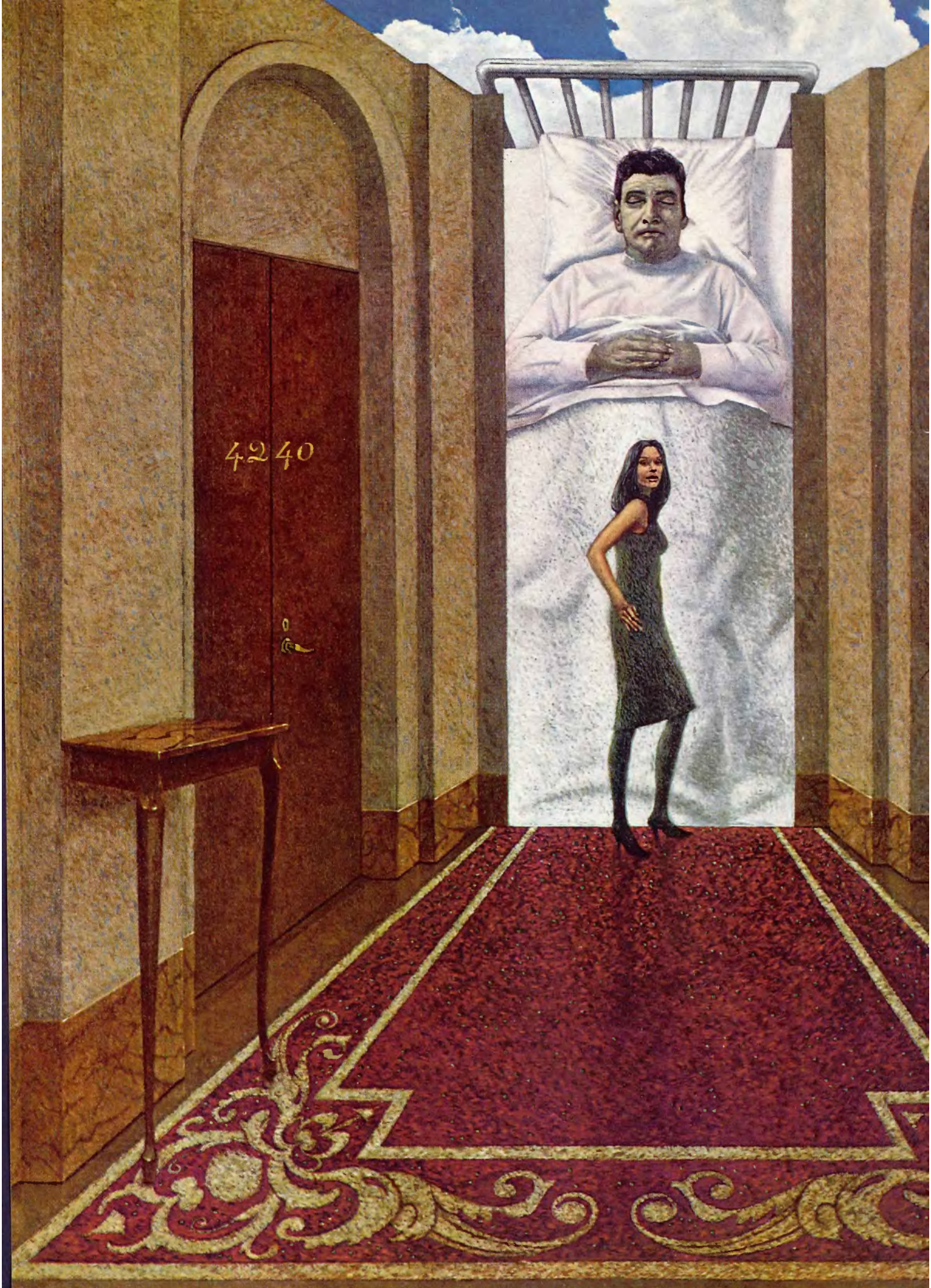
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a force he could not resist drew him through the huge, crumbling husk of a hotel, down its echoing corridors to the threshold of a room that held within it a terrible augury

fiction By JOHN D. MACDONALD

THE ANNEX

DURING THE LAST HOUR of the night, the charge nurse looked in at the critical in room 11, intensive-care section, coronary. She scowled and made an ugly, displeased mouth and hastened to replace the dislodged I. V. needle in the vein inside the elbow of the right arm, immobilized by the straps, the board and the side rail of the bed. She checked the glucose drip, made a small adjustment of the flow valve, checked oxygen supply, listened to the ragged labor of the pulse and went off and found the pretty little special drinking coffee in the treatment room and joking with the red-headed intern.

After chewing her out with a cold expertise that welled tears into the blue eyes, she herded her back to her night watch over the patient.

"I wasn't gone three minutes, honest," she said.

"An hour before dawn they get restless," the charge nurse said. "As if they had someplace to go, some appointment to keep."

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When the first gray light of the morning made the shape of the window visible, he dressed quickly and went out. He guessed that they would not be expecting him to leave that room so soon after arriving.

There were shadows of night still remaining in the empty streets, so that even though he knew his way and walked swiftly, the city seemed strange to him. They were changing it so quickly these past few years. The eye becomes accustomed to the shape and bulk of structures, giving them only a marginal attention; yet when, so abruptly, they were gone, one had the feeling of having made a wrong turn somewhere. Then even the unchanged things began to look half strange.

He turned a dark corner and saw the hotel lights in the distance. A taxi came swiftly to the cross-town corner, made a wrenching, shuddering turn and sped up the empty avenue, and he caught a silhouette glimpse of the sailboat hats of nuns in the dark interior, two or three of them.

He had not been in the hotel for years. He saw at once that it was quite changed. That certain quaintness of the lobby that once set off the high style of the monied people and the women of the theater was now merely a shabbiness. He realized that he could have guessed it, because were it not changed, they would not be mixed up in this sort of thing. And his shabby assignment in an unknown room would have occurred in some other place, perhaps even in another city at another time.

There was no one behind the desk. He felt in his pocket for the identification he would have to present and felt fear and irritation when he did not find it at once. Then, among coins, he fingered the shape of it and took it out and held it in his clasped hand. As he wondered whether to tap the desk bell, he saw movement out of the side of his eye and turned and saw a man walking toward him out of the lobby shadows.

"Mr. Davis?" the small man said; and as he came into the light, his face was elusively familiar. He searched memory and finally recalled the image of the same face, a bellhop uniform in dull red and gray, big brass circle of the master key ring looped around the scrawny neck. And the name came back.

"Do you remember me, Leo? From before?"

"Sure," the man said. He leaned against the desk and yawned. Davis knew the man did not remember him at all.

"You're the manager now?"

"So they keep telling me."

"Come up in the world, eh?"

"I guess so." He yawned again. "You got that thing?"

He felt unaccountably shy about revealing what they had given him. He said, "I keep telling them that they should use ordinary things. But they get fanciful. It just makes everything harder to explain when things go wrong. What kind of a sentimental nut would have a gold miniature of his own dog tag made? A grown man is supposed to get over being in a war."

"Look, I have to see it." Leo's tone was patient and bored, and Davis knew the man had no interest in what he thought and very little interest in why he had come here.

He held his hand out and the little wafer gleamed on his open palm. Leo

took it, glanced at it and put it in his own pocket.

"They didn't tell me you'd keep it."

"The room you want is four-two-four-two."

"Are you supposed to keep it? Did they make that clear?"

"Forty-two forty-two. Four thousand, two hundred and forty-two, Mr. Davis. OK?"

"All right. I'll assume you're supposed to keep it, Leo. It's their problem, not mine. But you're supposed to turn over the key. I know *that*."

"I can't, buddy, because the only keys here are the keys to the main house here. You should know that and they should know that. Right? What we're talking about is the annex. Which is being torn down."

"Then there isn't anybody in it?"

"Did I say that, mister? Did anybody say that?"

"There's no reason to get ugly about it, Leo."

"Who's ugly? Listen, they got old foops in there living there since the year one, and lease agreements and all that stuff, so about the only thing they can do is work around them until they get sick of all the noise and mess and get out. There aren't many left now. I think maybe your party is the only one left on that floor, but I don't keep close track. I've got enough to do here without worrying about over there."

"So what do I do about a key? Am I supposed to go knock on the door, for God's sake?"

"Mrs. Dorn is over there. She's got a master key to the whole annex."

"Does she know about me?"

"Why should she? Just con her a little, Mr. Davis. Play it by ear. OK?"

"I don't have much choice, I guess."

"Has anybody lately? Come this way."

Leo led the way back through the lobby and through a huge empty kitchen, where night lights picked up the gleam and shape of stainless-steel racks and tables. He pulled a door open and turned on a weak bulb at the head of a narrow flight of stairs.

"The regular way over there has been boarded up, so what you do is just follow the way a red pipe runs along the ceiling there, and when you come to stairs finally, go on up and you'll find her around someplace."

Three steps down, he turned to say his thanks in some massively sarcastic way; but as he turned, the door was slammed. There were distant lights in the vast reaches of the basement, just enough for him to make out the red pipe suspended by straps from the low ceiling overhead. There was a sweaty dampness in the basement. In some far corner, a laboring machine was making a slow and heavy chuffing sound. It made a vibration he could feel through the soles of his shoes as he walked. He noticed that the red pipe overhead was of some kind of plastic material, sufficiently flexible so that there was a perceptible expansion and contraction as the machine made its thick and rhythmic sound.

He estimated that he had walked more than a city block before he came to the stairs, where the red pipe disappeared into a wall. These were unexpectedly wide and elegant stairs, marble streaked with gray and green, ascending in a gentle curve. At the top of the stairs, he pushed a dark door open and found himself in an enormous lobby. It had the silence of a museum. Dropcloths covered the shapes of furniture. Plaster dust was gritty on the floor. Some huge beams had fallen and were propped at an angle, as in pictures of bombings.

"Mrs. Dorn!" he called. "Mrs. Dorn!" The sound did not seem to carry. It died at once into the silence.

Then he heard a click-tock of high heels and he could not tell where the sound was coming from. "Yes?" she said. "You, there! Up here!" Her voice was musical; the tone, impatient. He looked up and saw her standing at the broad ornate railing of a mezzanine floor, looking down at him, in silhouette against a window beyond her. "Yes? What do you want?"

"Can I speak to you a minute?"

"I'm very busy. Well . . . come on up."

She turned away. He looked around and saw the stairs and went up. There was a library and writing room at the top of the stairs. Several doors opened from the room. He tried them, one by one, and found they opened onto corridors. Then, close behind him, she chuckled and, as he turned, startled, she said. "It's really very confusing. I used to get hopelessly lost when I first came here."

She looked like someone he had known, somewhere, perhaps a long time ago. She had a soft and pretty face, dark wings of careless hair, and she looked at him in a familiar and mocking way of old secrets shared. She wore a shift of some tweedy gray substance over a young, sturdy body with a vital heft of hip and weight of breast.

"I wonder, Mrs. Dorn, if you could. . . ."

"Just a moment, please. I missed this room somehow, and the crews will be arriving any minute, and it would be just my rotten luck if they started here, wouldn't it?" She began to walk slowly around the room, pausing from time to time, pausing to hold at arm's length a piece of soft yellow chalk in the measuring gesture of the artist. She nodded to herself from time to time and then would mark with the chalk a piece of paneling, or a chair, or the frame of an old painting.

At last she sighed and turned toward him with a smile of enduring patience.

"Done, I guess. As well as I can do it, anyway. They don't really give a damn about saving anything. You have to watch them like hawks. They'll pretend they didn't see the mark and they'll smash stuff to powder and then look so *terribly* innocent. They hate old things, I guess. And hate the loveliest old things worst of all. They just want to come in and biff, bang, crunch and truck it away and get it over with and go on to the next job. My, how they resent me, and resent having to save things and handle them so gently and take them to our warehouse. You wouldn't believe it."

The mark she made each time was a D with a cross drawn through it, like a cancellation.

"What did you want?" she asked.

"They told me that you're the one to see. You can lend me the master key."

"Really? And exactly what room do you want to get into? And why?"

"Four-two-four . . . oh. Forty-two forty. It will take only a . . . very few minutes."

"On the forty-second floor. Now isn't that quaint! Isn't that the living end!"

"What's so funny, Mrs. Dorn? I don't think anything is particularly funny."

"I couldn't possibly explain it to you. I'll have to show you."

"You could let me take the key, couldn't you?"

"My dear man, so much has been torn down and thrown away and smashed, you could wander around up there for weeks trying to find a way to the right floor and the right wing. Even if I believed you, I'd have to go with you in any case."

She led the way back down and through the silence of the lobby and to a back corridor, and into a bird-cage elevator no more than five feet square. She reached and clanged the door shut, turned a worn brass handle and they began to creak slowly upward. He stared up through the ceiling of woven metal strips and saw the sway of the moving cables and, far overhead, a pale square of gray sky.

The animation and mocking amusement had gone out of her. She leaned, sagging, looking downward, finger tips on the brass lever, and he sensed that he had no part in what she was thinking. He could look at her with that feeling of invasion one has in watching someone sleep. There was a small mole below the corner of her mouth, on the pale concavity below the soft weight of her underlip. Her lashes were long and dark. He saw the lift and fall of her slow breathing and was aware of a warmth and scent of her breath. There were two deep pockets in the gray shift. The master key would have to be in one or the other. So it could be done. There was always a way.

Suddenly he had the feeling he was being trapped in some curious way, was being led from his assignment into a plan devised for some other reason, a plan wherein his role was minor; and looking at the panel above her resting

hand, he saw what had probably given him subtle warning. There were brass buttons for the floors, pressed so many hundred thousand times the incised digits were almost worn away; yet when the gray light struck them properly, he could make out the topmost numeral of the vertical row—21.

"So that's it," he said. "That's what's funny." He made his mouth stretch wide in the knowing grin. The girl looked at him, startled and puzzled. "There's no forty-second floor," he said.

Frowning, she turned and looked at the row of buttons and then back at him. "You're serious? Don't you know about the annex at all? You know how the transients are. Top floor. Top floor. It's all they can think about. But the people who stay have to have private lives, don't they? Not all cluttered up with salesmen and people coming to town for the theater and all that. You've never been in the business, have you? All the city hotels are just the same, you know. The elevators for the transients go only so high, just to such and such a number, and the quiet floors, where people live, are above that, always, and they have their private ways to get up to them."

She was so very patient that he felt ashamed of accusing her and felt irritated with himself for not having guessed, long ago, what she told him. There had always been enough clues. There were always people going through the hotel lobbies, looking neither to the right nor to the left, walking by the regular elevators to some special place and service awaiting them.

But when the elevator stopped and they got out, she reached back into it, pressed the lowest button, yanked her arm out quickly and slammed the latticework door. It began to creak downward, with a clicking of pulleys and rasp of cables. She looked up at him and wrinkled her nose in mischief and mockery, saying, "Don't look so worried. There'll be other ways down." He remembered that she had not told him the joke, and he was once again annoyed at her.

These were broad corridors, pale gray, with composition floors, lighted by misted glass panels set into the ceiling. He tried to walk beside her, but she kept quickening her pace, and he realized she wanted him to walk behind her, a person guided rather than a companion. Many times they reached an intersection where the corridors stretched for vast distances, and sometimes she would pause to orient herself and then turn confidently right or left.

He noticed that all the numbers had been taken off the doors. He could see the raw holes where they had been screwed through gray paint into the plywood.

She was 15 feet ahead of him, the dark hair bouncing at the nape of her neck to her swift, buoyant stride. The coarse gray fabric pulled in alternating diagonal tensions against her rear, and somehow he knew that were she quite still and quite bare, were he to place his hands so that his finger tips were hooked around the shelf of hip socket, feeling the warm, smooth slide of membrane over bone, holding her from the rear, his hands placed as a player holds a basketball for the long set shot, then through some delicious coincidence of design, the pads of his thumbs would fit precisely into the two deep dimples spaced below her spine. He shook himself out of the erotic musing, remembering how often they had told him that assignments were mishandled too often for exactly this reason.

At the end of a corridor, she pulled a heavy fire door open and turned to give him a bawdy wink, to run her tonguetip across her lips, as though she had read his mind and his weakness; and he determined not to look at her as she climbed the stairs ahead of him, and looked instead at the steel treads set into the concrete. He lost track of the number of flights they climbed. It winded him; and when he helped her push another fire door open, he tried to conceal his laboring lungs and to seem as fresh as she.

These corridors were a pale yellow, like weak winter sunlight, and at last they came to a small elevator standing open. The fluorescence inside was harsh and there was a sharp minty odor, as though it had recently been scrubbed with some cheap, strong antiseptic. It accelerated upward with a silent velocity that hollowed his belly and made his knees bend slightly. It opened automatically on a narrower, dingy, old-fashioned corridor. She reached into the elevator as before; and when the door hissed shut and she turned to speak, he said, "I know. There'll be other ways down."

"That isn't what I was going to say."

"I'm sorry. What were you going to say?"

"I can't say it now. You spoiled it."

Again he followed her. These corridors were set at odd angles. The room doors were shiny dark with old coats of varnish. The room numbers were not removed and they were of tarnished brass, fluted and curly and ornate. All the rooms were in the 4000 series, but they were not in any reasonable order. 4100 and something across from or next door to 4800 and something.

She stopped very abruptly; and as he came up upon her, he heard what she had heard—the gritty sound of latch and bolt—and then, 20 feet ahead of them, an old couple, dressed for winter, came out of one of the rooms, complaining at each other, fussing, asking if he or she had forgotten this or that, dropping small packages and picking them up.

Just before the old couple turned and noticed them, Mrs. Dorn hooked her arm around his waist and forced him into a slow walk. He put his arm, interlocked, around her, and she reached up with her free hand, placed it against his cheek, chuckled in a furry way, turned her mouth up to the awkward kiss while walking, so that as they passed the couple, he heard tsks and clucks of their disapproval. "Darling, darling," she murmured. "Dave, darling."

Behind them he heard the old man's voice, without making out the words. There was a harsh resonance to it and then it cracked into a high quaver and then went deep again.

He smiled inside himself, thinking it sounded exactly like Ricky trying to manage his 14-year-old voice as it alternately squeaked and rumbled. The finger tips of the arm that was around her waist touched the top of the pocket on the left side of the gray shift, and with sneaky and daring inspiration, he slid his hand down into the pocket, bending his knees inconspicuously to lower himself just enough, the palm of his hand against round, warm thigh under fabric, and with his finger tips he touched the cylinder of yellow chalk and then the thin edge of metal. With the metal held against the nail of his index finger by the pad of his middle finger, he drew it out of the deep pocket and worked it into the palm of his hand.

She stopped and turned and leaned against the corridor wall and, with her hands resting lightly on his shoulders, looked up at him, still mocking him, saying, "You're just not very bright, Dave, darling."

The old people were gone, around a distant corner of the old hallway. Suddenly, he realized that she had cleverly kept them from seeing his face, so that they would be unable to identify him later. And with a sense of disbelief, he realized she had called him by his name.

"You could have told me how much you knew about this," he said.

"It's better for you to guess, dear. Look at what you took."

He opened his palm and saw the miniature gold tag. Name, rank, serial number, blood type O, meaning zero, meaning blood type nothing. The shock was enormous. He was suddenly afraid he might cry like a child and shame himself in front of her. "How did you. . . . How could Leo have. . . ."

"Leo? Don't be silly. I had it all along. There were always two, you know. Don't you remember that, even? No, keep it, dear. If I have to have it back, you can always give it to me. Without any fuss. Promise?"

"Sure, but if you could just tell me. . . ."

"I can show you, Dave. Come along."

She paused at the next turning and bit her lip and, standing beside her, he saw

(continued on page 220)

THE ANNEX

(continued from page 88)

that the floor itself dipped down in a gentle curve and lifted again at another place in the distance, where it turned again. It was swaying slightly, the whole corridor, like the bridges primitive peoples wove across deep swift rivers. She told him to walk carefully and stay close to the corridor wall. She motioned to him to stop and they were, he saw, on either side of a double door. It was room 4242. If she knew the rest of it, she would know the right number. It had been so placed that half of it was on each door, so that each was labeled 42. Even though she knew, he did not want her to watch what had to be done, watch the task assigned him; but before he could ask her to go away, to give him the key and go away, go back and wait for him around the corner, out of sight, she put a bright-red key in the lock and the double doors opened inward.

Inward, but outward. They opened onto the nothing of a dizzy height, making a vent for a cold wind that came husking down the hallway behind him and pushed him a long clumsy stride to stand on the very brink. Far, far, far below, the bug shapes of city cars and trucks moved very slowly, as when seen from an aircraft. He teetered, toes over the edge, and slowly fought back the sickness and the terror, knowing he could not let her see that he suddenly realized how cynically and savagely they had tricked him. He adjusted himself to the slight sway of the corridor and rode it easily, smiling and casual for her benefit, aware of how narrowly she was watching him.

Then came a deep and powerful thud, more vibration than sound. It came welling up from below and it danced the swaying corridor, nearly toppling him out. It came again and again. He learned to ride the new motion. The girl whimpered. He looked far down, almost directly down, and said, "It's nothing. Your friends have come to work. They've got some kind of a derrick thing down there and they're swinging one of those big cannon balls against the foundation."

He stepped back with care and reached and took her hand. Her hand was cold and hesitant. He led her past the open and windy space and back to where, once again, the structure was solid underfoot, trembling almost imperceptibly to each subsonic thud. She pulled her hand free and, after walking slowly, looking at the room numbers, chose one and opened the door, motioning him to come in. The room was in semidarkness, gray light outlining the window. She closed the door and he heard her sigh.

Reaction made him feel weak and sick. He saw the shape of the bed and moved to it and sat on the edge of it. She came to him and pushed at his shoulder and he lay back, grateful that she understood. He swung his legs onto the bed and she went to the foot and unlaced his shoes and took them off.

"We'd better not make very much noise," she whispered.

"Of course."

"Do you understand about the old people?"

"I know there's something I'm supposed to understand."

"That's enough for now."

She disappeared in the shadows and then he saw her again in silhouette in front of the gray of the window. He heard her sigh and he saw her, with slow and weary motion, tug the shift off over her head, toss it aside, pat her rumpled hair back into order, then bend and slip her shoes off. She stood near the corner of the window, half turned, standing quite still in silhouette, hips in relaxed and weary tilt, and he remembered one of the girls in that Degas print standing off at the side, standing in exactly the same position.

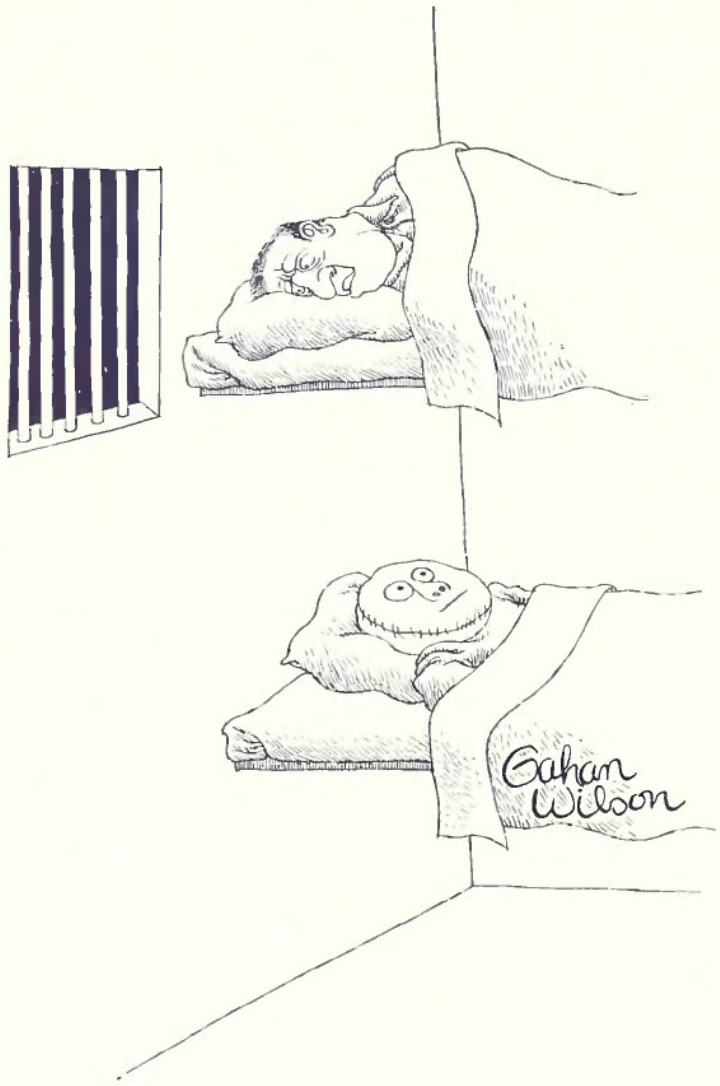
He knew she would turn and come to him but would not understand about what the weakness had done to him. He did not want to confess that kind of weakness to her.

He said, "Even when they do very tricky things, that doesn't mean the rules are changed. We have to follow the rules, just as if everything were happening to someone else, to some people they want to keep, instead of to us. You did it their way, and you know there isn't really any other way down from here. This is all we have left."

"So if I knew all along?" she asked, prompting him.

"If you knew how it was going to be, then you had to know you were a part of it, too."

Not turning, still standing at the gray of the window, she said sadly, softly, "See? You keep understanding more and



"Come on, Charlie, let me in on when you guys are making the break!"

more of it. Sleep for a little while, darling. Then you'll know the rest of it."

• • •

At a few minutes past six, Dr. Samuel Barringer opened the door of room 11 in the intensive-care section. In the shadows of the room, he saw the young nurse standing in silhouette by the gray of the window, looking out, standing there with a look of wistful grace.

At the sound of the latch as he closed the door, she spun with a guilty start, greeted him in her gentle and formal morning voice and handed him the clipboard with the patient's chart and the notation she had made since his visit four hours earlier. He held it under the low light for a moment, handed it back to her, then reached through the orifice in the transparent side of the oxygen tent to gently place the pads of his first two fingers against the arterial throb in the slack throat. He stood in a half bow, his eyes closed, listening and measuring through his finger tips. He was a big blond bear of a man, simultaneously clumsy and deft, as bears can be.

The nurse stood, awaiting instructions. He told her he would be back in a few minutes and he walked to the far end of the corridor, to the waiting room beyond the nurses' station. Sylvia sat alone there, at the end of the couch by the lamp table, staring out the big window. The hospital tower was higher than the buildings to the west of it, and she could see the wide, slow river in the morning haze. Daylight muted the yellow glow of the lamp beside her.

She turned and saw him and suddenly her dark eyes looked enormous and her face was more pale. "Sam? Is——"

"They didn't call me back. I just came in and checked him, and I have a couple of others to check, and it's standard procedure, Sylvie. No perceptible change."

He walked past her to the big window and shoved his fists into his hip pockets and looked out at the new day.

After a little while, she said, "He's been trying to take it easier since that little coronary. He really has. But you know how Dave is. He said he was going to weed his practice down to about eight very rich and nervous old ladies with minor ailments. Sam?"

He turned and looked at her, at the lean, mature vitality of her face. "What, honey?"

"What's the prognosis, Sam?"

He shrugged his bear shoulders. "Too early to tell." He looked out the window and saw a freighter being nudged into the channel by the tugs. He wished he were on it and that everybody on board was sworn never to tell Dr. Barringer where they were going or how long they'd be gone.

"Sam, please! That was a big one. Oh, God, I know that was a big one! Remember me, Sam? Eighteen years we three have known one another. I'm a nurse . . . was a nurse. Remember? You don't have to pat me on the head, Sam."

"I think she comes after the birds and the bees."

It was easy to remember the Sylvie Dorn of 18 years ago, that chunky, flirtatious, lively girl, now a whip-slender matron, dark hair with the first touches of gray. Thirty-eight? Mother of Ricky, Susan, Timmy—godmother to his own pair of demons. And Dave is—was—is 42.

"Sam?" she said again.

He turned from the window and went lumbering to the couch, thinking of all the times you make this decision and then decide how to wrap words around it to match the person you tell. But this one was close to the past and all the years, close to the heart.

He sat beside her and took her hands and swallowed a rising thickness in his throat, blinked, swallowed again and said in a pebbly voice, "I'm sorry, Sylvie. Dave hasn't got enough heart muscle left to run a toy train. And there's not one damned thing we can do about it or for it."

She pulled her hands free and lunged against him, and he held her in his big arms and patted her as she strained at the first great hard spasmodic sob and got past it and in about two or three minutes pulled herself back to a control and a forlorn stability he knew she would be able to maintain.

She dabbed her eyes and blew her nose and said, "Today sometime?"

"Probably."

"Tell them you've given permission for me to stay in there with him, will you?"

"Of course. I'll be in every once in a while."

"And thank your dear gal for taking over our tribe, Sam. Sam? Do you think he'll know I'm . . . I'm there with him?"

First, he thought, you throw the stone and then you throw the lump of sugar. No point in telling her that death had occurred, that Dave, as Dave, was long gone and that the contemporary miracles of medical science were keeping some waning meat alive, in the laboratory sense of the word.

"From everything we can learn and everything we can guess, Sylvie, I feel certain that he'll be aware of you being there, holding his hand."

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When the first gray light of the morning made the shape of the window visible, he dressed quickly and went out. He guessed that they would not be expecting him to leave that room so soon after arriving.

There were shadows of night still remaining in the empty streets, so that even though he knew his way and walked swiftly, the city seemed strange to him.