

COLORLESS IN LIMESTONE CAVERNS

*like those blind fish from
the depths of the earth,
the scientist's mind floated
in submarine darkness*

fiction By ALLAN SEAGER

THE METAL TANK containing Reinhart's fish occasioned no excitement when it arrived. Why should it have? From the same truck appeared a crate containing a magnificent puma, somewhat gaunt, rendered languid by the tranquilizers the shipper had injected, and a plywood box full of air holes, holding six pungent skunks. Such shipments were routine and the lab helpers—morose, giggling men from the university maintenance department—were used to handling them.

But if Reinhart had known just which truck it would be and exactly the time it would appear, he would have been glad to drive his new car out to meet it on the superhighway and escort his fish into town and supervise their safe stowage in the laboratory. He was terribly excited. However, he knew that the dignity of his new estate forbade such patent eagerness. He had only this term proceeded to associate professor (hence the car supplanting a bicycle) and he would have to restrain himself and take the notification of his fishes' arrival through the proper channel, a bill of lading in his mailbox.

The lemurs had gotten him tenure, tenure at 29. ("Fabelhaft," his mother had said.) He had taken six of them, frightened them by banging on iron bars, touching off a pistol full of blanks and playing records of horn music and train wrecks, and noted their reactions with the patience of a Chinaman. Then he had removed the frontal lobes of their brains. When they had recovered, he frightened them again. Deprived of their frontal lobes, the monkeys behaved differently. From this elegant experiment, Reinhart had drawn enough useful conclusions to make up six papers for the learned (continued on page 114)

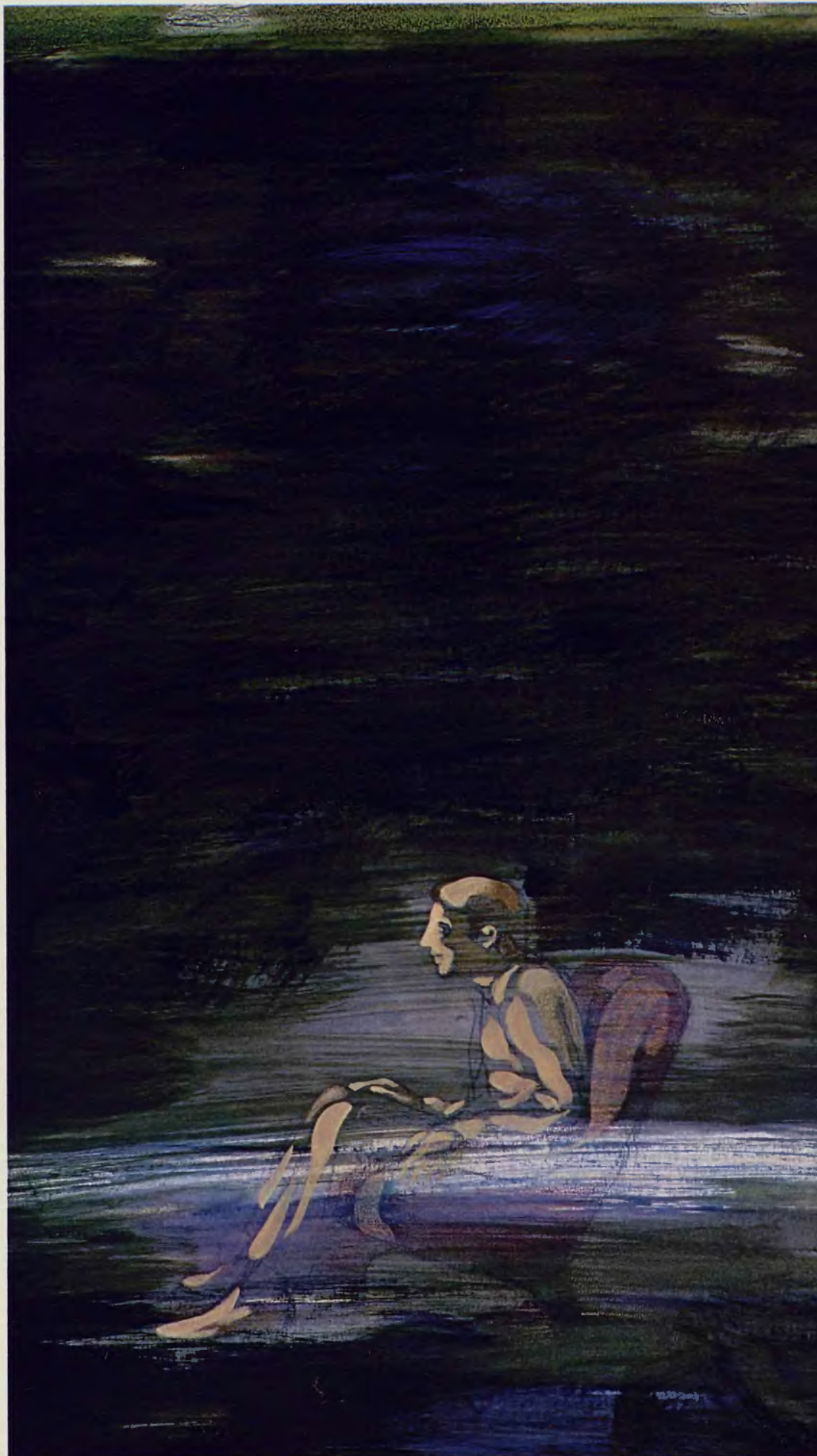


ILLUSTRATION BY ARTHUR PAUL

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journals. They had given the department a slight but definite cachet and he had been rewarded, a coming man.

Reinhart did not really know why he had chosen fish for this experiment. A city boy, he had never seen fish except dead in the market, their sea hues faded, their tails curling. He had not exhausted the experimental possibilities of lemurs, by any means, yet he had been drawn uninquiringly to fish.

They were southern cave fish, *Typhlichthys subterraneus*, "colorless in limestone caverns," his books had said. "The body bristles with nerve endings keyed to detect moving worms and crustaceans." They were totally blind. Indeed, when Reinhart first saw them in the glass tank in the laboratory, he had switched on the light and the four of them sank to the gravel bottom of the tank and lay inert among the ornamental shells. Although they could not see, they were apparently sensitive to light. It was not a word Reinhart had ever used, even to himself, but they seemed full of decorum. He was fascinated.

He went home to tell his wife. She was a thin little girl with a rather pretty face, from Hunter College. She met him at the door as she did customarily, delighted as she was customarily.

She said, "You can't wear jeans to the lab anymore. You'll have to wear your suit." She adored his promotion.

"Sara, they came. The fish," he said.

"Are they—all right?" she asked. What does one say about fish, even one's husband's?

He looked her straight in the eyes, expecting her to understand him. "They're wonderful."

She waited for him to tell her more, but he sat down on the couch with his hands hanging between his knees, silent. Thus, without any inkling of it, he began to grow away from her.

He was silent through the eggplant and cheese and the little chocolate sundaes from the supermarket. She had never seen him like this and she thought he was ill. Gently, she urged him to go to bed. Docilely, he went. She gave him two aspirins and a glass of water. As she turned off the light, he said, "If you turn on the light, they sink to the bottom of the tank."

This was a warning, but how could she take it as such? She thought he had a touch of flu.

In the morning, he was up earlier than usual. He bustled through shaving and bustled into his clothes. He never bustled. He was standing by the stove in the kitchen, looking out the window, when she came out in her pajamas. "How are you feeling, David?" she asked.

He looked at her as if her question were odd and unpredictable. He said, "Why, fine. I feel good." And he re-

sumed looking out the window. He loved her, of course, but they had been married long enough so he did not think about it. They once had long talks about the future. He had been a virile, healthy man, concerned about his career; and now, for the first time, she thought, he is ill—he has the flu and the fever that goes with it. She wanted to coax him back to bed and minister to him, but he left the apartment without embracing her, hardly saying goodbye. How was she to know?

The lab was dark. Even the assistants had not yet arrived. Reinhart switched on the light over the fishes' tank. As if stunned, the fish arrested their suave glidings and sank, their fins rippling, down to the gravel bottom, where they lay, three of them on their sides, one propped on its belly against a shell.

He drew up a stool and watched them. Without any regret or alarm, he could feel his entire research project slipping away from him. He had thought himself interested in their feeding habits and he had conceived his project to be an attempt to prove which way they swam to their food—rectilinearly or in an S curve. Now it did not seem to matter. Were they beautiful? He watched them, the smooth vestigial sockets of their blind eyes, their strange transparent bodies with their internal organs shaded throughout their interiors as if with some cryptic writing. He sat there the whole morning, his chin on his hands. At lunchtime, he turned off the light, dropped some worms and tiny shrimps into the tank and went out to eat his own lunch, not out of a brown paper bag anymore but in a restaurant.

When he returned after lunch, he switched on the light again. The fish sank to their floor of gravel, as if shocked, and this time all four lay on their sides. He stared down at them. It had been years since the blind—blind humans, that is—had aroused any sympathy in him. It had been bitten by their dogs, clubbed down by their canes, shut away in their Braille novels, its voice drowned out by their free records supplied by the state. Everything was done for the sightless human; nothing for these. Nor did they need anything. Cossetting his mind with a phrase remembered from some literature course, he said to himself, "In the Stygian gloom of their caverns, their lives are simple." And they, no one else, had modified all the strings of their nerves to enhance those simple lives. Reinhart was lost in admiration.

Each morning he came to the lab, sat staring on his stool for four hours, gave them darkness and food at noon, ate his lunch in a student restaurant where his colleagues did not go and, afterward, he stared at the fish again until six o'clock.

He did not ask himself why. Thoughts darted through his mind continually and he did not believe he was idle.

He ate well, slept nine hours a night, but he and his wife no longer conversed. He would answer direct questions after a pause during which he seemed to be returning from some distance; otherwise, he did not speak. He never asked for a beer. He did not watch the new television set. He seemed as willing to sit in one chair as another, his eyes wide open, his hands dangling from the end of the chair arms, his feet flat on the floor. He was relaxed and calm. It was his calmness that frightened her; yet, since he had been in analysis only two years before, she rejected a fear of any psychic disorder. For a day or two, she entertained the pandemic bugbear of the faculty wife, another woman, but she was forced to reject that also—he was home every night. He went to bed at nine o'clock. He did say, "Good night."

She had quit her job when he was promoted and she had little to do but worry. One day she caught up with him as he was returning from lunch and said she wanted to see the fish. "All right," he said, pleasantly enough. She had often visited his lab. Trained as a psychologist at Hunter, she understood his work and its importance, and she liked to keep up with his projects.

The lab was in darkness, but he found his way to the light switch easily and, following him, she was just in time to see the fish stop swimming and sink decorously, their fins and tails rippling, to the bottom.

"Why, they're luminousensitive, even if they are blind." She said that, "Luminousensitive."

"Yes."

"But you can't observe their feeding habits in darkness."

He did not answer. He had pulled up the stool and sat down with his head between his hands, watching the fish.

She began to chatter nervously. "But I've got a great idea. I know what you can do. You can get an infrared camera and photograph them, no matter how dark it is."

He turned his head and looked at her. "Why?" he said softly.

"Of course, you'll have to apply for a supplementary grant. . . . What did you say?"

He had turned back to the fish and did not reply. She watched the fish and then him for a minute and went away despondent. She had only tried to help.

It was not an easy decision, but she called his mother in New York and asked her to come out. Since she could not tell her exactly what was the matter with him, her statements seemed cryptic and sinister and they alarmed Mrs.

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Reinhart excessively. She said she would fly out the next day.

Mrs. Reinhart had not had to deal with misbehavior in any of her children in some years. Sara took her to the laboratory and let her in alone. Reinhart raised his head and said, "Hello, Momma," as if he had expected her, and resumed looking at the fish. Passionately worried, she fell back on a method that had always worked when he was younger and at home—she recited his accomplishments to him, relying on shame to do its work. Falsely and frantically cheerful, she asked him to remember how he could read in the *World Book* at three, how he had won a prize in grade school for having the best marks and—here she gave a really dreadful little laugh—how he had been the best stickball player on the block. The swimming medals at camp followed—"all pure gold"—and led to the culmination: He had been valedictorian of his class at the High School of Science.

It failed. Reinhart did not change his position. He did not speak.

Mrs. Reinhart's hands were moist with fear. In desperation she said, "David, I'm your mother."

Reinhart moved one finger and pointed to the fish. "There is my mother—and my father."

She was too shocked and bewildered to reply. She stared at him a moment, patted his shoulder and went out into

the corridor, where Sara was waiting.

At first Reinhart had not known what he was doing, why he stared at the fish. He was confused but happy. Later it occurred to him that he was contemplating them. He knew nothing of contemplation except what he had heard at evening parties, where it was linked with LSD and Zen; but after some days, he discovered that the contemplative's mind is either full or empty. His was full—he held the fish in a mental embrace so strong that the edges of his mind seemed to waver like their fins and tails in the tiny subaqueous currents of their tank. At night, sitting relaxed in his chair, with the living fish no longer there to dazzle him, he attempted with perhaps a relic of his scientific training to describe them; but his descriptions were not scientific, and in the part of his mind where he knew he was neglecting wife and career, he knew that, too. Were they beautiful? He had no way of determining that. They were simple, but in a way nothing he had learned had taught him to comprehend. One afternoon, one of the fish had pressed its head against the glass of the tank a few inches from his nose. The blind socket seemed to be trying to see him, as if, sensitive to light, it were sensitive to him as well, as if he were a light. Then he felt a bond of kinship flooding him like his blood—they were not alien, the fish. He felt they were teaching him some-

thing. Theirs was not a mindless immobility flawed only by the movement of the water. They contemplated an infinity he was only beginning to be aware of.

They were, he now believed, superior beings. Moving in darkness, supine in light, they were innocent. They were legless and armless, with only their weak fins as instruments, while his hand was the father of invention and in its bones and tendons lay Rome, Germany and other abominable crimes. And, innocent, they lived in a vast unending peace. Which he could achieve. Which he, too, could achieve.

He was beginning to feel quite new, like a leaf unfolding.

The first evening of his mother's visit, he came home to an empty apartment, and for the first time in his married life, dinner was unserved. It was waiting for him in saucepans on the stove. He ate, washed up the dishes and sat down in his darkened living room with the fish in his mind. He was not surprised, however—he had almost foreseen it—when, about nine o'clock, his wife and mother returned and switched on the light. They had brought three of his friends, all psychiatrists, and the women went into the bedroom so they could have a free hand with him.

They spoke to him with the ominous kindness they used with patients. They asked how he was and awaited his answer with genuine concern.

With numb resignation, Reinhart cast the fish violently away. He said genially, "I know Sara has been worried, worried enough to call my mother, obviously, but my previous research has been incomplete, really, because I didn't get fully enough acquainted with my subjects and their habits. I saw, don't you see, only simple problems, because I was ignorant. Lately, I have really concentrated on my fish and I have learned a great deal. Perhaps my concentration was too intense. Certainly it was intense enough to pain Sara. But now I have filled out the order for an infrared camera [This was a lie, but it would be true soon enough. He knew he had been caught.] and the work will proceed." He stood up. "It's nice of you to come in. Can I get you a beer?"

They looked at one another. "Why not?" one of them said.

He brought out a tray of beer and pretzels. In a few minutes, all their professional constraint vanished and they were talking with animation. It was like old times.

The next day, Reinhart ordered an infrared camera. Ten months later, the fish were dead; he had fathered a son and written three excellent papers; but the lemurs, gentle and lethargic, still occupied their cages. No one knew what to do with them.



"He must come from a very sophisticated monastery."