That everybody tended to behave largely as though he were not there did not dismey Harrison. It would have been nice, of course, if somebody seemed to know who he was . . . but what was terrifying was the revelation that he himself had only the mistiest idea on the subject.

A TIME TO KEEP

by Kate Wilhelm

Harrison had been with the English department of the university for twenty-five of his fifty-five years, and for twenty-two of those years he had been a widower; beyond that no one seemed to know anything about Harrison. He had a penchant for turning the conversation from himself, not as if he had anything to conceal, but rather as if there never before had been anything to be discussed.

He was, away from the university, like a policeman out of uniform, seen with only partial recognition by his fellow faculty members, and never noted at all by his students. In a vague, semi-conscious manner he was aware of his own insignificance and once even tried to grapple with it by volunteering to serve on a faculty committee investigating intramural gambling. His contribution to the study lay in a prominent position on his desk for several weeks, then less prominently on an easily accessible book shelf, from there to a file, and finally was burned, uncalled for and unread. He never volunteered again.

He was sitting at his desk, grading papers, when Miss Frazer knocked lightly on his door. She knocked a second time and thrust her homely face around it. "I said, do you want a lift across the bridge? It's raining."

"Thank you," he said looking up quickly, almost guiltily. "Are you leaving now?"

"Fifteen minutes or so. Don't hurry." She checked his clock over the door with her watch and added, "I'll be in the faculty lounge."

Harrison clipped together the papers he had finished and slid them into his briefcase along with his books. It was four twenty-five. The wind drove the rain against
his windows in violent, erratic flurries of activity and he sat watching it for a few seconds thinking it was kind of Miss Frazer always to remember him when the weather was bad. No one else ever had.

He closed the venetian blinds on the windows then and flicked the wall switch, shrouding the small office in deep shadows with only the rectangular, elongated streak of light that shone through the transom to relieve the darkness of the early October evening. Harrison grasped the door handle and opened the door.

... He was walking against the driving rain, his head ducked low in an effort to catch the most part of the onslaught in his hat brim. The bridge stretched endlessly before him, bare of traffic, devoid of light, only the faint wavering house lights on the far side to show that it did indeed have an end. He felt the cold rain seeping into his shoes, pressing his trousers against his legs in a clammy embrace. His chest cringed back into itself as the frigid water soaked through his suit coat, into his shirt and plastered it tightly against his body. He could feel himself shivering deep inside and lengthened his stride watching his feet slosh through rivulets of forging water that covered his shoes. The lights seemed as far as ever from him, he thought with a mild thrill of sur-
prise when he raised his eyes again. Now his thighs felt warm and tight with the strenuous pace he maintained and incredulously there was a tingle of excitement that ran through him. He lifted his head and let the rain sting his face with immeasurably fast, icy needles that only touched and tested and didn't pierce. It felt good, and he walked head up in the furious rain. The house lights shone brightly as the wind ebbed, only to fade and become ghost-like as a new curtain of water obscured them once more. Their distance didn't seem to have changed. Harrison walked steadily, unthinking, face on into the rain.

He heard a cry of fear and pain ahead of him before he could see anything in the lightless dusk. Then he did see figures; two youngsters, teen agers, and an elderly man. One of the boys was nearly six feet tall, looked as if he belonged on the campus football team; he was holding the old man by his arms, smiling. Harrison tore his eyes away from that incongruously sweet smile of the boy to look instead at the other one. Shorter, lighter than the one holding the man, he was rifling through his pockets rapidly, but thoroughly. When it appeared there would be too little to be of consequence, he began to swear in a vicious, tremulous voice and his right hand lashed out to swipe again and again at the pain-con-
torted face of his victim. The man groaned and went limp, his arms outstretched in the hands of the tall, athletic youth. The boy let him go and very slowly he crumpled to the concrete. Water swirled over his hands, made a rust colored eddy about his head, was dammed up by his body. The boys turned together and looked at Harrison. The tall one was still smiling, and he looked like an angel discovering the delights of heaven. Harrison turned and ran. There was a door . . .

He slammed the door behind him and leaned against it trying to catch his breath. He turned from it dazed and blinking in the cold, daylight of the fluorescent rods on the ceiling of the hall. His clothes were dry, but he shivered still and his heart was pounding thunderously in his ears shaking his entire body with its force. Instinctively he looked at his watch and it was four twenty-seven. He drove home with Miss Frazer.

Characteristically he made an early appointment with his doctor and during the next weeks he managed to push the memory of the frightening hallucination back, behind other memories whose edges were long since blunted with polishing.

The next time was during the Christmas holiday. Snow lay in deceptively soft looking piles everywhere and where the streets and sidewalks appeared swept clean, there was a glistening overlay of ice. The telephone lines sagged with its weight, the wires encased in half inch translucent tubing. Trees dipped their branches to the ground and in the night silence the burdened branches cracked and splintered with nerve shattering, rifle blasts of noise. Long icicles pointed pale witches' fingers over every window and gathered in conspiratorial clusters at every corner of the eaves. Harrison sat staring out his study window, looking through the melted spot in the fairyland of frost tracings on the pane. He could see the tops of the university buildings in the distance across the bridge, looking as if they were hung from the indeterminant sky by thin ribbons of smoke from their chimneys. He wished that the holidays were over, had never even begun.

For nearly an hour he sat quietly, his book on his lap unopened, and when he turned his gaze once more to the window the small melted spot had frosted over. He held his hand against the window for a minute or so and looked again. The sun was still diffused to the point of nonexistence by the colorless, formless clouds and the light had an unreal glow to it.

He had some early term papers to read; several books had accumulated still in their wrappers, and his own library catalogue was incomplete, but he found a growing restlessness overwhelming
him. He decided he was hungry and since the woman who came in to clean and cook hadn’t been able to come over the icy roads, he’d have to do something about it himself. A feeling of relief accompanied the thought of being busy. He went through the hall to the kitchen and opened the door.

... The river bank was gentle in descent; nevertheless it was treacherous with its generous coating of ice. He edged along cautiously, sliding his feet several inches at a time rather than lifting them to walk. He heard laughter ahead of him and looked up in surprise. They were skating today. He watched in pleasure as the figures glided and darted effortlessly in a blur of flying scarves and stocking caps.

There were twelve children. He counted them and there were exactly twelve, laughing and shouting as they played. They were all very proficient, more so than the mediocre assortment the ice usually attracted, rather as if they were practicing for an ice carnival. He edged closer.

"There he is!" one of the little ones shouted excitedly. In a second they were all skating rapidly toward him. In consternation he glanced behind him to see if they might have sighted someone else he had missed, but it seemed obvious that he was their target. They converged on him and skates were thrust out toward him.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken," he started, but they appeared not to hear.

"Put them on! Put them on!" they chorused clapping their hands.

"I can't skate," Harrison protested trying to back away.

"How do you know that?" another voice asked interestedly.

He whirled about and stood face to face with a blond, bare headed girl. She had two red spots on her cheeks from the cold, and her eyes sparkled blue lights. "How do you know?" she repeated.

"I never did it," Harrison said simply.

"See. You don't really know, do you?" she answered logically. "Put them on."

Hands reached out eagerly to help with the skates and then he was skating hand in hand with the girl. They skated out to the center of the ice where the children made a circle around them. The children wore tight, vivid pants and high necked sweaters in the brightest colors he had ever seen: reds and yellows and blues so dazzling that they hurt his eyes almost. The girl was similarly dressed, her pants a screaming orange, her sweater forget-me-not blue that wasn’t as clear as her eyes. He was aware of himself fleetingly, of his baggy old slacks
that were no longer presentable enough for school, of his grey, shrunken sweater that had one elbow out. But as he looked into the deep, shining eyes of the girl he forgot; he knew only that he was warm and vital.

"Who are you?"

"Gabrielle. Come, we must lead them."

"Why?"

"They expect it of us. This way."

She led him and they were streaking across the ice faster and faster, and behind them, as if attached with invisible cords, the children followed in a serpentine line. Gabrielle turned on one skate and was facing him, both of her hands in his. "You're quite good," she said.

"Where did you and these children come from? I've never seen you about before."

She laughed and her hair whipped about her head hiding her face for a moment. She said, "We're leaving them too far behind. Let's go back."

"No!"

She laughed again and was off and away from him before he could turn around. The children were brilliant specks on the white glare of the ice far in the distance. He pumped harder and harder to catch up with Gabrielle. "Wait for me! We'll go to my house and have hot chocolate. It's just over there!"

She smiled over her shoulder and nodded. The children were doll sized now and he could begin to make out their features once more. He waved to them and they all waved back, their voices, faint with distance, seemed to be joined in a song.

Harrison sang too, feeling a surge of power flow through his legs as he sped over the ice. He felt free and clean and strong and he marveled at his ability to skate so well. Ahead Gabrielle had joined the youngsters and all together they were coming to meet him. Their blades flashed in unison and he looked down to see his own blades cutting through the ice. His heart froze within him. There was a crack and even as he watched, it grew wider and he could see the swift, black water below. He turned to his left away from it and watched it appear silently, magically, as a thin, black line separating the two halves of the river.

"Gabrielle! Get off! Get off!" he called frantically, but the children sang and waved and he knew they didn't hear. He pointed down at the growing, widening crack, and they laughed. Now they were close enough to see the half-dollar sized red spots on their cheeks, to see the color of their eyes and the whiteness of their teeth.

"Get off! Off! he screamed over and over as he clambered for the bank, his feet slipping from under
him again and again. The crack now appeared to be frozen lightning, streaking out in many directions, sending erratic patterns up and down the length of the river.

Gabrielle and the children skated on and beyond them a cake of ice up-ended and disappeared into the torrent. Then another and another was swallowed silently and still they skated toward him. In horror he watched as the cracks appeared on their ice and one by one they were isolated from each other. He was falling again and desperately he lunged out to grab a stump on the river’s edge. When he turned again he saw Gabrielle standing still on the other side. Her eyes followed the progress of the cracks and then turned to meet his. She seemed to be waiting. The children, for the first time, appeared to realize what was happening and they turned panic stricken faces toward Harrison. He could but stare back, the words dead in his throat.

Gabrielle was out of her skates and bare footed, running swiftly across the gaping breaches gathering them before her. Together they leaped across the last of the cracks and stood on the opposite bank. They didn’t look back.

Harrison cried out, “Gabrielle!” She walked hand in hand with the youngsters, diminishing rapidly until he could see them no longer. He ran. He ran along the bank, his skates dropped, forgotten. He had to get across. His feet rang hollowly on the frozen bank and he ran and stumbled and ran again until his breath didn’t come, until his lungs heaved uselessly and he finally fell and lay still, gasping. Time didn’t exist and it might have been seconds or hours later when he pulled himself to his knees and looked about wildly. There was a light and he crawled to it, slipping and sliding, clawing at the ice, clutching at the air. His groping fingers found a handle and he fell inside the door almost unconscious.

He stumbled into his kitchen and collapsed into a white enamel chair with a red checked cushion. Behind him the door swung back and forth whispering past the frame and finally came softly to rest. He looked about him maniacally, hanging onto the table top, his breath coming in convulsive gulps and he felt as if his heart might explode. He still felt the cold ridges along one cheek, on both legs and arms and all up his body where he had lain on the ice.

“What's happening to me? My God, what's happening to me?” he whispered. “What’s happening?” he repeated under his breath and clutched at his face with both hands as if to blot out the memory.

He had another fruitless session with Dr. Glaston the day
before school resumed. Then the finals were in for grading; goodbyes had been exchanged with a class of personless students; faculty meetings were posted to plan for the coming semester. Now he attended every meeting there was; he welcomed Miss Frazer’s standing offer for a ride home and even accepted her invitation to dinner in her apartment.

He was surprised at himself at being there, and, being there, at enjoying himself. The meal had been delicious and Miss Frazer was amusing. She was nearing forty, a rather square figure that couldn’t be glamorized by her expensive clothes. Her hair was graying, but curled about her ears like a girl’s. She was new at the university, had traveled a good deal and could tell about it charmingly. Harrison was glad he had come. Miss Frazer was exactly what Dr. Glaston meant when he said he needed amiable companionship, to be alone less. When the clock chimed the half hour after nine, he looked at it in disbelief.

Miss Frazer must have sensed that he was readying himself to leave and very briskly she rose to her feet and said, “You’ve enjoyed yourself, haven’t you? You’ll have to come back after the new semester starts. We can play chess.”

So Harrison began “seeing” Miss Frazer. Late in February they had dinner and played chess un-
things persisted; a primordial fear had roused and was worrying at his consciousness. He stepped off the curb to cross an alley and before he could back up or get fully across he was engulfed and swept up by a mob of yelling men and women.

Hands pushed at him and bodies pressed against him as he tried to resist the force of the mob. He was carried along by it as a leaf is inescapably a part of the stream that floats it. They were cursing, shrilling, incoherent, infuriated mad men and he was of them. A wild intoxication flowed through him and he clapped his hand on the shoulder of the shoving man at his side. The man turned to look at him, but his eyes were vacant as if he moved in a trance. His mouth dribbled little specks of sputum from the corners and he cried hoarsely, “Kill him! Kill him!”

Harrison recoiled sharply and was jabbed in the side by a little woman carrying a stick. Her eyes were empty above a working, screaming mouth. She was lost in the swirling bodies. Somehow Harrison found himself half turned, being pressed onward sideways, and always before his horrified eyes were the vacuous expressions, the calm, almost peaceful emptiness of the upper faces and the filth of the gibbering, screeching mouths. He was yelling too, begging them to let him go, helplessly flowing along with them.

Someone would be trampled to death, he thought as he stumbled and frantically caught at an arm to restore his balance. The police would come and break it up. They filled the streets, overflowing into the sidewalks and yards. On and on they weaved, gaining speed and strength by the second, their voices an intolerable din. Harrison felt he couldn’t breathe; he hurt from the constant jabblings he received as he kept trying to shove his way to the side of them. He couldn’t see the ending of the long, senseless stream of robotic shapes. Now they were virtually running and he had to run also, or die under their feet. They wouldn’t stop if he fell, and he hated them and was afraid of them, knowing that no matter how fast he ran, he was part of them and couldn’t leave them behind.

They stopped abruptly as definitely as a single unit with no preliminary slowing down, no shoving. Only Harrison was caught off guard and his momentum carried him several yards ahead of the rest. The mob had become ominously silent, unbelievably silent. He whirled to his right and saw the inviting blackness of an unpaved alley. He looked again at the mass of stilled bodies as immobile and expressionless as mannekins, as if someone had turned them all off. It
was as if they waited for further instructions. Nowhere did he see comprehension or even awareness and slowly he began to edge to the side toward the waiting alley of escape. Their eyes didn’t see, but their heads turned almost imperceptibly to follow his progress. A colder terror seized Harrison, gripping his bowels, jerking his stomach spasmodically. He backed away from them almost fainting with fear, and suddenly his nerves could stand it no longer and he screamed shrilly and raced madly down the blackness of the alley. He could hear them as they were released from their trance-like stance, and now he knew it was him they wanted. He ran until his legs buckled under him and he fell headlong through a door. . . .

He fell to his knees gasping and panting for breath. Dimly he became aware of Miss Frazer’s hands on him loosening his collar, undoing his belt. He had got away! In relief he opened his eyes.

“Keep breathing deeply,” Miss Frazer said firmly. She was tugging at him apparently trying to back him against the wall, and still dazed, he helped until he was propped up by it. “I’ll get you a drink,” she said.

The unaccustomed whiskey burned harshly, but the terror melted away, leaving confusion and a sense of embarrassment over making a fool of himself. He avoided Miss Frazer’s appraisal ashamedly and started to rise, but her competent hands held him down with his back against the wall.

“Stay right there for a few minutes,” she ordered, stared at him for a moment and turned to get the bottle and a glass from the counter. “I think I need this more than you do.”

“I’m sorry I frightened you,” he muttered, “but I am all right. I stumbled.”

“Yes, you stumbled,” she agreed dryly. “And your heart decided to run a race all by itself, and you couldn’t breathe. Do you know what happened to you?”

“I stumbled,” he repeated stubbornly. “And right now I feel like a fool,” he added through tight lips. It happened again! he cried to himself despairingly. Why?

Miss Frazer took several steps backward, and when he did get up alone, she seemed surprised. “Harrison, have you done that before?”

He nodded. “But it isn’t my heart. I had Dr. Glaston give me a complete check. My heart is perfect.” He shuddered violently and looked directly at her in desperation. “Do I look like I’m losing my mind? Am I going crazy?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! There could be a lot of things to cause you to fall. Blood pressure. Disease of the inner ear . . .”

“The doctor checked everything,” he cut in rudely. “Or-
ganically I am in excellent condition. I live through it, but it doesn't take any time," he hissed wretchedly. "I go through the door to somewhere else, and then I come back, but it doesn't take any time!"

Miss Frazer frowned down at the table top a moment, raised her eyes to meet his and finally said slowly, "I don't know what you're talking about, Harrison. But believe me, I do not believe for a moment that you are any more insane than most of us. Now you sit still while I make coffee and we'll talk."

Haltingly at first, with much hesitation over words, he began with the first time it had happened to him. Then more surely when she didn't laugh or interrupt, he continued with words flowing effortlessly until he concluded, "I remember how miserable I felt with freezing rain soaking to my skin. I remember the feeling of the tightness of the left skate. It was almost tight enough to rub a blister. And later I was cold where I had been against the ice. Those things are real! They happened!"

"Walter Mitty's other life was real to him," she suggested.

"But he dreamed of things he wanted to do," Harrison cried. "He was his own hero. God, I hated that man I was! I'm ashamed of him. He—I could have done something about the children. I could have helped that old man. I could have tried to reason with the mob. Do you think I'd daydream about a coward?"

"Harrison. Harrison. You are talking nonsense. No one can control his dreams. You have to believe me, this is a dream of a sort. So you ran. That's one of the classic dream patterns."

Wearily Harrison rose from the chair, and he felt old and tired. Quietly he said, "In my real dreams I never run."

"Don't go yet, Harrison. Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm sure," he said. "I'm sorry about all this. I didn't mean to . . ." He stared at his hand outstretched for the door and he felt that he couldn't move. Fascinated he reached out for the knob and again a paralyzing dread mastered him and he was unable to open the door. Suddenly he turned and crossed the room unsteadily to stand at the counter gripping the edge of it tightly. "I can't seem to open the door," he muttered despising himself.

"Harrison, I'm going to open the couch and fix you a bed. It makes a very comfortable bed, and I'll give you a sedative so you'll get a good night's sleep. And in the morning I'm going to take you to Dr. Blakesley."

Harrison stood there not answering and she left the kitchen. He closed his eyes tightly a mo-
ment and again turned to face the
door. He still couldn’t force him-
sell to touch it. Panic was rising
within him unbearably as he tried,
and uncontrollable, atavistic fear
made him cower back away from
it. He knew he would have lost
consciousness, or started scream-
ing, if he hadn’t left it.

He lay in the unfamiliar room
and drifted aimlessly midway be-
tween sleep and wakefulness as
the two pink pills she had ordered
him to swallow dulled the razor
edge of his thoughts. The mob
wouldn’t have listened to him. It
had been a trick of his twisted
mind that led him to think they
awaited his orders. Running
wasn’t the real crime. Other peo-
ple seemed always to know what
to do, like Miss Frazer, and his
wife years before, and his mother
long before either of them. He
thought pleasant thoughts about
his mother and somehow she grew
more like Gabrielle, merging with
the girl until only the golden
haired girl remained. She had
known what to do, but there had
been a difference. Why? He tried
to rouse himself from the letharg-
ic non-awareness of his wander-
ing mind and hold onto the ques-
tion. Why had Gabrielle been
different? It was important. He
couldn’t remember, and trying, he
fell asleep.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Miss
Frazer said as she poured their
breakfast coffee. “You promised

me you’d see Dr. Blakesley this
morning and you are going to do
it.”

“You really think I need a psy-
chiatrist then? Just because I fell
down and was frightened for a
time?”

“Have you opened a door yet?”
Harrison looked behind him at
the kitchen door standing open
and shook his head. It had been
opened by her.

Miss Frazer chatted amiably
through breakfast, and in the car
on their way to the university
where Dr. Blakesley lectured two
mornings a week. Harrison wasn’t
listening to her, and she seemed
to realize it, and made no effort to
draw him into her soliloquy.
There had been something, he was
thinking, something he had almost
grasped, and missed.

Miss Frazer parked the car and
led the way into the Natural
Science Building, holding the
door for him. Sheepishly he fol-
lowed her. She hadn’t given him a
chance at a door all morning.
Gabrielle would have, he thought
with assurance. Unlike the others,
she had given him the opportunity
to act first and he had failed. But
she hadn’t assumed he would. He
was acutely conscious of Miss
Frazer’s startled grunt as he
pushed past her and opened Dr.
Blakesley’s door . . .

. . . There were eleven other
men in the room, many of them
drinking coffee. The air was thick
with stale smoke and the press of bodies too long in one place. Harrison looked straight ahead stoically pretending he wasn’t listening to the nasal voice inches away from his ear.

“Y’know he done it, Harrison. All that evidence against him. What more do you need?”

He sat without moving, making no sign. The foreman leaned across the table to point an accusing finger at him. “If he gets off, he’ll keep doing it. You know that!”

“He might not be guilty,” Harrison said stiffly.

“Everybody knows he’s guilty!”

“He never denied it!”

“He wouldn’t be here if he wasn’t guilty!”

Harrison felt a numbness creeping along his body and incongruously all he wanted to do was sleep. He put his head down on his arms pretending to be thinking about it. The voices continued persuasively.

“The judge will be lenient, Harrison. It’s not like you were sentencing him to die or anything like that.”

“But he’ll die,” he mumbled.

“We’ll all die,” the other one answered impatiently.

“If he didn’t do it, he wanted to. That’s just as bad.”

“That’s as bad as doing it,” someone else echoed solemnly and it was taken up and reiterated over and over.

“We don’t know that he did. We don’t know,” Harrison protested desperately.

“Harrison, we’re all agreed that he’s guilty. Are you with us?”

“I can’t decide.”

“Have you ever decided anything in your life?” asked a new voice.

Harrison looked up at the speaker and it was Dr. Glaston.

“I’m sorry, Harrison,” he said. “I had to tell you the truth. There wasn’t a thing wrong with your heart. I’m sorry.”

“I know,” Harrison said. Why did he say that? What a curious thing for a doctor to say.

“You really do have to make up your mind, you know. They’ll be calling us back soon,” Dr. Glaston said gently and returned to his seat.

Harrison licked his lips and met the gaze of the foreman. Mutely he nodded and the Greek chorus rumbled approval. They filed back into the court room awkwardly, embarrassed by the stares of avid curiosity their re-entrance aroused. Harrison stood before his seat until they were all present and as one they sat down.

The accused sat turned away from them as if he alone in the room had failed to notice that they returned. The judge cleared his throat.

The prisoner stood and faced them, but Harrison kept his eyes on the straggly hairs on the red
neck before him. He couldn't bring himself to look at the tormented face of the guilty man. The verdict was read and a great shout broke out among the spectators. Above and through it rang out the judge's gavel demanding order. Slowly the noise subsided. The man on Harrison's left whistled softly under his breath.

"Betcha he wants us polled," he said knowingly.

"Pollied?"

"Yeah. Wants us to stand up one at a time and say it."

Harrison felt the lump return to his stomach where it swelled. The man at his side grinned as if he knew.

"Won't take long," he said wisely. "Then you can head for the john."

They were both silent as the first man, the foreman, repeated, "Guilty," firmly, and then the next, and the next. The prisoner remained turned away from them, only beginning to move toward the light as the man next to Harrison heaved himself to his feet. "Guilty," he said quickly and sat down again. Harrison felt frozen to his chair only stirring when the judge frowned disagreeably at him. On both sides the men were pushing at him and somewhere to the side he heard, "You better not renege now."

He rose swaying and stared into the eyes of the other man, into the face he knew so well. The face was empty, emotionless, un-lived in looking. It was his face.

He yelled and leaped from the jury box racing from the courtroom, out the double doors in the rear before anyone seemed to realize what was happening. He ran as if pursued by all the devils of hell, but through a void of silence. No one chased. The streets were deserted; not even a dog barked at his flight. He ran to the corner and across the street and nothing moved along its length except him. It wasn't fair, he sobbed. It wasn't fair to make him be the one to decide. The system was wrong! He wasn't a bad man. He wasn't guilty, but was he innocent? No man could decide it. It wasn't fair. Why didn't someone come and stop him? They could stop him if they tried. He pushed himself away from a building and staggered on, wheeling back to crash into it dizzily. He had to keep going.

The sidewalk ended and he plummeted into a wall ahead of him, stumbling down to his knees. He forced himself back to his feet, but stood half crouched over, hunched as if in great pain. His fingers groped blindly for something to hold, finally finding a handle. He gripped it hard and stood stiff and still waiting for his breath to return.

It was a door handle. He turned it and the door began to swing open. He could go through
it, let Miss Frazer and the doctor take care of him—the circle completed. He thought about the man back there who looked like him, but was empty and so very, very guilty. He at last recognized the enormity of the guilt. Not of being; that was accidental. But, having being, of the failure to be more than the insubstantial shadow that hovers awhile and then passes, leaving nothing of itself to mark its passage. Not on one single individual in need, not on a woman and their un-born children, not on humanity as an entity. He had failed them all.

And now this, the final test, the ultimate decision, the opportunity most men recognize somewhere along the way, but that he had never before faced knowingly.

Deliberately he placed his foot back again and withdrew from the doorway. They would not come. To be forced to choose was not to choose at all. They knew. He looked down the empty streets. It would take much longer to walk back the path he had run before, but he started, and in starting, he felt peace, and he walked straight and tall through the empty streets. . . .

Inside his office the doctor rose as the hall door was pushed open. He didn't recognize the man who paused in the act of crowding in past Miss Frazer, but assuming it was Harrison, he was prepared to see him display the neurosis the opening of doors triggered. He was not prepared to see him slump to the floor—the unmistakable stamp of death already composing his features.