, helixes, and circles; Jack taking in the sights and watching the nebulas and planets until sunrise when he climbed into the closest tent and into a soft, green, down-filled sleeping bag and fell asleep.

While Jack slept, the Suttons spent 12 hours chasing Denker, ending up at the rock festival where the asshole fell off "TITS" and disappeared into the crowd. They tried to follow him, but, after hours of searching through the mud and spectators in the dark, most of the Suttons lost interest and headed back to camp to get some sleep.

When Bill Rosenthal fell into his tent and tried to pull his bag over him, he had a surprise. It wouldn't move. Then it grunted, and Jack Starryck's sleep-puffy head emerged. Bill asked Jack to move over and Jack explained that he was dead, that Bill was probably dead too so it didn't matter.

Bill tried to explain to Jack that he wasn't an ion cloud, but Jack never really accepted the notion. Jack

believed what Bill said. Jack even said that he was glad to be alive, but it didn't sink in.

After that morning, physical danger always sent Jack into a kind of acid trip in which he believed that he was an invulnerable blue ion cloud and that's part of how the Butte Affair happened.

Around noon the Suttons packed up their camp and Jack and motored it all up the thruway to the Woodstock festival where they set up camp again. For two days they danced, tripped, smoked, drank, and screwed while spaceman Jack stayed in the tent and stared. Jack could be led around, but volition was completely absent. On the third day, Bill decided to give Jack another dose of acid and a half hour later Jack walked himself to the porta-john lines and, then, wandered about until he met a honey sweet girl from Atlanta who was having trouble with her hairdo. Aside from her wilted blond curls, she was happy, turned on. She felt so good that she cried about the Civil War while the Jefferson Airplane sang "Wooden Ships" and people ran naked in the rain and the mud. The girl cried about how her great grandfather got killed the day after her grandmother was conceived, so Jack told her that Southerners had a lot to be proud of. He told her how straight and proud the famous Stonewall Jackson had stood in the face of superior Yankee fire. The girl stopped crying when they announced that the festival's

first baby had been born. She thanked Jack for giving her courage, and Jack decided that the honor, the reputation, of the old south rested on his shoulders, that he would live by the hand-kissing, deference-to-ladies values of the pre-war plantation.

Most ladies didn't have anyone to protect them Jack decided. Jack felt an unusual sort of ambivalence, felt himself torn between belligerance and civility. He resolved to teach the world how to treat ladies, or at least he could set a good example for men everywhere and defend those ladies who needed it.

When Jack got to Rand, they reinforced his Son-of-the-South conclusions. In fact, his ability to observe rural southern values whenever he dealt with a female made him more trustworthy. His boss, Oily Al Barnard, only had to turn him over to a secretary and his rowdy behavior became exemplary, compliant even.

It was a secretary who told him that they were sending him out to Great Falls to test the F-12 that October.

IV

Graceful Degradation

Buoyed by the prospect of getting the credit for the F-12 program, Oily Al Barnard returned from lunch with General Stewart to his office-landscaped work area. Al's desk was in one of four rows of cubicles that radiated from a hub at Dick Hubert's area. Dick Hubert was Director of Psychological Services for the west coast division of Rand, and he was sitting in Al's chair with his feet up on Al's desk.

"Congratulations," Hubert said, "I hear you got a new job."

"Thanks," Al said, "this is the chance I've been waiting for." Al was being humble for the moment, aware that if the F-12 worked he would be in a position to jockey for Hubert's job.

Hubert dropped a report on the table. It had a candy-cane striped "TS/SAR" cover sheet on it.

"I put you on the access list for project 993. See me when you've read this. I think we can get a half million funding out of it. Maybe hire another analyst."

"Sure thing," Al said. "Be with you in an hour."

"Take your time," Hubert said and smiled the smile of an auto salesman closing a deal on a used Jaguar. Hubert got up and left Al to study "Extrapolations of the Liftshitz Phenom-

enon." Al grabbed a pencil and put his feet up and proceeded to learn what we've already learned about Leonard Liftshitz and his lisp. But this is two years later and there had been some new developments. The main question raised, the one Hubert hoped to get funded for, was this: What if a machine, the computer that targets and fires the missiles, for instance, picked up something worse than a lisp? What if it picked up a pacifist tendency or a dislike for Trenton, New Jersey, or Gary, Indiana? Properly presented, the implications of the Liftshitz Phenomenon could be made to sound frightening, and Al's brown eyes brightened as he saw his way to a selling point. Machines had to be kept simple enough to be understood, he'd say. You have to be able to intuit them. It was a job for a psychologist, Hubert's department.

Al scooted around the typing pool and between a couple of potted rubber trees and confronted Hubert.

"Dick," Al said, "I think you're right. Try this on. We call it Audio Programming and throw in some stuff about primary and secondary intuitions. The drift will be that the subconscious desires of the engineer can be overridden by the subconscious wishes of the programmer. They've usually got hundreds of designers and programmers. We get it down to one or two of them and have a complete profile on the guys so we can counter-program the hang-ups. It's cost effective."

"That sounds great, Al. It's all yours."

"But I've got the F-12."

"It's the same thing."

"The hell it is. I'd never get promoted out of this little project. It's just a little technical job. It doesn't take any management skill at all."

"Come on, Al. Listen for a minute."

"No, Dick. Get someone else."

"Listen for a minute. What was the next step you were going to take on the F-12?"

"I was going to program the psychological stress and run shakedown flights on the air frame."

"Who flies the shakedowns?"

"You been talking to Stewart?"

"Colonel Starruck, right? Where is he now?"

"I don't want you talking to Stewart, Dick. That's my job. He's in Nam."

"When does he get here?"

"Next month."

"Stewart doesn't want anyone else flying the ship, right?"

"Maybe, maybe not. I haven't talked to him about it."

"He doesn't. What computer were you going to use to drive the stress matrix?"

"The Rand CDC-1800."

"Couldn't you use the Command and Control machine in the Omaha Hole?"

"No."

"No?"

"You ever been to Omaha? That thing fires the missiles."

"Then it should be able to fly a plane and piss off a few pilots."

"You're trying to sabotage my program."

"Come on, Al. . ."

"You are. I've got four kids, Dick."

"It won't hurt you. It's just a month. You can have half my staff until that pilot gets here."

"I'm gonna talk to Stewart." Al became silent. Red-faced, he turned to go.

"Let me know in the morning," Hubert says, but Al doesn't say anything.

Barnard capitulated the next morning. He told Hubert that he'd take the program if he could use any and all staff members that he wanted and Hubert agreed. Hubert added that Al should be "sure to factor in Slow Degradation."

So: The Liftshitz Phenomenon had shown that a computer's personality was dictated by its designers' personalities, that a computer can have both a conscious and a subconscious. But before Al's system could be built he would have to reckon with a certain trend in Pentagon thinking which was just

catching on. The buzz word for this trend was Slow Degradation.

If you've ever been in a computer room, you've probably noticed how cool and dry the air is. Most rooms are kept between 68 and 60 degrees and down around 60 percent humidity because when it gets hot or cold or wet, the circuits start acting differently. They start to act on their own, in a way. Individual flip-flops fire randomly, causing the system as a whole to make mistakes, to degrade.

In the Fifties, there just weren't enough bombs to change the temperature in the computer room down in the Omaha Hole, the command and control center that Al was going to use for his F-12 anti-stress program. In 1958 the biggest Russian bomb could have landed on the elevator shaft and the troops in the war room wouldn't have known about it until the video display told them about it.

But things had changed in the Sixties. There were bombs for everywhere: fifty for Kansas and fifty more for every other state. They were bigger. There was a bomb for Trenton, a bomb for Gary, and, thanks to the inscrutable Nikita Krushev, there was a very big bomb and a back-up for Disneyland, and the same for Omaha. As the Russian stockpile grew and the Chinese, French, and Israelis complicated the situation, we needed to protect ourselves against losing a war just because our computer was too hot and

dingey. We needed a computer that would degrade slowly and not just throw in the towel as soon as the mercury hit 95 degrees. We wanted it to shoot Moscow before it wasted time on Krasnador. In short, we wanted it to keep it's priorities straight.

After weeks of proposal writing and revising, Al Barnard was given half a million dollars to study the related problems of subconscious behavior and slow degradation in what Al had called the "K2r" modification of the command and control system. Al's groups of psychologists, psychiatrists, programmers, systems analysts, and hardware experts were tasked with finding a way of making the proposed "K2r" system degrade slowly. Al wasn't going to be involved with the actual programming; he was only going to formulate the general guidelines.

Only Al knew what he had to do; he'd been at Rand for three years, long enough to know that his job wasn't to find a way to purge K2r's subconscious or make it degrade slowly, but, rather, to come up with a plan that the Air Force would buy, one that they could sell to Congress. It couldn't be too complicated, and it had to have a better name than Slow Degradation.

A month later, when Hubert started taking his staff back for another project and Stewart was about to leave for his new job, Al decided to fly with what he had. The report titled "Graceful Degradation in the Command and

Control System." It was highly classified and 342 pages long with 35 graphs and tables. It concluded that two programmers would be optimum, that the "parents" of K2r should be people who would always act the same in spite of "reason, danger, love, or peer pressure." Al didn't say that what he needed was a pair of assholes, but the thought occurred to him. He added that careful study of the parents would allow any personal hang-ups to be counter-programmed. The more visible the hang-ups, the easier the whole task would be, and he added that he already had enough data on Jimmy Stewart (and Stewart's aide, Richard Denker) to realize a considerable cost-saving if they were chosen as the parents.

Denker and Stewart spend a not altogether unpleasant two months in the Omaha Hole "raising" the K2r system, teaching it diplomacy, discipline, and strategy.

When Stewart made his delayed departure for the NSA, the Strategic Air Command tested their new system. They heated up the Hole to 120 degrees and told the computer that it had been hit by a 90 megaton bomb. They deprived it of all its communications links and it kept shooting at the right targets. Al Barnard was free to return to the F-12 and his career.

The Butte Affair

"I made it myself. Four to one with two olives," Richard Denker said as he literally pushed his way into a chest to chest conversation between Major General James Prescott Stewart and Brigadier General Larry Olsen. Teatotaling Stewart stepped back and accepted his fourth martini while the brigadier scanned the room for a less crowded conversation.

Stewart and Denker were celebrating their second day of freedom after two months of being locked in the Omaha Hole with the K2r system. It had been a trying period for both of them and now that it was over, there was a certain readjustment going on. Denker had taken the female, ironing and cooking sorts of roles during their subterranean period, while Stewart saved himself for the big decisions. While Jimmy had enjoyed the attention in the privacy of their silo, it embarrassed him now. It wouldn't do to have his aide nuzzling into him at a cocktail party or calling him "Jimmy" in that particular tone of voice. Jimmy took a sip of the drink, drowned, and tried to resume his conversation.

"Yep," Jimmy said, "Bud is all for it. He's had enough time in the cockpit to recognize a good ship when he sees one."

"I'd like to take one up," the brigadeer answered. Denker's shoulder was touching his so he was still looking for another conversation.

"Don't you like it?" Denker said.

"Uh--sure," Stewart said. He continued without looking at Denker. "Just give me a call in a couple months and I'll fly one down to you."

"You bet," the brigadeer said. He walked away.

"You don't like your martini?" Denker asked.

"No," Stewart said.

"Too much vermouth?"

"No."

"I didn't put in any olive juice?"

"No. You're acting too familiar."

"I'm your personal aide."

"Not here," Stewart said under his breath. He turned to accept congratulations from a Peck and Peck sort of woman whom he couldn't place.

"Mrs. General Bingham," the woman explained.

"Right," Jimmy said, "So many people here today."

"Can I get you something," Denker asked. She looked at him, contained her condescension and said: "A Manhattan." Denker went to fetch it.

"What's Bert up to lately?" Jimmy asked.

"Oh, getting old." She flicked a strand of Jimmy's greying hair and added: "Just like you."

"He should be a three star too," Stewart said. "He's a good stick."

"He is," she said. "He got promoted last month." Jimmy was as visably disappointed as she was pleased.

"One Manhattan," Denker said. He held up another Martini to Stewart.

"No, thanks," Stewart said.

"Try it," Denker said as Stewart walked away. Denker followed him.

"What's the matter?"

"Beat it."

"You owe me an explanation."

"Beat it."

Denker grabbed Stewart's sleeve and said: "Please." Then Stewart pushed him but Denker held onto his neatly pressed sleeve. Stewart shoved him away. Surly as a bottom-of-the-pecking-order southern whipping boy, Denker hunched and glowered, his tears forced back behind his eyes.

"Have you got that?" Stewart said, and Denker threw the martini into the general's face.

"Have you got that?" Denker said, and Stewart got him with a left jab. Hand on his bloody mouth, the tears broke loose from Denker's eyes. He turned and ran out of the party while Stewart wiped his face and brushed his jacket with a napkin.

Mrs. General Bingham smiled like a cobra with a mon-goose in its belly.

Richard Denker was very hurt as he headed for the L.A. airport. He'd come to love the lonely general during the last year. He'd made a lot of sacrifices for Stewart. He'd even re-enlisted. When he ran away from the party, he headed for the only friend he trusted, the only one who could take Stewart's place. He headed for Bismark, North Dakota, ready to forsake all other human company for K2r. Stewart might have changed when he got out of the Hole, but the Stewart System hadn't. Denker took a cab to Rand and then to the airport where he made the best connections he could on such short notice.

As Denker's milk plane approached the Butte, Montana, airport, enroute to Bismark, Denker ran his tongue along the inch-long gash in his mouth and the Boeing 737, its landing gear down, drifted through the coincidentally falling snow. The pilot was intent on the Instrument Landing System, the ILS, on keeping the red cross-hairs centered on the black dot. The co-pilot stared out of the windshield looking for a glimpse of terra firma.

"I've got it," the co-pilot said. He was very calm and authoritative. He cranked in full power, pulled the gear level up and clicked on the radio.

"Missed approach," he said into the radio.

"Your ILS is fucked up," the lady pilot said into the radio.

"ILS must be fucked up," Denker thought as he leaned over and strained against the seat belt. He picked up his martini glass then the transparent little ice cubes. Denker spotted a crumpled paper napkin and had to undo his seat belt to tidy up.

"Uh," the pilot said over the intercom, "there was some equipment on the runway they couldn't see from tower. We'll be on the ground in a few minutes." But the pilot was being more optimistic than realistic.

It was a party night in Butte. The guys in the tower had not only closed up early but had forgotten to tell anyone that they were going home. The ILS wasn't fucked up at all. It was turned off. Flight 43 was homing in on a Bomar Claculator that had been left switched on in the tower.

"Bullcrap," Denker mumbled in response to the pilot. "ILS is fucked up."

The wheels were lowering for another try at the runway and Denker wondered what was wrong with the ILS as the gear clunked open. He speculated about a burned out register in the second intermediate amplifier. He looked preoccupied but alert, like he was working on a crossword puzzle as the stewardesses held hands and cowered in the galley as the

pilots searched the white-out for the approach lights and finally saw them off to the left.

"Fuck it," the pilot said.

"Yeah, let's go to Denver," her number two said.

The pilot shrugged her shoulders.

"I've got it," she said as she put in power and banked left.

"We're too low," number two said. He stared out the window, then gripped the arm rests and scrunched down preparatory to landing as the plane turned slowly, hovering and wobbling like a sandhill crane. When it reached the flashing string of red and amber lights, it turned and started sinking faster as the engine roar faded to the whine of half power.

Denker's attention finally switched from electronics to securing his drink for landing.

Rosalind Andor, the pilot, was intent but still calm. She was still in control.

The touchdown was a little rough and a little lopsided but aside from depositing Denker's flight bag in the aisle and dumping a few plastic glasses, there were no ill effects as first the right and then the left shock absorbers bottomed out. The aft section of the plane was hidden in the cloud of flying snow.

They finally came to a stop with three hundred feet of runway to spare. The pilot smiled as the aircraft slowed to

taxi speed. The perspiration on her face started to feel cool in the shaft of air-conditioning which she always kept aimed at her face. Her assistant was very relieved as the plane pivoted on the right wheels and headed back up the runway in search of the taxiway to the terminal which had been the next item on the plow crew's agenda when word of the Columbia Gardens bash had reached them over the radio.

Back at the approach end of the runway, the pilots' elation dissipated and another tour of runway 18 only produced gloom, then another "Fuck it!" from Roz Andor who turned tower only to get stuck in a ditch about 150 yards from runway centerline. The nosewheel was up off the ground, and full power didn't budge the plane.

Denker collected his baby blue Pan Am flight bag and slung it over his shoulder. He then knelt and pulled a heavy package in a plain brown wrapper out from under the seat and stood up, holding it in his arms. The asshole was wondering how he was ever going to get to Bismark, North Dakota, if the straining engines proved unable to free the plane. He was anxious to get there and tune into K2r and tell his problems to the only psychology in the world that understood him. He was getting irritated with the engine noise, the vibrations, and the elderly woman who kept asking him what the matter was.

Denker was looking forward to de-planing at Bismark, renting a car, and driving to a very particular farmhouse about 40 miles from the airport. The house was situated on top of a knoll, and most of the land that went with it had been sold off. There was no radio or television reception at the site. Even the telephone connection suffered from loud background noise that sounded like a DC-7 Constellation, the triple-finned pride of the Lockheed company. The owner of the house had been unable to sell or rent the place for years now, so Denker had been a welcome tenant when he called from the LA airport to offer forty dollars-a-month rent.

The microwave channel that connected Omaha with the northern missile fields passed right through the attic of Denker's farmhouse. Denker was going to take his package, a sophisticated NSA amplifier, and shack-up with the Stewart System which had just been counter-programmed against Denker's and Stewart's hang-ups.

As the 737 strained to get out of the ditch, Denker pulled his amplifier tighter into his stomach. He was flinching at a "b" above high "c" that had just emanated from two-year-old Kathy Gertz who was also having trouble maintaining her sense of humor. Dick pulled the strap of

his flight bag higher up on his shoulder and then put his arm in front of him. He proceeded to push his way down the aisle to the back of the plane. He was fuming at the child, the old woman and anything else that was making it harder to get to Bismark.

"I'm getting off," he said to one of the stewardesses. His face was red and taugth, his toes and hams clenched, his whole body trembling.

The stewardess explained that FAA regulations prohibited de-planing until the engines were shut off, so Denker grabbed her by the wrist and proceeded to push his way back up the aisle to the cockpit where he found the pilots leaning forward out of their seats, applying pinball-style body English to the 80-ton jetliner.

As Denker arrived with his hostage in tow, they realized the futility of their efforts and sat down, sheepishly waiting to hear what Denker had to say.

They didn't have to wait long.

"I demand to be let off this plane," Denker said.

Rosalind Andor studied him. "So?" she said.

"She won't let me."

"So let him off," Roz said. "Let 'em all off--shove 'em off for all I care." She pulled the throttles back. The cockpit became silent and a hush spread over the passenger compartment.

"Fuck it," Andor said. She looked Denker in the eye. She winked at him and then switched on the PA system.

"Uh," she said, "Uh, welcome to Butte. Not much of an Indian summer here--guess it's about ten below and snowing--guess I'll have to go and get some help. I don't really feel like it because I think I'm gonna get fired. It should take a couple hours. Guess you can try and walk it if you want to, at your own risk. I'm not recommending it. I'm sorry for the inconvenience but--shit, you're still alive even if you are stuck in Butte."

Can you see them?

Richard Allison Asshole Denker and Captain Rosalind Elizabeth Andor of Liberal Airlines wading through two feet of snow, heading for the Butte America passenger terminal.

Notice that they're flirting with each other, that as the plane fades in and out of view in the blowing snow, as they get further and further from the snared 737 that Denker is starting to smile.

See Captain Andor pat him on the ass?

Remember that they're in Butte, Montana, home of Evel Knieval and the Berkley Pit, the city that was offered ten million dollars to go away.

Butte is the bigger half of a twin city set-up that includes Anaconda, Montana. Butte has the mines, the Berkley Pit, and the mile-deep inky black shafts that under-

mine the city with a honeycomb of abandoned shafts supported by decaying timber. Anaconda has the smelter. Anaconda has the world's biggest smokestack while Butte has the biggest and deepest holes.

A mile-high in the Northern Rockies and isolated from the rest of the country, both towns have adhered to the company town principles of men only bars, fist fights, and big families. The miners and smeltermen are apid high wages after generations of bitter strikes and heartbreaking layoffs. Today the fringe benefits take care of almost everything except punching the time clock, but life in Butte has never been dull. Traditionally, entertainment was available in Meaderville, and the red-light district, but Meaderville became part of the Pit and the red-light district died away as the unions gained strength and the miners started having families. Social change being what it is, there was a tendency for the menfolk to continue to visit the innumerable saloons even after they had wives and children. Then the ladies started getting together and going out themselves. This still goes on. When the packs mix, a few of the men inevitably wander off with a few of the women to have a party at someone's house out in the woods in the summer or wherever. This would all be fine except everyone has been married since they graduated from high school andthe party pairing, even though it's among life-long friends, is usually pretty drunken and spontaneous. When a husband or wife happens to

catch their mate heading out, there is either a fist fight or a claw fight or sometimes a murder which, although frowned upon, is accepted as a part of life, and domestic murderers usually don't spend more than a year or so in jail. Fights are sport. There is a tradition in Butte, of confusing violence with love, of being grateful for whatever attention you can get.

Time magazine did a report on Butte. They called it a dying town and said that the people were burning down their buildings for the insurance. Time failed to conjecture that buildings got destroyed for fun or as a gesture of affection or even succumbed to the constant rivalry between the two cities. As a patron at the Bucket of Blood Saloon put it, "We have real good fires in Butte."

Butte started out as a copper camp. Then the tents gradually yielded to more permanent structures and, as the pit got bigger, parts of the town had to be demolished. Over the years the town succumbed to the pit a block at a time. It wasn't exactly urban renewal, but it helped, and at least someone always made a few bucks on it and bought a few rounds at the bar.

On the day of flight 43's arrival, word had come out that the Company needed the ore under Columbia Gardens, a beautiful amusement park and landscaped gardens. Joe Louis had fought there, and Marcus Dailey's thoroughbreds had raced on the track. Forty kegs of beer showed up at the park from

somewhere, and as word spread, it turned into quite a party. A sort of lease-breaking party, except no one was planning to move except for a few prairie dogs.

Richard and Rosalind were invigorated when they reached the terminal. They were relieved to find that it was still open thanks to the rent-a-car companies who didn't recognize Columbia Gardens Day as a legitimate holiday.

Dick brushed the snow off the amplifier and put it on a contoured seat in front of a grey-cowled television. He brushed the snow off his wool slacks, straightened and tightened his tie and smoothed the wide lapels of his expensive suit. Denker liked clothes; he spent a good deal of his salary trying to look as spiffy as possible, and as Roz walked over to the Hertz counter, he sat down next to the amp and took off his alligator shoes, brushed the snow off his socks and picked the snow out of the seams of his shoes. He was distressed that they had gotten damp and water stained. Denker muttered about the snow and the stupid plane and why did it have to snow in October anyway, why couldn't it snow in January like other places.

Roz was unbuttoning her coat when she reached the Hertz counter where all three of Butte's rent-a-car girls were drinking spiked coffee and swapping rent-a-car stories. There was a peel of laughter as Roz neared them. It put

her on the defensive, made her wonder if they were laughing at her.

One of the girls squelched her giggle, stood up, and put out her cigarette. She felt imposed upon. All the cars were stuck so why should she stand up and smile at some broad who was just going to get hysterical and blame her for the blizzard. She resolved to keep smiling; that was always the best way; the company never hassled you as long as you were nice to the customers.

Roz smiled back at her.

"I don't know how to explain this," Roz said, "or what you can do about it, but I got stuck out there."

The girl held her smile.

"My plane got stuck," she said. "There's fifty people waiting for help."

"But the airport's closed," the girl said.

"Could I use your phone?"

"Sure can," she said. "But everyone's partying."

"Oh?" Roz said.

"Yeah," the girl said. "You won't find anyone open except for the bars and half of them closed up to go out to the Gardens."

"Can I rent a car?"

"They're all stuck."

"Are the roads open then?"

"I don't know."

"Well, fuck it," Roz said.

"Excuse me?"

"Nevermind," Roz said.

Captain Andor marched back to Denker who was now looking out the window and drying his shoes over the base-board heater. He'd finally unbuttoned his fluffy white fur coat. When he head Roz approach, he stood up and said, "Hi."

Rox explained that she wanted to hitch into town. Denker simply shook his head, "no," as he glared down at the white semi-circles that the melting snow had stained into the inch-and-a-half heels on his shoes.

"Come on," Rosalind said as she unbuttoned her uniform. She sounded like Bambi's mother. She knew how to handle gay men, had learned to enjoy them while she'd been flying the New York to L.A. circuit. She had lived in the West Village.

"Oh, your shoes," she said, stooping to pick one up. She examined it.

"They're lovely. And green is such a bad color to get wet. Y'know, I'll bet you never tried mink oil. It comes from some gland or other in minks. I thought I'd ruined this beautiful pair of calf pumps till my houseboy put mink oil on them, and I couldn't tell where the stains had been."

"I'll bet that's all my shoemaker does to them," Denker said.

Denker thought it over and said, "Why that's wonderful." Roz nodded agreement as she admired his suit.

"C'mon," she said. "Let's go have a drink."

Denker became coy. "Where?" he said.

"Downtown; I'll show you around. I kind of like this place."

"Yes, I think I might enjoy that if I could keep my feet from getting so cold."

Denker's feet got very cold during the forty-five minutes he spent holding up his "Butte" sign to the empty highway. He didn't complain, he was much too upset as he sat on a snowbank and watched the vague snow-shapes, the left side of his face covered with his hand to protect it from the wind. Roz paced up and down the highway, periodically trying to persuade her companion to try walking to town while Denker sat and scowled.

Then Jason McCaul waved from the cab of his '52 Chevy truck. It was a very special sort of Chevy truck because it had a twenty-four yard Garwood garbage box on the back. The truck didn't stop or even slow down, but the driver was trying to yell something at them. The message was lost in the crashing of gears which remained audible for several

seconds after the flashing brakelights faded into the blowing snow.

Denker was glad that the truck hadn't stopped. The idea of actually getting into a garbage truck appalled him. He would rather freeze.

Then the truck came back. Reverse gear sounding like a powermower grinding up a croquet hoop.

"C'mon!" Jason McCaul said. Roz bolted for the door as Jay continued. "Takes a minute to stop in weather like this. Didn't see you till I was right on top of you."

"C'mon!" he said to Denker. Denker looked wistfully down the highway, hoping a normal car would come along.

McCaul started to explain that there was little hope of getting another ride, but Roz leaned across him and shouted out the window.

"Get in here," she snapped at Denker and Denker complied. He slumped and shuffled, but he finally got in the truck.

"Get stuck at the airport?" Jason asked.

"Yup," Roz said.

"Some coffee under the seat over there," Jay said to Roz.

"Great," Roz said as Denker sat up straighter, determined that he wasn't going to drink any of it.

"Some of this?" McCaul said, offering Roz a half-full fifth of R&R.

"Ah," Roz sighed after swallowing. She sat back. Her palm was flat on the bottle cap; her head leaned back as the gearshift knocked back and forth between her knees. It titillated her with symbolism more than with physical stimulation.

Fucked-up company," Jason said to the center of the windshield. "Fucked-up," he added.

"These two ranches up here at Ninemile pay the same as a little old lady right in town, and it's a half-hour each way."

Everyone was silent for a moment, then Jay spoke again.

"Should see the boss. Just like a little kid. Here." He waved a microphone over the shift knob. "One of Roy's ideas--two trucks but he's got to have a radio so he can play Buck Rogers--starts snowing like this I just turn the thing off--why make things unbearable. I guess it pays pretty good, five bucks an hour. Guess I'm lucky to be working at all with that new arbiter at the smelter, but. . ."

"Can I turn it on?" Roz asked. She checked with Denker who was scowling. He had his eyes closed, his feet held up off the floor. He wasn't saying anything to anyone until circumstances stopped tormenting him.

"NO," Jay said, "He's just gonna be sayin' 'twenty calling Jay--Come in Jay;' sometimes I get a lecture.

Most of the time he wants to know if a place is on his route. He's got a memory like a. . ."

The trio continued on; their chartreuse garbage truck pushing on into the snow streaked tunnel of the headlights, the plowed highway looking like a bobsled run when one got a glimpse of it through the slush on the windshield. McCaul was leaning forward and down to the left to see out of the only clear spot that the tired wipers could keep clear.

Jim offered them a look at today's additions to his pornography collection but elicited no interest. He said he found a couple interesting letters from a 13-year-old girl to her 30-year-old boyfriend, but Roz would have felt embarrassed and Denker was still incommunicado. He was still clutching his knees, clenching his anus, and cradling his beloved amplifier.

Roz turned her attention to Denker. She stroked his head and neck trying to bring him out of it, wishing he'd take a couple swigs from the bottle and calm down.

"Have some whiskey, Dick, it'll warm you up," she said. She pushed toward him, the bottle sloshing in the rocking, pitching, jouncing cab, but she didn't get through.

"Here, let me put your gloves on the heater," but there was still no response. Roz uncurled his fingers and pulled the black kid gloves off his limp red hands and put them on the defroster next to Jim's rubber-and-ooze-coated work gloves.

"And your hands are so cold," she said as she took his left hand and pushed it under her coat and between her breasts. She pushed the thin fingers into her cleavage and ignored the scratching of his star sapphire pinky ring.

Denker resisted having his other hand warmed. He silently insisted on keeping a firm grip on the amplifier and the flight bag so Roz let him have his way and returned her attention to the road. She freed her left hand for another hit on the bottle.

They were coming into town now. They were passing a jumbled subdivision which had one of everything from colonial trailers to tarpaper shacks and old frame houses which had been moved out onto the "Flats" when the pit had claimed their real estate. The road opened into four lanes and other cars started to appear. Their red tail and brakelights glowed surrealistically bright in the dark and the white. Roz became more alert. She was bouncing along with the jostling as her spirits rose as they approached civilization. Even Denker was looking up; his grimace softened to a scowl; his fingers regained their color as he relaxed his grip on the amp, allowing himself to fantasize a dim, quiet restaurant with lace tablecloths and huge slow fans and red-jacketed, satin-slippered darkies silently delivering mint juleps and pecan pie, shrimp remoulade and chateaubriand bernaise. Denker wasn't really smiling yet, but he was getting there.

"Hey," Roz said, "Looks like a party night." Denker started, actually looked over at Roz and Jay, his eyes betraying the first stages of a twinkle.

"You betcha," Jay said. "Hear they had forty kegs down at the Gardens. Copperheads and Bearcats are playin'. Those high school kids. . ."

Denker's twinkle emerged on the words, "high school kids" as Jason applied the brakes and slowed to the speed of the sander in front of them. Sand was clattering off the windshield as Jay pulled himself up in an attempt to pull the left side of the wheel down. He was trying to override the truck's tendency to dive for the ditch whenever he hit the brakes. The truck amputated a mailbox before drifting back onto the road.

"Whoa," Roz said.

"That sonofabitch; been tryin' to get 'em to fix that left brake for a year--it's not like I'm asking for four. Or power steering or anything." He took a hit on the bottle and so did Roz as Denker resituated himself on the seat. Jason grabbed the mike.

"Roy," he said, "Your truck just bought a mailbox." Jay turned up the volume.

"Where the hell are you?" a thin insistent voice asked. It faded as Jim turned the volume off.

"Lincoln Hills," Jay said and put the mike back on the hook as he once again grappled with the wheel. This time

he was trying to stop before engaging his party and their twenty cubic yards of compressed mild containers, paper diapers, tin cans, broken toys, and all with the post-game traffic at the Butte Civic Center. He had a little more room than before so he could let off on the brakes when the truck drifted too far to the right, finally clanking and rattling to a stop five or six cars back from the light.

"Looks like the Copperheads won," Jay said. He was explaining the two Anaconda High buses that were under seige. There were thirty or so high school boys throwing rocks at the now windowless buses. The occupants were huddled under the seats. One of the yellow buses had a boulder nested on its crumpled roof, and down the block there was a twenty-man brawl in progress. A misdirected rock hit the roof and Denker hit the door handle, shoved the door open with his shoulder and tried to pull away from Roz who had him by the arm.

"Easy does it," Roz said.

"Oh, Oh," Jay said as he put the truck in reverse and started easing it back as first one horn and then another and another begged him to stop. The pitch of the cacophony changed slightly as the Anaconda Disposal Company's flagship crumpled the front end of a pickup truck. The outraged driver gave it gas, trying to win at push-come-to-shove as his wheels spun on the snow and Jay pushed him back out of

the way. The driver got out of his car and headed for Jay's door.

McCaul shifted into first and made a left into a parking lot. He was shaking his head and chuckling, mumbling "sunsa bitches" over and over.

"Son of a bitch," he said. "Must've really whomped 'em. Throwin' rocks just caust it says Anaconda on the box." He double-clutched it into second and turned left onto Park Street, heading for the interstate and home base.

When Dick Hubert had assigned Al Barnard to the Lift-shitz program, he had been using his head if not his heart. Hubert had been eyeing a burgundy Mercedes 120 in the showroom window but he needed a raise to extend his credit and buy it. He needed to increase his staff by five men because Dick Hubert was a GS-16. If Barnard had most of his staff tied up and Hubert could come up with an urgent project, then he could justify additional staff. Hubert collected suggestions, deciding that K2r satellites had the best chance of getting funded.

Hubert wrote the preliminary report himself and kept it secret from Al. It said that a series of computer satellites could take over the Denker System after the Omaha Hole finally got too hot. Rand would need 200,000 dollars for a more complete study, and the Air Force coughed it up. Hubert

hired five engineers and bought his car. He signed the final report, and the Air Force took it to Congress.

But Congress objected to the 500 million dollars that the extended Denker System would cost, so Bud Stradlow, Chairman of the Armed Forces Subcommittee, called a special meeting in his walnut panelled office where a handsome Air Force officer briefed Bud's committee on the proposal to put up a dozen computer satellites which could take over when the Denker System degraded too much. Ten minutes into the spiel, the spokesman stated that satellites were needed to make the entire Command and Control system Degrade Gracefully.

The words had a ring to them that pulled Senator Lerum out of his reverie.

"What's that?" Lerum asked as he sat up.

"Graceful Degradation, sir," the uniformed colonel said. "Idea's that the system can only be blown up a little at a time." He took a step toward Lerum. "You see, sir, if we only have one bird up there and they hit it, well, the whole system's gone. But, if we have six of them and they hit one, we only lose a very little bit of our capability." The colonel pulled his forefingers across his thumb. He brightened; he was getting into a technical area and no one in the room could really understand him. He stepped back to an easel and removed the cover from a flip-

chart and then pointed at a dotted line connecting two satellites.

"Laser links," he said. "That's the big plus in this system. The laser communications links. Never thought that laser R&D would pay off, but if we build this baby, all that R&D will pay for itself." He threw Stradlow a thumbs-up salute.

"The way it is now, the whole system's in the hole, and it can't fight much of a war after it's hit a few times, but if we take twelve birds and tie 'em together with lasers," he paused, "they all add up. It's like having one bird that's twelve times as smart. If they hit part of it, the rest of 'em will take over and pinch hit. We could still launch minute men with only one bird left. I don't need to explain that in order to carry out a tactical war, a less than total war, the principle consideration would be our ability to keep shooting after we've been nuked, that. . ."

"Shut up," Stradlow said.

"Now wait a minute, Bud," Lerum said. "I wanna hear this."

"You wait a minute. You know how many planes we could build with half a billion. At least I know what planes do for me. If you want to buy this Graceful Delegation bull-shit, then you can go along with that army contract that'll get spent in Dakota."

"Okay, Bud," Lerum said, smiling at the spokesman.

"You've got it."

"Go ahead," Stradlow said to the Air Force representative. "Go ahead and tell Bob what he's getting while I have some lunch."

Richard Denker and Roz were receptive when Garbage man and philosopher Jay McCaul offered to buy them their first drink in "Andaconich" as he referred to it. While Jason had been scolding himself for not dumping today's haul on the Butte Chamber of Commerce, Roz had been working on Denker. She'd been soothing him with talk about New York. She had gotten his attention with a copy of the Soho Weekly News which she'd gleaned from Jay's porno collection. In addition to an article on Marisol, it had an article about the scene on an abandoned New York pier where hundreds of gays had been gathering on weekends. The author/person had described the "sweet smell of urine" and the smoke hanging in the dark cavern. It tantalized Denker with descriptions of finely muscled males passing each other in the dark, turning slowly to feel each other's bodies and then retiring in two's and three's and more to secluded corners to make love. Denker had been engrossed, but upon finishing, he pooh-poohed the scene as too "coarse."

"Oh, once in awhile I go to the Baths," he said.

"But I can't take much of it, those big scenes, you really have to get off tetracycline every now and then. I'm really not promiscuous you know."

Roz played along with the tease, hearing that she probably wouldn't be able to seduce him on this, their first date.

"I bet," she said, "that after dinner at the Grammercy Park Hotel and some Taitengers at my apartment, you'd want to spend the night." She was whispering into his ear, her chin on his shoulder.

"Oh, no," Denker said, "I'd never spend the night; why, I'd probably have a roommate that I'd have to lie to. What if I had an asthma attack? Why, I'd die without my respirator." He giggled.

"Oh, come on," she said. She was running a fingernail along his spine. Denker was blushing slightly. "You wouldn't want to go to that little place over on 27th and 3rd for antipasto and scampi?"

"Oh, no, it's so crowded and smokey; I wouldn't even finish my meal."

"A play? Dinner at my place, looking out over the Park. My big pillows on the floor and some cocaine. You should see my tusk. It's smooth ivory. I keep it warm on a heating duct next to the coffee table."

"There's just so much disease," Denker said.

"The Opera? At the Met with those Chacall back-drons?"

"Maybe," Denker said, pulling away from her. "Oh," he said, "I'd love to see "Lucia" again. There just isn't any opera in Los Angeles and I haven't been to MOIA or the Met for years. I love that sculpture garden in the summer."

"Oh," Roz said, "and the stores. I've got to get to Bergdorf's soon."

"Yes, Bergdorf's."

"And La Guardia really is my favorite airport anywhere."

Jim held the truck door open for Roz. Roz in turn offered a hand to Denker who accepted the gesture gracefully. He descended to the ground with a great deal of elán but then lost his footing on the snow and fell directly on his center of gravity. The asshole scrambled to his feet, anxious to get into the bar and away from the street where the victory celebrants were driving back and forth along the main drag. They'd turn around at the bank and drive back, honking, yelling, and horse-playing their way to Euttrey's supermarket where they either turned around again or stopped to reshuffle passengers and check on the party which was inevitably held out on some back road.

Tonight's party would be a good one. The Anaconda team had won and odds were that the cops would reward them by not breaking up the kegger. Half the cops had gone to Butte to help out with the Columbia Gardens party and those who hadn't been hospitalized wouldn't be back in Anaconda until very late.

A quart beer bottle flew out of a passing car and splattered off the back of Jay's truck. A pubescent voice yelled: "Throw your own fucking beer, you asshole."

Denker looked back over his shoulder thinking he'd heard Jack Starryck call him by his middle name, then seeing no pedestrians, he chalked it off to deja vu and pushed through the swinging door. He rushed to rejoin his companions.

Denker was taken aback by the place. He was frightened. He had expected a cocktail lounge instead of the brightly lit Turf Bar. He stiffened his posture and proceeded to join Roz and Jason, squeezing in between them in the middle of the thirty-stool bar, inching his feet up to the rail to get them out of the puddle and away from the aged and German Shepard who was sprawled across a dry patch on the linolium. The bog's bloodshot eyes slowly closed when Denker looked away from him to survey the variously booted feet at the four chrome and plastic tables lined up against the wall. Richard Denker looked up and down the wet grimey

floor, still too intimidated to risk looking anyone in the eye.

"Earl," Jay said to a muscular six footer next to him, "want you to meet Roz an' uh. . ."

"Dick," Roz said.

"Yeah, Roz and Dick." Jay smiled encouragement as Denker shuffled his feet. He looked up at Earl and said, "Hello."

"Earl's a G-man too," Jay said. "He's usually my partner but he's sick today."

Earl imitated a cough and said, "Howdy Roz," he looked at Denker and nodded a restrained hello.

"How'd the brakes hold up today?" Earl asked.

"Same," Jay answered. "Shit," he said. "Wasn't that somethin' when I was out of the cab helpin' you lift that fifty gallon can and they let go." Jay turned to Roz continued.

"We wuz up on the hill in one of those subdivisions and the truck started down the hill. Went runnin' after it. Company almost bought a house for sure. Got in the can and turned into a snowbank. Lucky it didn't get goin' any faster."

"Naw," Earl said. "You had to lift box. I remember it. There was garbage all over the place. The box dug in and drug you stopped."

"Yeah, but the snowbank stopped it."

"That's right. Sideswiped that garage, knocked off a few boards. No structural damage."

Earl took the ball while Jay tossed down a shot.

"Yeah, that fancy-assed woman came out in her nightg
. . ."

"Remember those letters she was gettin' from that guy over in. . ."

Roz was pulling Denker's sleeve, trying to give him his vodka on the rocks while Denker gazed at the steamy, ice-fringed window and listened to a 12-year-old boy who was trying to take his father home. The man was intent on the pinball machine which was clicking and thunking as the meter counted off the 200 free games that the man had just won, which he'd be able to collect twenty dollars for once the machine finished.

"Mommy wants you to come home."

The boy grabbed the man's wrist with both hands, tugged at it, but got nowhere.

"Why don't you come home dad?"

"Dick," Roz said. She got through this time and handed him his drink which Denker immediately drank a tenth of, then another tenth. He looked straight into the glass, his eyes half-closed and kitty-licked another tenth of it.

"Isn't this great?" Roz said to him. She gestured toward the room at large, urging him to take a look around at the "friendly, healthy people."

So.

Senator Lerum's satellites got built in Carolina and launched into semi-synchronous orbit and linked together with ruby columnized laser beams. Programming of the space born computer was left to the ground based Denker System and K2r spent a whole day teaching the "666's" to reason like Stewart and Denker.

Imagine, Jimmy's and Dick's personalities floating around in space that way, thinking Stewart and Denker thoughts, wishing it was allowed to take a shot at this gas station or get even for that licking that Denker took from Harold Perdum in the Bronx in 1953. Lucky it had program inhibit sub-routines against those impulses. Too bad Denker was going to stop by and counter-counter program it. Too bad for Butte but in a way Butte would get the better part of the deal.

While Butte would stand to be nuked or conventionalled or whatever, so should everyone else. Try to picture it after a war. The pyramids are gravel. The few survivors have become barbarized and there's the Denker System, the

culmination of Western civilization, its ruby colored laser links beaming Stewart and Denker thoughts around space, telling the chance visitor from another galaxy that Butte was the only part of our civilization that didn't think the way it does.

Denker looked around at the Turf Bar. He read animosity in every face and feared something wild which he saw in many of the people. They seemed, to Denker, to have something in common with the lady who was dealing cards across the green felt table in the rear. They had those straight mouths and eyes which stopped you before you could sense any emotions, laughter, affection, and animosity breaking out at intervals, undiluted and unexpected. The outbursts made Denker flinch.

After he lapped up the eighth tenth of his drink, Denker suggested another round to the folks. Earl thanked him. He seemed to have changed his first impression of Denker.

When the bartender brought three beers, three shots and a "martini," Denker offered his MasterCharge in payment and the bartender told him that they didn't "take 'em." The bartender paused and pointed to a sign behind him while he watched the rearmost table.

The German Shepherd was pawing at the door as a man and a woman joined a drunk at one of the back tables.

Dick read "Used handguns bought and sold--see the bartender," and "Silver Lake Pig Roast, June 20--July??"

Denker wondered what the point was until he alighted on this:

IF WE DON'T KNOW YOU
 WE DON'T KNOW YOUR s
 NO OUT OF TOWN s
 \$5 ON ALL BAD s

the management

"This includes all credit cards," was penciled in on the bottom.

As Roz put a five on the bar, one of the two gentlemen at the back table rose and dove onto the table, putting all his weight into a haymaker which he was aiming at the table's other occupant. The woman had gone to the lady's room.

Glasses, ashtrays, beer, and pitchers sprayed out from under the bellyflop. The victim and his chair fell backwards as the table tipped over, then landed on his stomach. The assailant rolled off the left and came to rest against a seated Indian in a faded denim jacket.

Roz had seized Denker's arm again but was just barely able to restrain him as adrenalin doubled his strength. The bartender grabbed the brawler from behind and locked his fists across the customer's chest. He pointed him toward the door. The red-headed bartender leaned into him and pushed him forwards, down the aisle, blood dripping off his chin, his arms still flailing when either Denker or Denker's white fur

coat inspired him to one last act of valor. Perhaps the bartender let him go.

In any case, the punch grazed Denker's nose, leaving him completely stunned and slightly bloody as the bartender tossed the instigator out onto the snow and business as usual resumed. The regulars were trying to decide who had been sleeping with whom. The consensus was that it had to do with the night when Debbie and Mick disappeared from the Reno at the same time for two hours.

"Dick?" Roz said. She tapped lightly on the hand-carved mahogany bathroom door with a fingernail. Denker had insisted on separate rooms at the Marcus Daly Hotel, but he'd given her the key to his when she went to change.

"Come in," Denker said.

Roz opened the door a crack and peered around it. She crept into the room.

"How do you like my kimono?" she said.

Denker was taking a bath in a huge porcelain tub with ornate brass fixtures. Just now he was trimming his toe nails and listening to every sound outside the window. He was feeling hateful about being stuck in Butte when he should have been in Bismark hooking up the amp and sorting through the channels in the column of microwave energy that ran through the attic. He would have to get an oscilloscope

somewhere and probably spend days sorting through all the wave forms, partially decoding them until it sounded like a DC-7. Denker looked at Roz, as his mind continued to root in the particulars of getting through to K2r.

Roz made a half-bow. "Silk," she said.

"Real silk?" Dick asked.

"Yes," Roz said emphatically.

"Oh, it's very becoming," he said. "I used to have a silk one too but the slob I was seeing burned a hole in it. In the lapel of all places. I can't bear to wear it anymore and I couldn't stand to throw it out."

"I love it," she said. "It's just what I need after a day of wearing that uniform--Oh, be right back."

"Lock the door," Denker said.

A few minutes later Denker became frightened at the sound of Roz returning to his room. He hunkered as the bathroom door opened and then smiled with delight and relief when he saw that it was Roz and that she was carrying a bottle each of pear onions, vermouth, and Bombay gin. She had a crystal pitcher, a chrome and ebony bucket of ice cubes, and two frosted, stemmed glasses.

"Eight to one?" Rosalind asked.

"Marvelous," Denker beamed.

Roz used a quarter of the gin on the first batch. She proposed a toast.

"To Lincoln Center," she said.

"To Lincoln Center," Denker said.

"Perfect," Denker said after his first sip.

"My husband makes 'em 2-1," Roz said. She had downed her drink and was chewing her onion. Her lips were pulled back so Denker could see her teeth or her cans rather.

"Couldn't handle it, it was part of a whole thing he had. Carrying his rubbers on sunny days in case it rained. Taking an hour and a half to get dressed and turning out the lights when we balled." She put an onion in her glass, poured another martini and sipped it. She was looking past Denker and out the window at Anaconda which looked like a toy railroad town, the tiny houses all bunched together beneath 10,000 foot Mount Haggin.

She leaned forward, the loosely tied kimono revealing her breasts. Denker peeked at them now and again, looking away so Roz wouldn't catch him.

"Could you wait in the other room while I dry off?" Denker asked.

"Shy?"

"Terribly," Denker whispered.

When Denker emerged from the bathroom in his favorite blue satin robe and grey slippers, Roz had her elbow on her knee and her chin and a cigarette in her hand. She'd turned off the lights and lit a candle. There was an open can of

Buluga and a box of Bremner wafers on the victorian lamp table next to her chair.

Eagle eye Denker spotted the caviar right off. He rushed over and scooped some up with a cracker.

"Delicious," he said.

"I carry that stuff just in case." Roz said.

Denker plomped down into the other chair, bouncing up once and settling down.

"Sometimes he still gets me," Roz said to the window.

"Who?"

"My ex. Sometimes I get stuck in a town like this with someone like you and I get got. Y'know what I mean?"

Denker was on his third caviar so he nodded, "yes."

"Same kind of kinky hair on his chest, same eyes--what the hell?" Roz poured them another drink. She was smiling warmly but deliberately.

"How's the nose?"

"Sore."

"That would have to happen to you. We gotta get you another coat. How the shoes look?" She flipped the ash and put her chin back in her hand.

"They're wonderful. Thanks."

Roz sat back and pulled herself together. She looked sexier.

"You're most attractive," Denker said.

"There's some cocaine."

"No, thanks."

"Do you ever sleep with women?"

"Yes."

"Enjoy it?" she whispered. Roz spread her knees slightly, then pulled them together. "We could do it here, on the chair," she said. Her speech was thick with alcohol.

"Or here, on this one," Denker said.

"I wonder how the kids do it in the can on the plane?"

Denker touched his penis through the robe with his bent middle finger. He wiggled it.

"Like this," he giggled.

"Let's see it," Roz said. She leaned toward him and started tugging at the bottom of his robe but Denker said, "no," so she sat back and thought it over.

"I could bend over the bed," she said.

"Ohh--I could too. I have anal orgasms you know."

Roz looked askance. "Oh, come on," she said and Denker crossed his heart with his arms.

"You could have them too."

"I'll stick with the other kinds."

"You should let yourself go."

"Hemorrhoids," Roz said.

"I know what we can do," Denker said.

"What?"

"They only do it down South."

"What can we do?"

"Maybe not," Denker said. He was sitting down in front of Roz, licking his finger and stroking her.

"Ohh," Roz said, "Dick? Dick, there's something I have to tell you before we go any further." She watched him for a reaction. "Dick, I have inverted nipples." Denker stopped touching her.

"It's hereditary," she said. "It's like the skin grew over the nipple, like the nipple was inside. It feels funny. They look okay when they're erect but when they're not. I've got dents instead of bumps."

"Let's see," Denker said. Roz pulled the Kimono off her shoulders and Denker touched her breasts. He pinched the skin and felt the nipple underneath.

"They're wonderful," he said. "Why are you so embarrassed about them?"

"Men freak out."

"They're beautiful," Denker said. He put his mouth on the left one and sucked the nipple out of its dent, making a growling noise and pretending excitement. He stroked her shaved underarm lightly. He pulled back and looked at her.

"Beautiful," he whispered.

Roz leaned forward and rolled off the chair. She put her legs around one of Denker's and pulled at his penis.

"No," Dick said. "I'm too frightened."

"What of?"

"Listen."

A beer can clattered across the street and a pair of drunks were "oh yeah, oh yeah-ing" at each other. "Yip's," "Yahoo's" and bellows were coming from all over. He touched his nose lightly, surveying the damage. There was something that sounded like gunshots.

"I hate it here," he said.

Roz seemed dazed for a moment. Then she pulled on her kimono and stood up. She folded her arms and stared at the candle.

"Oh, fuck it," she said. She took a hit on the gin and sat down, then took another hit and threw the bottle into the bathroom.

"Just fuck it," she said and marched out of the room. She was crying.

High over November Montana, nearly in space and painted a special shade of blue so it was practically invisible, a prototype F-12 fighter/interceptor was having a shakedown flight. Spaceman Jack Starryck was at the controls.

"I want you to sustain it at 12 G's for two minutes today, Jack," the radio said. It was Al Barnard, the F-12 program's new director.

"Hell, no," Jack said. "What ya think I am?"

"Come on, Jack. The anti-stress seat'll take care of it. If it doesn't you can call it off."

"Stewart jus' made up the stress seat, Barnard. You're forgetting that I've got friends at Rand."

"Not true, Jack. I don't know who told you that, but the seat really works."

"You're not sittin' on my hemorrhoids."

"Okay, Jack, okay. Just talk to Kathy here for a minute."

"Stop using women too. It's dishonorable."

"Okay, Jack. I guess I'll have to show those pictures around. I'd really hate to do it but you're being unreasonable."

"I'm gonna tell on Rand de-targeting L.A. Same guy told me as told me about this stress seat. You even put in a button for the seat didn't you. Hold on. I gotta check something." Jack flipped through the In-Flight-Guide that was strapped to his leg and looked up the circuit breaker wiring. He studied it for a moment.

"Barnard?" Jack said.

"No one's going to believe we de-targeted L.A., Jack. But when they see the pictures, they're going to want to check. What are you going to do then, pal?"

There was a click, then a pause, and then another click.

"Okay, I'll try." Jack's voice was subdued and reluctant.

"There we go," Al said.

"Who's we?" Jack said. He pulled a circuit breaker

which shut down his radio and pulled his map case off the velcro patch on the leg of his jump suit. He pulled out a map of the area beneath him and studied it as he descended for a closer look at the mountain fringed ranching community of Phillipsburg. The plane wobbled from low air speed over tan squares of hayfields and fresh white new snow on the Sapphire mountains. Jack circled over the valley for a moment, looking for the most prosperous spread he could find and then shoved the throttles into afterburner and climbed.

At 60,000 feet, he leveled out and did a few calculations on the clipboard which was strapped to his right leg. He rolled the ship upside down and pulled the stick back between his knees with the trim button and then rolled upright in a 60 degree dive as the airspeed climbed past mach 2. At 2.8, Jack pulled back on the throttles and moved the trim button back and forth until he had it set so the nose kept coming up very slowly as the G's opened his mouth and pulled his eyelids down as he gripped the stick to keep his hands off the floor. His thoughts got murky and the G forces countermanded his heart and kept the blood from reaching his head. Holding on to the very edge of consciousness, he pushed the button back with his thumb. The plane was 2,000 feet above the ground and it was climbing. His heart was pounding like an ocean liner boiler room as windows

all across the Phillipsburg valley shattered under one of the most effective sonic booms ever executed. Antique glass decanters and tractor oil reservoirs shattered. Cattle stampeded through barbed wire and everyone who was inside said it was like the building had been hit by a train. Everyone who was outside thought it was the bomb. Jack reset the breaker and gave Al Barnard a call.

"Al?" Jack said.

"Jack, what happened?"

"Nothin'," Jack said. "The G-meter says 12. I held it for a minute."

"Great!" Al said. Jack turned down the volume on his headset.

"Hey, Barnard," Jack said.

"Yeah?"

"I'd take my phone off the hook if I was you," Jack said and then he pulled the breaker again.

Richard Denker was lying face down on the bed when Roz returned to his room at the Marcus Daley. She approached him but stopped when he looked up at her. His eyes betrayed fear and humiliation.

"You just wanted to be close, huh?" She said it softly. She sounded like Bambi's mother again.

Denker looked up and nodded.

"It's been too much to bear," he said.

"Here," Roz held out her arms.

"No, I have to go. Thank you." He was standing, picking up his robe and folding it, smoothing it down after each fold. He walked stiffly into the bathroom and gathered his toothbrush, toothpaste, tranquilizers, tetracycline, hairbrush, cologne, comb and soap. He swallowed an antibiotic and a pale turquoise valium 10. Roz followed him. She watched him, looking for a way to comfort him.

"That happens to me all the time. I see more wilting pricks than the vice squad." She forced a laugh.

"No, no. I'm just scared. It's not you. I've been going through a lot."

Neither believed either and the ensuing silence was replaced by the deeper silence of Denker closing the zipper of his flight bag and pulling the amplifier out from under the bed.

"Why don't you stay and tell me about it." Roz had given up, had made the offer more for her conscience than anything.

"Thanks," Denker said as he slid around the partially open door.

Outside the hotel, the night was still. The wind had stopped, leaving the air resonant with the sounds of the

revelers. The lights on top of the world's biggest smoke-stack dominated the horizon.

Dick walked the short block to the bus depot where the cardboard sign with the clock face said that the depot would re-open at 2:45, fifteen minutes before the next bus. He shaded his eyes to look through to the schedule which said that the 2:45 was going eastbound, to Butte and Bismark and points east. Denker was puzzled by this; he thought he was in Butte. The sign must have meant from Butte. It said eastbound anyway, and he sat in the doorway with the amp under his coat for half an hour. Then he sat inside on one of the wooden benches after the ticket seller told him that he could make connections to Bismark if he got on the 2:45.

Richard Denker spent six months in North Dakota before getting discharged from the service and returning to New York to pursue a career as a systems analyst. He spent all that time, except for the day it took him to tune in, visiting with the already counter-programmed Denker System, the multi-plexed personality that could both understand and advise him.

Denker talked to the system about Jimmy Stewart and "Butte." He told it how he'd taken care of Jimmy only to have Jimmy tell him to beat it. K2r told him that he should have explained his feelings to Jimmy and given him a chance to apologize. The Stewart side of K2r went on at great length about how Jimmy was just concerned about protocol and

department. Denker should remember that he was in the Air Force.

Butte, however, was another matter. The Stewart side was indifferent but the Denker side, of course, sympathized with Denker. It understood how deeply the punch in the nose had hurt him. It appreciated his terror at the post-game riot and somehow blamed Roz's behavior on Butte. It tried to reassure Denker that he was much more valuable to society than those thugs, but Denker kept clenching his fists and wishing he were tough enough to get even until K2r decided to help him out.

It did a scan of Russian targeting priorities and discovered that Butte was fairly low on the list. Denker and K2r talked it over, Denker wanting to target Butte directly with a few of our missiles and K2r wanting to use the now standard "de-targeting" procedure in reverse. It wanted to leak information through the Defense Intelligence Agency, DIA.

"But we can't be sure if we do it your way," Denker kept insisting.

"Thure we can," K2r would reply. "It'th worked for L.A. L.A. ith down to thixth-hundred and fifty-fourth according to the Real Agency report," K2r said.

"But we've never fired a missile," Denker countered.

"We'd have to override the domestic target counter-programming," K2r pointed out. It was speaking from the more technical Denker perspective, referring to Oily Al's post-programming clean-up.

"Okay," Denker said. He sounded gloomy but something instantly sparked him to laughter. "Hey, a crow just flew into your beam."

"Whattth tho funny about that?"

"It fell on the ground. It's steaming," Denker chortled.

"Thorry," K2r said. "That happenth."

"Maybe we could just microwave Butte."

"Be therious."

"I guess, I guess I'll go along with you but I'd really like to get this off my chest. I feel so angry, I need some gratification for these feelings. Some actualization."

"It will be targeted. Ithn't that enough. Do you want me to target them twith."

"Oh, yes," Denker said. "More than twice. Three times."

"I'll tell the Thule inthallation that Butte is critical to us. That line ith tapped."

"Did you do it yet?"

"Yep."

"There's a gas station on 156th and Northern Boulevard in Queens. Could you compute the parameters and target it."

"No. I have a program inhibit thubroutine for that target."

"Oh; I wish I didn't feel so angry. Would you target Silver Lake too. They're going to have a big pig roast;" and Kr2 said, "Yep, justh onth. Five megatonth?" and Denker said, "I think so."

So K2r had issued an update to the DIA stating that while copper wasn't very likely to be targeted in a short, limited or even total war, it might be very important in a one or two shot incident. K2r's message to Thule got tapped and then retapped by Britain who shared it with K2r; giving the rumor triple credibility.

The bulletin inspired a senior civil servant at Wright Patterson Air Force Base to invent a story on the effects of a copper shortage on military preparedness and "Aviation Week" printed it. It even came up at the SALT talks.

"Your copper supply degrades rapidly, not gracefully," Borris said. "If we nuke Butte, it'll take you a year to develop another supply. You will have to use 25 warheads to do equal damage to us. You will have to use aluminum wire and that's expensive. You'll look bad if we have an accident and fire a missile by mistake and you shoot back unfairly."

"Oh," the United States spokesman mumbled, but he was fast.

"How about some corn and wheat?" he said.

"How much?" the negotiator asked.

VI

July 7

November and Thanksgiving, December and Christmas, New Year's 1970, February, March, April, May, and June. Jack Starruck continued to fly the F-12 into July at his captor's behest. There were twenty-five other F-12 pilots now. Unlike Jack, they had volunteered for the project, but just like Jack, they were all blackmailed to a greater or lesser extent by Alfred Scott Barnard.

One of them was having an affair with a woman and one of them was having an affair with a man. One of them couldn't meet his margin calls and all of them had shown up on Al's cross check of sundry computer files. If you wanted to fly the F-12 right and piss the pilots off you had to know what you had on them. Al had gained access to the files through an interpretation of the National Security Act. He was ready to go.

"I want them to go through the whole routine from now on." Al said. He was talking to K2r from a computer terminal in Great Falls, Montana, home base for "A" squadron. "A" squadron was an experimental version of an operational F-12 unit. It was July 7, 1970, the height of the Sixties and everyone was doing things they thought they shouldn't do.

"I want you to give them the full 15 G's. You'll have to give them 50 mils of meth and really piss them off."

"Yeth, thir," K2r said. Al had already given K2r the frighteningly complete dossiers which he'd culled from the Air Force, the NSA, American Express, insurance companies, and Ma Ball. If nothing else, the Denker System would be able to elicit anger from the pilots.

"Use everything you've got. I want to show them what this baby will do."

"Yep," K2r said. Barnard seemed to bring out the Jimmy Stewart in K2r.

"You've been doing a good job on Starrыck," Al said.

"Thank you," K2r said.

"Ten-four," Al said and then he popped his second valium 10 of the day.

Sandy haired and fifty, Lt. Col. Pete Townes was staring down at the pavement as he ape-walked to the plane on July 7. Overweight and naturally slow, he shuffled along under the weight of his parachute, wishing that he wasn't being forced to retire on the 8th.. The snow topped peaks stood buffed green and off-white above row upon row of fighters, bombers, and tankers. Scurrying yellow fuel trucks and maintenance troops went unnoticed as Pete looked down at the pavement. He ignored the friendly greetings of the ground crews while he wished that he was back in Korea or Nam; while he wished

there was even a faint chance of making his fourth kill today.

He pulled his parachute higher on his shoulders, pulled the heavy rubber chaps and girdle of the G-suit high on his waist. Another routine mission, Pete didn't know what it was about, he only had to ride the plane. There was always a chance that a Mig would wander into United States airspace and Pete would get to shoot at it, but the odds weren't very good so Pete just moped along without any hopes or expectations while his crew chief waited at the plane. Pete only nodded at him today. He pulled the chute off his shoulders and heaved it up into the narrow cockpit.

Pete finally smiled as he surveyed his light blue plane. He was anticipating the hormonal surge he'd get when he pushed the throttles forward into afterburner. He could almost feel the plane press forward as he applied thirty feet of engine to his back. Pete was a seat of the pants pilot who longed for a simpler plane that he could fly with his instincts instead of his brain.

He walked around his interceptor, checking it out, looking at every rivet, examining every seam and feeling the smooth, sun-heated metal of the wing. He stuck his head into the air intakes and searched for the forgotten glove or wrench which could convert the turbine into a fragmentary bomb. His crew chief followed him at two

paces, silent and anxious. He flinched when Pete turned to him.

"Sir?" the crew chief said, but Pete looked away and continued his inspection.

"Looks alright," Pete said as he climbed the aluminum gang plank and wedged himself into the red and black cockpit.

"Real fine," he said, but he couldn't really tell. He'd tried to understand the manuals but there never seemed to be enough time. He wished he'd done better on the last procedures test, wished he knew more about electronics and aerodynamics. He took out the maintenance log and initialled it; noting that the technicians had put in forty hours last night. He pulled on the parachute, removed the red ribboned safety pins from the ejection seat and snapped on the seat belts. He plugged in the G-suit air hose and reset the G-meter to zero from 12.

Taxi-ing toward the runway, Pete pushed the radio transmit button.

"Alpha One to Alpha Two," Pete said. Alpha Two was Pete's buddy, Jack Starryck.

"Yeah, Pete," Jack said. "We're gonna get one today."

"Sure," Pete said.

"You'll see. Gonna get your number four."

"Sure, Jack."

"That's right," Jack said. "I know something. I was talking to some of the spooks."

"Where are you?" Pete asked and Jack said, "Right behind you."

"Don't get lost," Pete said and he released the transmit button, sending a final click over the air.

Townes smiled a tight smile and turned down a row of fighters. He pulled the plastic canopy down and locked it shut. His space became silent as he waited for a lumbering transport to get out of his way. The propwash buffeted his ship while he flipped switches and wished he had another arm as he proceeded at thirty mph, steering with the pedals. His eyes darted from the T.V. screen to the instruments, to the heat rippling runway.

When tower cleared him, Pete pulled out and waited for Jack who pulled up on his right at the head of the runway.

"Bongo two four go around," the radio said. It clicked twice and tower said: "Let's go, Alpha One." A wobbling fighter screamed over at 50 feet, performing a last second "go-around" as Pete and Jack got it together on the runway. Pete looked up at Bongo Two Four as it passed overhead. He could hear a faint hiss but it wasn't as loud as his breathing.

"Let's go," Pete barked. He shoved both throttles forward. He ground his teeth as he strained, fighting the engines with the brakes, with his leg and back muscles,

keeping the ship still while he made a final instrument check before flying off into vector-space of headings and dials and the video display which told him where he was and what he was doing.

"Now," Pete said. He jumped off the brakes as the two planes crept into motion, slowly crushing the pilots back in their seats.

When the plane felt like it wanted to fly, Pete checked the airspeed and said, "Rotate." They were flying with their eyes for now, actually seeing where they were going as they pulled the sticks back between their legs. The two ships pointed noses high and then inched into the air. At two thousand feet, Pete steered to a heading of 015 degrees and pulled the throttles back slowly so Jack wouldn't hit him. He stretched his legs, then looked down at the shrinking Rockes and smiled. He wished that his wife could understand that flying the 12 was better than not flying at all. But he'd made his decision and there was no mileage in regretting it now. She was right in a way, too. He was losing his nerve in a way, getting scared or intimidated or confused by this plane. It wasn't the old sort of fear; it wasn't the old sort of adrenalin fear that comes from having a gun pointed at you, but something else that comes from trying to remember too much too exactly, that makes you hesitate or hit the wrong button.

The F-12 was pointed to the left of the sun, low and brilliant, reflecting off the nose and illuminating the tiny scratches in the canopy. Pete looked at the mountains now, now that he was an airplane and momentarily freed of his career.

"Going on the PMI," he told Jack, and Jack said, "Roger dodger," because that was Jack's sense of humor. Jack fell back a mile or so as they both flipped the switch and the PMI, as they called K2r, took over the flying.

Then the orders appeared on the screen, the 8X12 inch screen between their legs. The green letters appeared one at a time like on a teletype, building suspense as the pilots watched to find out what they were doing. Today's mission was fighter intercept as usual, over the north ice-cap at 70,000 feet. They would spend two hours in the featureless space over the pole where the only references would be the white below and the blue everywhere else. They'd have to rely on the numbers to know where they were, the heading, airspeed, and altitude numbers, the distance from and the heading to Thule, Greenland numbers. They'd have to rely on the screen on K2r, in a space without objects a space inhabited only by abstractions and two voices. But there was a kind of power or freedom in being so far above and away from the world. There was a sort of safety in being free from the usual domestic thoughts and worries which can unexpectedly throw you

back to one of those uneasy moments that you never do straighten out.

The PMI displayed the new heading as the plane automatically banked and turned. In the lower left corner it said that there were no targets. The F-12's wings were glowing faint orange.

Pete unsnapped his oxygen mask and let it hang from his helmet. He lit a cigarette. They kept telling him that the plane would blow up if he smoked in it. One of the engineers must have been a non-smoker. Probably Jimmy Stewart himself, Pete thought, but he was wrong.

Al Barnard had made up the no smoking rule because he didn't smoke and because it irritated some of the pilots.

"Hey, Jack," Pete said. He held the mask up to his mouth so he could talk into the microphone. "You back there?"

"Sure am. You know a three-letter word for sea eagle?" There was the rattling sound of a newspaper in the background.

"No."

"Four-letter word for uncommon?"

"Nope. Hold on."

Townes blinked as the F-12 flew into a bank of cirrus clouds. The puffs caused a four-cycle strobe. He pulled the stick back but the plane wouldn't climb. It just kept

punching through the house-sized puffs. Pete flinched at each of them until he was out in the open again.

"How'd you turn off the PMI that time?" Pete asked.

"Which time?"

"When you went to Butte?"

"Oh. Breakers 8 and 4. Wanna try?"

"Nope."

"Come on. It'd be fun."

"I'd get courtmartialled."

"Nah. I'll handle Barnard."

"How?"

Jack's radio had clicked dead and the PMI was telling Pete to check his breakers and then it told him to look and see if Jack was still there but Pete still didn't have control of the plane so he couldn't turn around. It must have been some kind of bug in the program.

Jack's ship appeared up in front of Pete. It rolled clockwise fifteen times or so and then once the other way before it drifted back out of sight. The PMI was stuck on its order to look for Starrayck.

"See," Jack said. "Didn't even piss it off."

"Oh, yeah," Pete said. The screen had started flashing, fast like a discotheque.

"Just the breaker," Jack said and sure enough the screen returned to its "check breakers" message and then went blank. After a moment of steady blackboard green, it started

flashing again and Pete said, "Oh, Oh," and then Jack said, "Oh, Oh," too and they watched the screen for news, waited to learn if this was the start of an intercept, one of the ball-breaking, simulated intercepts where they'd take speed, methadrine, to get their hearts going so they could keep fighting when all their blood was drained into their legs as they chased a decoy with the Denker System trying to tell them that the orange drone was really a Russian Mig. They were usually too busy with procedures to even take a good look at it. Pete understood why Jack had boomed Phillipsburg. Pete often got angry enough to go into a dive and sweep the ship's shock wave across ranches and pastures. What he still didn't understand was how Jack got away with it. It must have had something to do with the time Jack spent at Rand.

The planes broke into a right turning climb, pushing Pete and Jack down into their seats as the G-suit started pumping up and the G-meter fluctuated around "5." The sun was burning his face through the green tinted lens of the helmet. The sky was a deep rich ultraviolet. Pete looked for stars, but he wasn't high enough to see them. He looked for the ground but it was covered by a silky cloud deck.

The 12's went into afterburner, surged forward and growled. The screen changed from green to yellow and started to pulsate slowly.

INTCPT

MIG25

180

179 seconds. . .appeared on the screen.

"Wants us to play with the drone," Pete said as he studied the red and black circuit breaker panel. The PMI was flying both the F-12's and the distant black drone through gentle turns. It would turn the 12 back to Pete in a few minutes but it would retain control of the drone and drive it into an impossible 20G turn when they finally got close enough to shoot it down.

"Hold onto your hemorrhoids," Jack said. "We're gonta get this one. I'll chase 'em and you head 'em off." Jack pulled the breakers and ran the ship up to mach 3.

The target's heading, airspeed, bearing, and all were displayed in yellow next to the arming checklists. The lists went by too fast as the oscillating got faster, now orange, then red, the beeper forcing it on. Pete performed indifferently as Jack tried to head-off the decoy, playing a numbers' game with the dials and buttons and the screen, not looking outside. His exhaust was glowing blue with full power.

Then the PMI went into the psychological conditioning that Barnard had installed to counteract G forces by pissing off the pilots and raising their blood pressure.

"Pete," it said. It displayed a portrait of his family. "You haven't been paying enough attention to your family, Pete." But Pete ignored it so the PMI set off the fire alarm, the rectangular patch on the panel flashing, "FIRE, FIRE, FIRE," but that was an old one too and Pete didn't bite. Then it started playing around with the pre-arming checklist and after being sent back to "go" twice, he was ready to get mad but he looked up and sighted what he expected to be an orange drone, but this one was black. It looked like the real thing so he accepted the methadrine that the PMI fed him, rubbed his nose through the mask, eager to engage a real enemy and maybe get his number four as the PMI turned the plane over to him.

"Try an force 'em north," Jack said.

"Real Mig," Pete grunted back from the middle of a 7G turn. His vision was turning grey as he pulled the plane's nose up and to the right so he could point at the bastards tailpipe and shoot him with one of the heat seekers, but the Mig seemed to know he was there and tried to out-turn him as the G-suit pumped hard as a football, cutting off circulation to his lower half, sending all the blood toward his brain as he tightened his stom ch and chest muscles, grunt breathing to get a little more blood up to his brain because the G's were pulling his eyelids down, and what he could see was getting more fuzzy and grey and his mind was

cloudy but he was out-turning the Mig and maintaining range and about to start the firing sequence as the F-12 rolled upright. The PMI was, once again, blue.

"Disarm Weapons," it explained as the plane slowed.
"This is an exercise."

"Which breaker was that?" Pete asked.

"Eight and four," Jack said. "Shit," he added, "had 'em lined up and he pulled into one of those turns. Flipped the breaker back to call you up 'an the PMI put me in this loop. Conta pull 'em again. You get a shot?" Pete had pulled numbers four and eight. He had put in full power. At the moment he didn't care whether his kill was a Mig or a drone. He just wanted to shoot something down.

The breaker message flashed on his screen as he closed on his target, pulling on eight, 10 G's as it tried to out-turn him. Pete flicked switches until the weapons armed light went on and Pete pulled the trigger.

The missile wobbled like a crooked arrow as Pete eased off on the power so he could see better. The missile straightened out and turned to the target, which it reached seconds later. It flew right past the drone that Jack had had his buddies paint black as a going-away present for Pete. The missile detonated into an orange sphere which the drone

flew into, the orange fading to debris speckled smoke and nothing else, metal pieces falling out of the cloud.

"Told you," Jack shouted. "There you go, Pete. You got him. Number four."

"Yhy," Pete said. His G-meter said one but Pete was feeling dizzy, like a herd of elephants was tromping on his chest. Breathing became difficult, and he pushed the breakers on for the second time. The PMI was impatient about its checklists. Pete tried to open the chest of his jump suit, but he couldn't move.

"Must be out of sequence," he thought, and then he died from his heart attack.

K2r missed them.

It told ground control that the pilots and the drone were malfunctioning. One of them had an electrical problem and the other wasn't using oxygen or doing his checklists. K2r told ground control that if they didn't get a flight controller in the circuit, it was going to have to fly Pete's plane itself, and it had limitations; it couldn't do landings.

So ground control flew him back. Someone wished that there were a way to eject Pete from the ground.

They turned off the PMI and flew him home fast, at high altitude, as Jack Starryck talked to the control room.

Jack pulled up on Pete's ship and saw that Pete was limp and blue.

Ground control flew him south along the continental divide and brought the ship down to the runway where it flared for a two point landing twenty feet off the ground as the men in the tower ducked under desks and the fire crews hid behind their trucks. There was some sort of bug in the electronics.

Jack Starruck was right above Pete, rocking his ship right and left so he could look down. He told ground control to put in full burner but Jack knew that it was futile. Pete's ship didn't have enough power to fly that slow.

Nose pointed high, first hovering on the blue exhaust flame, Pete's 12 proceeded to wobble right then left like a lazy cobra. The sabre dance lasted a full twenty seconds.

The nose tucked under and the plane pitched over once, the fireball rolling down the runway at a hundred fifty mph until pieces of metal flew out of it and scattered on ahead. They settled, igniting the brush where they landed.

"Assholes," Jack said as the fireball subsided. He made another pass at the runway. He landed and taxied right up to his car in the parking lot.

When the green fire trucks came and sprayed white foam on everything and the technicians started putting the plane pieces and all into boxes, Al Barnard was already working on it, working on a seat that could be ejected from the ground and working on a way to make sure that the crash got blamed on Jimmy Stewart. Stewart would try to pin it all on Al. Neither of them would ever say that their little deal was over; it would just end like a bad marriage or a peace treaty.

It was Pearl Harbor Day for Stewart. Al and Rand would no longer support Stewart by saying that the F-12 was America's best fighter. They'd say it had promise, but they'd also say that Stewart had been over-enthusiastic, that Stewart had distorted their findings. The National Security Agency had a new assignment.