

The apartment was empty. So was she. But not for long.

VASSI

By ART LEWIS

ILLUSTRATED BY RITTER

THE APARTMENT is called a single. It contains a Murphy bed, a chest of drawers, an overstuffed chair, a sofa, a coffee table, a seventeen-inch television set, a bookcase partially filled with the volumes A through F of an encyclopedia from the super-market, assorted paperback books, and a radio that doesn't work. In the ceiling is a fixture with two twenty-five-watt bulbs. A short hallway leads to the bathroom and the kitchen.

Julia Fenway stood outside her apartment, fumbling in her bag for her keys. She had never had any trouble finding her keys before. Her purse was always neat and orderly. And she was breathing hard. Breathing hard from the short walk from the bus at the cor-

ner and down the long corridor to the private, the lonesome apartment door.

Those keys! Where are those keys! I'm becoming a regular pack rat lately. Look at that bag! Did you ever see so much junk? She thrust her hand deep inside and felt around. A crumpled kleenex, worn-out lipstick, change purse, pencils, movie stubs . . . a coldness, the keys. Her heart was pounding. She pressed the hand with the keys to her bosom. It *was* pounding. At least it was working.

She managed to get the door open just as the landlady's door down the hall gushed forth cooked cabbage odor and Mrs. Shultz stuck her head out. Julia closed her door behind her until she heard the lock click. Of all the people in

the world, why was it the Mrs. Shultzes she attracted?

At the sound of the lock, the cat, Belle, poked her head out of the kitchen. She walked lazily into the room, rubbing her side along the wall to scratch off the sleep. Then she leaped to the top of the dresser and started to wash herself.

JULIA STOOD with her back against the door. Her arms, tired of reaching out, hung limply against her sides. A ray of sunlight streamed through the partly open window and a little pool of it snuggled on her pillow. It had been such a long ride in from Beverly Hills and on two buses. She had sat in the back where it wasn't so crowded and the smell of exhaust was still in her nostrils.

She walked over to the dresser and put her purse down beside the cat and ran her fingers caressingly through the soft fur. Belle took a swipe with a hind paw. Julia rested her head on the dresser.

"I'm going to die, Belle."

The cat sat up and lifted a front paw. She washed it with little delicate strokes from her tongue.

Julia moved over to the bed and sat down on the edge of it. She slipped her shoes off. Her feet hurt. They always hurt in heels. Why does one get dressed up to see the doctor? He could have told her she had

six months to live while she was wearing flats.

He didn't actually blurt it out as I walked in the door. He fooled around under that sheet for a long time. And then he said it. No, not then either. He just looked pained and hurt and a little white around the lips and he told me to get dressed and come into his office. He had the lab reports on his desk and he pounded on them and he said you're as good as dead now!

I wish he had! Then I could hate him. I could hate instead of feeling numb all over. He didn't want to tell me anything. Just get ready for an operation. No, there really wasn't any rush. But soon. And then I dragged it out of him. I insisted I had a right to know. It was my life. No, I don't have any family here. No one . . . no one! A brother in New York. Don't call him! The doctor stammered like a schoolboy who's unprepared in class.

Julia fell back on the bed. She stared at the unlighted ceiling fixture. She should cry, but she'd cried in the doctor's office and there was nothing left to cry. Six months to live. Maybe only five months. Certainly no more than seven with the operation.

A spring in the bed got her in the back. She ought to tell Mrs. Shultz to fix that. She certainly didn't want to spend her last six months sleeping

on a loose spring. Spend her last six months!

She turned over on her stomach and pressed her face into the blanket. Her body was rigid. She tried to contemplate her own death. She should call her brother. No, she would die first.

"Hello, excuse me, my name is Vassi."

Julia raised her head and looked around the room. It was empty.

"Would you say this is a typical prior dwelling?"

Julia sat up. There was no one.

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that possibility. I suppose we don't have a similar frame of reference. You'll never understand my thoughts."

SHE GOT off the bed. She walked around the room and her stocking feet made little padded sounds on the cotton carpet. Then she crossed to the door of the apartment and pressed her ear against it.

"Are you a ventriloquist?" she said.

"A ventriloquist? Oh, my, no. I'm an historian." The voice was in her head.

"I'm insane." It had to happen. She touched her fingertips to her mouth.

"Is that so? That's too bad. We're over and done with that sort of thing."

"I'll wash my face with cold water. It must be the strain.

I shouldn't have forced the doctor . . ."

"You *are* alone, aren't you? I looked around rather carefully. I didn't see anyone except that . . . that thing on that piece of furniture."

Julia looked at Belle. The cat was asleep on the dresser. She started to walk to the bathroom but stopped in front of the bed and sat down. Her head was going to burst.

"Please" she said. "Please stop."

"I really don't want to intrude. But I have my recorder right here. It won't take long and then I must move on. Now I notice you're fully dressed. Most remarkable. We always thought you prior people indulged in sex orgies almost continuously."

"My God!"

"Your thoughts are confused. Is it because you're insane? You haven't had much experience in thought projection, have you?"

Julia jumped from the bed and ran into the bathroom. She locked the door behind her and turned on the cold water full force. She cupped her hands under the faucet and plunged her face into the cascading coldness.

My name is Julia Fenway. I'm a file clerk at Continental Insurance. I'm going to die and I'm not preoccupied with sex.

She turned off the faucet and stared into the sink. The

water gathered into a little whirlpool and disappeared down the drain. There was a knock on the bathroom door.

The voice was in her head. "I wonder if I could see that. We have some rather indistinct writings on running water. I'd like to bring them up to date."

The cold water didn't help. If anything, it was worse now. The knocking came from the door. She was sure of it. But the voice . . . the voice was inside her.

"May I come in?"

Julia sat down on the edge of the tub. She squeezed her head between her hands. I don't deserve this. What did I do to deserve this?

"Please. I'm on a tight schedule."

"So am I! Go away!" She was talking to it. She was talking to the voice in her head.

Then it was very quiet. Julia watched the door, waiting for someone to walk through its solidness. Nothing happened. She lowered her head and started to count the tiny tiles in the floor.

If I count one row very carefully, it will take me five minutes, two rows ten minutes, three rows . . .

She started to count.

AS SHE was midway through the fourth row, the voice said, "I don't think you realize the importance of

my visit. We recognize your right of privacy, but don't you feel in this case . . . ?"

Julia jumped up and pulled open the door. "Let me die in peace!"

She ran into the other room and stood in the middle of it, looking all around, breathing hard. Belle leaped down from the dresser, her doze finished, and rubbed against Julia's leg.

The water in the bathroom was running.

She hadn't shut it off. But she had. She had.

The water started again. It stopped. It started. It stopped.

"How quaint."

There is someone here!

"Who are you?"

"Vassi."

"Vassi?"

"I'm chief historian, research division. It's my first trip in time. The scientists have been playing around with this thing for years and they've only just let us take it over."

A time traveler! Julia stood very still. Her eyes searched the room slowly once again. The window was open about three inches. Too small for anyone to squeeze through. The door was locked from the inside. There was absolutely no one in the room. In her desperate state, she was hunting for an out. She was involved in a fairy story. Her body started to relax.

"I can't see you, Mr. Vassi."

I can't accept death. I'm looking for escape.

"You can't see me? I'm standing right in front of you."

"I can't see you."

"I don't understand. I can see you. Here, take my hand."

For a moment, Julia hoped. There was nothing.

"Why, I can't touch you!"

Not even a breath of wind.

Julia walked over to the dresser and took a package of cigarettes out of her handbag. She carried it over to the sofa and sat down.

"You walked through me!"

She lit the cigarette, inhaled deeply and blew out the smoke in a long steady stream. When she was a little girl and she had a sharp pain in her side, her mother would say it's only gas, hold on, it'll pass.

She would hold on . . . Mother, help me!

The voice in her head. "I wish I had paid more attention to those scientists. What was it they said? I had so much to do before I left. Something about transporting living matter . . . Are you *sure* I'm invisible?"

"I can't see you."

"Do you people have trouble with your eyes? No, that's not it. I can't touch you. And I'd expected to bring back some artifacts. I am terribly disappointed."

"I'm sorry."

"And well you might be.

It's going to be extremely difficult going around asking people a lot of questions when they can't see me. You must have had quite a start."

"Stop it! Stop it! My head. Oh, dear God, my head!" Julia got up. "I'm going out!"

"You are having trouble with the thought projection. I'll sit down and be quiet for a moment."

THE voice stopped. Julia paused at the door. The room was quiet. Breathing! She heard breathing. Her own? She held her breath. It was there in the room. She was sure of it.

It was a whisper in her throat. "You are real."

The faucet, the water, the knock on the door. "You are real!"

If she held on, it would pass like gas. "You are real!"

She moved trancelike back into the room.

"You see me now."

"No. I heard you breathe."

"Can you touch me?"

"No."

She heard her own blood in her ears. Her own breath forced itself between her lips. His breathing was gone. It was a dream.

She said, "You're gone."

"Over here on the arm of the couch."

She turned. She fought to silence herself. She heard the soft breathing from the direction of the couch.

"Who are you, Mr. Vassi?"

"It's just Vassi, no mister. I already told you who and what I am."

"A time traveler from some distant future," she said.

"Most of your records disappeared in the final war. We want to pick up the traces. Best way to do that is to travel back in time."

"It sounds like such a long way. How long?"

If it was true, it was a miracle. If it wasn't . . . Julia, you're a realist!

"It would be a meaningless term for you. It's an age, an eon away."

Julia sat down on the edge of the overstuffed chair. She noticed a faint layer of dust on the coffee table. The apartment looked messy with the bed out of the wall. Ever since the first visit to the doctor three weeks ago, she hadn't thought of cleaning.

"I'm afraid the apartment doesn't look very presentable."

"Aren't you comforted to know that the world has survived?"

"But I won't survive." She looked at the dust again. "You see, I don't do much entertaining."

"Is that so? I wouldn't know. Do you mind if I record our conversation?"

"I don't mind. It's nice to have someone to talk to, even if I can't see you." Julia, you're a realist!

"Yes. Well, that is a bother. Now would you mind telling me a few pertinent facts about civilization as you know it?"

"I don't think I know too much about that sort of thing," said Julia.

"I'D HOPED to land in the middle of a library of some sort . . ." His voice broke off. "You don't seem to have much of a collection of books here."

Julia said, "Are you near the bookcase?"

"No wonder the records didn't last, if this is the way they were kept."

"Vassi, can you touch the books?" She got up and went to the bookcase.

"Yes."

"Pick one up."

"They're no use to me. This isn't history."

"Pick one up!"

"I haven't got the time. I have to move on."

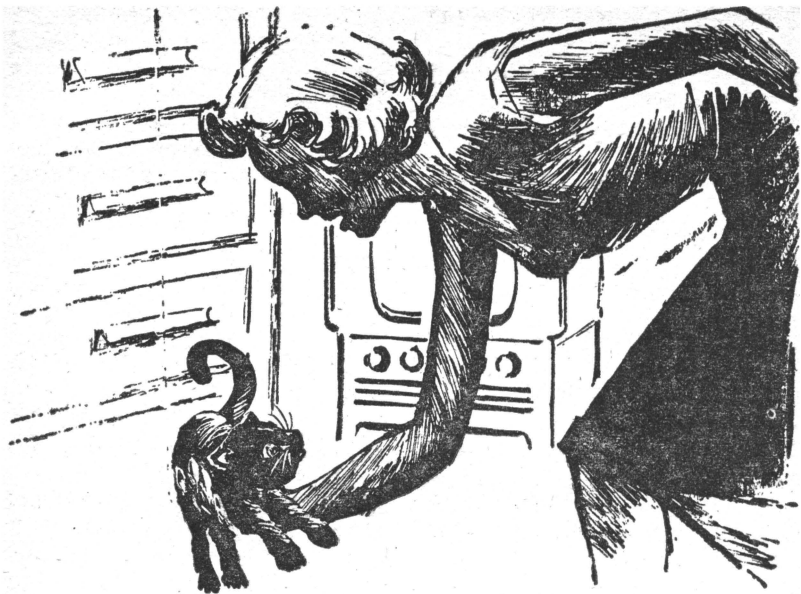
"Vassi, you touched the faucet, didn't you? And you knocked on the door."

"Yes . . . That *does* mean I can bring back artifacts!"

"Why can't you touch me?"

"Now I have to get to a place that will do me some good. A library, a store, isn't that what you call them? A museum . . . Are any of these things nearby?"

"Let me go with you. I'll be your guide. I'll—I'll show you my time."



"But won't you be uncomfortable? I'm invisible."

"I don't care! No one can steal you from me this way."

"Steal me?"

"Vassi, why can't you touch me!"

"I'm not too sure. I think it's because you're alive. You see, life is a transient thing. Matter is continuous in one form or another. Matter existing today always existed and will always exist, or something like that. I didn't listen too carefully. Anyhow, it's possible for someone to travel back in time but not ahead. Do I make myself clear? It's out of my line, you know."

Julia reached down and

scooped up Belle. "Can you touch her?"

"What is that?"

"My cat. Can you touch her?"

"A cat? My, the anatomists would love to see that! But it's the same as with you. My hand passes right through her."

Julia put Belle back on the floor. Her mind was racing.

Vassi said, "She's sitting right where I'm standing."

"I've got to believe it's not a nightmare. I've got to believe you're real and that you can help me."

"If I can do it quickly. I have so much else to do. Others are waiting to use the machine."

"Are people well where you come from?"

"Very well, thank you."

"Are there any incurable diseases?" She tried to listen for his breathing.

"Incurable? You mean sickness that doesn't respond to treatment? No, of course not."

"Then take me with you!" she cried.

"You just said you wanted to guide me here."

"Take me with you to your time."

"I can't do that. I can't even touch you."

"There must be a way. You have got to think of something."

"Even if I could take you, I'm not supposed to."

"Why?"

"It would mix up history to remove persons from their time. It might even be dangerous with artifacts. I suppose we couldn't hold onto them very long."

"History? I have no history. I'm going to die very soon. No one depends on me. I have no one. Please take me, Vassi."

"I feel very strange."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. I just feel—odd."

"How . . ."

"First you want to guide me, then you want to come with me, you don't care about mankind's survival. You sound so terrified and confused."

JULIA sank down on the couch. If only she could see him. "Don't leave me to die."

"How strange to talk about dying," said Vassi. "We all live so long we never think about it."

"You will take me with you, Vassi?"

"If people in your time have such short lives, then why does dying trouble you? It would seem a matter of course."

"Vassi, I haven't lived yet."

"This is out of my line. I'll tell you what. When I return, I'll talk to one of the scientists. If they're interested in the project, they'll send someone back."

"How long will that be?"

"Now let's see if I can figure in your time. Hmm . . . I'd say about a year . . ."

Julia closed her eyes. She felt dampness under the lids. Her voice was hollow as she spoke to the empty room. "I'll be dead in six months."

And the voice in her head echoed, "Six months . . ."

"Vassi, isn't there someone you can talk to now?"

He didn't answer her.

Julia looked around the room. "Vassi, are you still here? Vassi? Vassi, if you don't talk, I can't tell if you're still here! Vassi, please answer me. Did I talk too much? I didn't mean to run on about my problems. I know you have a job to do. Maybe you

can squeeze me in. I don't want to keep you from your work. Vassi, you didn't go, did you? You didn't leave me! Don't leave. I believe in you. I believe in you . . ."

And now she had the aloneness she had longed for. He was gone and she would be left with the Mrs. Schultzes and the doctor.

She went from the living room to the kitchen to the bathroom and back into the living room, listening, hoping to catch the small sound of his breathing. But her body would not be quiet and she heard nothing except herself.

She stood for a long while looking down at the bed. The sunlight drifted from the pillow onto the covers and finally spilled off the foot of the bed onto the floor and the room was a shade darker. She was a stone, but a stone whose blood gurgled and stomach rumbled and heart beat and pulse pounded, so loudly she could hear nothing else.

Her legs gave way and she crumpled to the bed and she was silent at last.

The breathing came from the direction of the window.

She spoke into the covers. "Vassi, why didn't you answer me?"

"You tempt me and I have so much to do, so much ground to cover."

"You can come back."

"We haven't got enough of these time centers. There's

quite a lineup to use them. If I go now, there's no telling how long it'll take me to get back."

Julia got up and went to the window. "Am I facing you?"

"Yes."

"You're my only hope, wild as it seems. Vassi, wouldn't it be helpful to your research to have a real live person from my time to study?"

VASSI spoke slowly. "You mean you would be willing to have us—study you?"

"Within limits . . . No, not within limits."

"They'll be very angry if I come back without my research project."

"Are people that cold in your time?" asked Julia.

"Cold?" Vassi repeated in bewilderment.

"Heartless?"

"Heartless? I hardly think so."

"I mean callous, without pity, without compassion."

"I've been very busy. I haven't thought about it."

"Do men and women marry in your time?"

"Yes, they do."

"Are you married?"

"No, you see, I'm not very—presentable. Besides, I have my research."

"To me you're the most beautiful man in the world."

"You can't see me. If you saw me, you wouldn't think so."

"I can hear you. That's all I need."

Julia turned from the window and walked back to the couch. When she sat down she could feel herself trembling. Never, never in her life had she spoken to a man like that. Maybe, if she could see him, his eyes would be mocking her.

She said, "If you take me back with you, then later when I'm well I could come back with you and show you everything you would want to see. Then I could be your guide."

He was standing in front of her. She could hear him breathing again. There was excitement in his breathing; she was sure of it.

He said, "I wish I could touch you. You're very beautiful."

"Vassi, in my own time I'm ugly. Perhaps I belong in your time."

Then the excitement that was in his breathing was in his voice. "All right. All right. I'll see what I can do. You wait right here. It may take me several years to get back. But I'll do it if I can . . ."

"Several years! Vassi, I can't wait that long!" She was very near despair.

"No, no, you don't understand. In your time it'll only be a matter of minutes. The controls would be set to right now, however long it may

take to have the project approved in my time."

The room was quiet. A slight breeze drifted in through the open window. Julia sat very still on the couch for a few moments. Belle rubbed herself against the coffee table and then climbed into Julia's lap.

She had to hold on. She had to believe. A world with no illness. A world where people live practically forever. A world with Vassi.

She scratched the cat behind the ears. Belle started to purr softly.

"Belle," Julia said, "what am I going to do with you? Vassi will think of something. He's coming back, Belle. He's coming back and he'll take both of us with him."

She picked up the cat and put it on the couch. Then she got up and went to the mirror over the dresser. She pushed her hair back from her face.

He said I was beautiful. Not even my mother ever said I was beautiful. What will they think at the office when I don't come in tomorrow or even phone? They won't think anything. They'll get Sheila with the black hair and the big bust to do my work and they won't think about me at all.

Even *that* one didn't say I was beautiful. Not even right after I moved in here and he was a little drunk and he could have said it then. Then,

of all times, but he didn't. He just looked a little ashamed, maybe disgusted afterward, and he talked about being late for a dinner appointment.

THERE was a knock on the door. Julia whirled from the mirror. Vassi must have gotten a little off course. She hadn't thought of that possibility. She walked quickly to the door.

"Vassi?" she asked.

"It's me, Mrs. Shultz."

"What do you want?"

"You went to the doctor today. I expected you'd come by. Tell me, how are you?"

"Go away."

"Julia, open up. Maybe I can do something for you."

"Go away. Please go away."

"You're not feeling so well?"

"No."

"Bad news, maybe?"

"I don't want to see anyone, Mrs. Shultz."

"I understand. I'll come back later."

Footsteps went down the hallway. A door opened. The sound of a television set. A door closed.

Vassi, hurry! I don't know whether or not it really happened. I'm not sure now, Vassi. I am going out of my mind. I am clutching at straws. Come back, Vassi. Come back. Reassure me.

"They said it would work."

"Vassi!"

"They said it would work,

but it sounds like a terrible risk. We'll do it with the cat first."

"Vassi, where are you?"

"Right in front of you. Now listen carefully."

"Are you going to take me with you?"

"We'll try the cat first. If it works with the cat, then we'll try you."

Julia was trembling. "What do I do?"

"The first thing we have to do is kill the cat."

"What are you talking about!"

"When the cat is dead, it will become as inanimate an object as any of those books over there. In that state I should be able to transport it to my time. There the doctors will revive it. Everything is ready."

"I can't kill my cat!"

"If it works, it's only temporary."

"And if it doesn't work?" she whispered.

"I'd rather it be the cat than you."

"I never dreamed . . ."

"We'll have to hurry. They are waiting."

"I can't kill Belle."

"You're not killing her. You're transporting her."

The tears were in Julia's eyes again. "It's crazy. I'm crazy."

"Look, I'd do it, but I can't physically touch the cat."

"I know. I know."

"They said suffocation was

best. It leaves fewer complications."

JULIA bent down and picked up the cat. Her tears fell on the animal's fur. She held it close to her. The cat was quiet, unknowing.

Julia said, "Do me first."

"Even if I could, I would not," said Vassi. "The cat first."

"I've had her since she was a kitten, a little round ball with a button for a nose. I can't do this to her. If it does not work . . . This is my madness, not hers!"

"What were you going to do with her six months from now?"

"Six months . . . Alone, she would be left alone . . . Belle has never been alone except for the hours when I'm at work. Who would take care of her? She's such a fussy eater. I have to feed her liver from my hand . . ."

"You'll be together."

"Together . . ."

"Take one of the pillows on the bed. Don't think about it! Do it!"

Julia carried Belle over to the bed. As she tried to put it down, one of its claws became entangled in her dress. The cat started to struggle as if finally awakened. Julia reached over for a pillow. Sweat stood out on her forehead. Her tears blinded her. She saw the mass of fur. She saw the softness. The claws

were freed. She brought the pillow down over Belle.

Julia blacked out, sprawled across the pillow.

She couldn't have been out long. She pulled herself from the bed. The pillow was on the floor. Belle was gone.

Vassi's voice was in her head. "It worked! The anatomists are wild! I've never seen so much excitement!"

"Belle is all right?"

"Wonderful. It took them no time at all to revive her. The laboratory is a bedlam. Everyone wants to examine her."

"How should I do it? I'll never be able to suffocate myself." She laughed a little. "I can't even turn on the gas range. Mine is electric."

She looked around the apartment. If she slashed her wrists there would be too much blood. She hated blood. The thought of poison repelled her. Wait—she had it.

She pulled one of the sheets off the bed and twisted it. She pushed the overstuffed chair into the center of the room and stood on one of the arms to attach an end of the sheet to the ceiling fixture. At the other end she made a noose.

There was a knock on the door again.

"Julia, if you're not well, it's no good you should be alone," Mrs. Schultz said.

Julia slipped the noose over her head.

"Vassi, do you love me?"

"Of course. I just hope you'll love me."

Mrs. Schultz knocked hard. "Julia, I hear you talking. I know you're home. Let me in. I have some soup for you."

"Vassi, do you think I'm beautiful?"

"The most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

Mrs. Schultz pounded on the door. "Julia, why don't you answer me?"

As Julia stepped off the arm of the chair, she saw the open window. A thought crossed her mind before the noose tightened. Belle could have jumped out of the window when I passed out. *Julia, you're a realist!*

MR. SHULTZ put down the pot of soup and opened the door.

The apartment is called a single. It consists of a Murphy bed, a chest of drawers, an overstuffed chair, a sofa, a coffee table, a seventeen-inch television set, a bookcase partially filled with the volumes A through F of an encyclopedia from the supermarket, and assorted paperback books, and a radio that doesn't work. In the ceiling is a fixture with two twenty-five-watt bulbs. From the fixture hangs a twisted sheet with a hangman's knot in the end of it. The noose is quite empty. So is the apartment.

END

ART LEWIS

