

*This story was recommended to The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction by Ray Bradbury, whose influence upon its style and structure is manifest. Less manifest (to North American eyes, at least), but surely present, is the influence of the author's native Chile: on the upper coast the burning deserts of nitrate, in the distant south the cold-howling fury of the Magellanean Straits; Inca remains—gaunt, cyclopean ruins crouching on gaunt Andean peaks—and the fierce, barbaric integrity of the unconquered Araucanians; glowing with color, the rich fields and vineyards; civilization, science, and culture, and even (recently, a guest at the University of Concepción) Allen Ginsberg . . . Hugo Correa, who wrote this story in English, is twenty-six years old, the author of the two first science fiction novels published in Chile, and of many short stories and articles appearing in leading Chilean newspapers and magazines.*

## THE LAST ELEMENT

*by Hugo Correa*

GREAT LUMINOUS AREAS, green, red and blue, pierced the planet. They were most abundant between the tropics, gradually diminishing toward the poles, resembling ulcers on a dark and wrinkled skin. The old world was a corpse. The sun, in the throes of agony, sent forth blood-red rays.

"Twenty-five minutes to land, captain! Radiation has diminished. It comes particularly from those swamps."

"What's the difference, Juan? The trip is a success, isn't it?"

"I repeat my suggestion, captain: it would be better to remain in orbit for a couple of days, until we can determine exactly the behavior of this radioactivity. Its fitfulness is suspicious."

"No. We have no time for that. Element Z is sure to be found here in its natural state and we need it to overcome the rebels. We've got to hurry."

The land, as it came nearer, was stained red by the dying sun. No signs of life, either vegetable or animal. Ancient mountain ranges worn away by millions of years' erosion. Wide plains and enormous rocky formations, these last seen in low rings around the radiant zones. Clouds of white gas floated over the landscape, stretching in long wisps close to the ground and imperceptibly creeping over it.

"Will the Earth end this way, Juan?"

"I wonder!"

"What's the matter, Juan?"

"Premonitions, captain. There's something down there that makes me nervous. I wonder what happened there?"

"We'll soon find out. As to your premonitions, don't trust them. They'll deceive you most of the time. On the other hand, our instruments are infallible. We can trust *them!*"

The rocket, like an inverted wineglass, raised its pointed prow to the sky. To the North could be seen the first slopes of a rounded mountain range; behind it, that strange, many-colored glow.

"Max and Juan! Take the tractor and go look at that swamp."

Max went ahead. His heavy boots sank at every step leaving deep prints which disappeared in the dark. The ground was now soft and slippery, making the

ascent more difficult. Night came but not darkness, for the radiation glow, far and near, provided light enough to see by. A sort of ghostly halo surrounded the stars.

"The sky is different, but it looks familiar somehow, don't you think so, Max?"

He pointed to a constellation in the shape of a cross, made up of eight stars of first magnitude.

The top of the hill. At their feet they saw a blue sandy waste, its surface slightly waved, entirely surrounded by high cliffs. The substance blazed and flickered in some silent activity going on under the explorers' eyes. In spite of its coloring and peculiar vitality, the place lacked beauty.

"I've a feeling we're being watched, Juan! Don't you think the light has increased?"

Behind the glass of their helmets both men could see each other's faces in the bluish glow.

"Yes, that's true. Of course it may only be an optical illusion due to the sunset."

"Look!"

Suddenly the wavy surface flattened itself out and turned into a smooth blue plain, quietly glimmering. At the same time the emanations changed into a mist which shimmered like hot air over a road in the sun, as though the vast expanse had begun to steam.

"It's changed, Juan, hasn't it?"

"Yes. Let's go. I don't like this at all."

They turned back. Max gave a last look at the swamp. Water-spouts beginning to whirl were now scattered over the whole plain.

"Juan, I'm sure the place changed when we arrived. As if it had noticed our presence."

Behind them, the light was diminishing rapidly.

The captain listened to the two men in silence.

"Most of the radiations are unknown, captain. I maintain my opinion: let's take off and observe the planet from space."

"No, Juan. In two days we'll have completed our exploration, then we'll take off. To lose a few hours might prove fatal. The outcome of the war depends on us."

The planet slept peacefully. A dull twilight allowed some details to be seen within a reduced radius.

"Are you sure, Pierre? You weren't daydreaming?"

"You know I'm not in the habit of daydreaming, captain. I saw two figures that looked like Juan and Max. They were walking toward the swamp. You see that the light has increased. I couldn't be mistaken."

Midnight.

"D'you think there are people here, captain?"

"Who could live in this atmosphere?"

"Some creature adapted to the place. Maybe—"

"Well?"

"Well, it's possible some other expedition has got here before us. The rebels, for instance."

"That's impossible, Joe! No one knew our destination."

The captain went to the observation window. A purplish light illuminated the scene. It lit up the hills about five hundred yards away from the rocket, which marked the end of the hollow where they had landed and also the beginning of the swamp.

"Joe! Pierre! Take the tractor and make a quick inspection. I still believe yours was a vision. But we must make sure."

The light was intense. Far off, the different shades combined to form a fantastic color scheme. The tractor started in a straight line to the swamp.

"Why didn't you wake us at once?"

"I didn't know what to do, Joe. I only came to my senses when I found that no one had left the rocket. Here's a way up!"

He drove the tractor toward an opening in the hillside. The bottom of the pass, though irregular and swampy, was as wide as a sidewalk and would let the tractor climb easily.

"No wonder I thought Max and Juan were hiding something."

The two men stared at the peculiar city. The walls and roofs of the low, symmetrical buildings sparkled softly. The wide, well-

kept streets seemed to be built of the same material as the houses. There was no rubble to be seen.

"Have you found anything?"

Pierre gestured to Joe to be quiet.

"Nothing yet, captain."

"I'm convinced that you had a nightmare, Pierre." The captain's voice sounded harshly in their ear-phones.

"Why did you lie?" Joe asked, after a moment.

"For a very simple reason. Juan and Max must have seen the same thing we have. But they kept quiet about it. Why? We'll do no harm by keeping the secret a few minutes more, will we?"

The men got out of the tractor and went nearer.

"Funny we didn't notice it from the air!"

"The buildings are the same color as the sand. They don't stand out. The radiation shimmer makes them invisible from the air."

"I'm going to take a look at that city. Wait here for me in case anything happens."

He began to climb down nimbly, clinging to the rocks. At his feet, a wide smooth street ended at the cliffside. The man put his foot out and placed it on the pavement.

"It's as solid as concrete, Joe."

He started up the street between the houses.

"The radiation is tremendous.

These streets are a real labyrinth, Joe. The houses have no openings or windows of any kind. What use could they be?"

Pierre's figure glowed the same as the city itself. He was already half a block away, close to a building which rose at the end of the avenue.

"What's the matter?"

"Wait a minute—There are words engraved on the metal, Joe! It's a name. My God!"

Joe had no time to answer. The scene suddenly quivered like jelly. The buildings burst into bubbles, in a twinkling the landscape flattened out into a furiously boiling lake. There was a soundless bubbling. The light increased blindingly and diminished at once. At Joe's feet appeared a flat smooth surface, light blue in color, slowly dying out.

*"Joe! Pierre! What's happening? What do those lights mean? Answer me!"*

Joe was still there, clinging to a rock, his eyes fixed on the swamp. Max and Juan had to separate Joe's frozen fingers to carry him to the tractor. Sixty feet down, the swamp glimmered. Pierre did not appear.

As they returned, the men noticed that the general luminosity died down considerably. Once more night reigned.

In the space ship Joe's body was subjected to a detailed exami-

nation. His eyes were closed and he was placed in the freezer, where he would remain until they returned to Earth.

The three men met in the navigation cabin.

"Why did they stop reporting to us? They were silent for at least ten minutes before Joe's final cry."

"Joe saw something," commented the captain somberly. "Maybe he saw Pierre die."

The planet, asleep now, sent out a soft glimmering which the men could see from the windows.

"He must have fallen into the swamp, captain. Joe was at the edge of the cliff. Maybe Pierre got too close to the edge and fell in."

"And the figures that Pierre saw?"

The captain could not control a sigh.

"That's something we'll never know, Max."

The captain couldn't sleep. He went to the navigation cabin and looked out. The light had increased again. The surroundings were visible to a considerable distance. There were worse places, undoubtedly. Mercury, for one. There you found lakes of steaming lead, hot gases sweeping rocky plains, and on the side which the sun's rays never reached the temperature was close to absolute zero. But, in spite of all that, it had an innocent look.

But here . . . The star was

dying. Where does a world's evolution end? When does its sun go out? Or does evolution continue, developing and adjusting itself to new climatic conditions? On Earth itself, man had no reason to believe that he would be the last created being. Any catastrophe could put an end to his existence: the very war which was imminent and which had caused the present expedition in search of new elements of destruction.

The captain was visibly agitated . . . *The effects of atomic war!* After a lapse of centuries radioactivity could form a malignant silt, shapeless but forever clinging to the face of its planet. Those strange, life-endowed pustules . . . The remains of the lost race could well be amalgamated there. A new form of life. Or death. A cancer of the planets. The last element. That was *it*: element Z. The captain felt suddenly calm. The expedition's objective was foremost again. The search for unknown element Z, the existence of which was only the fruit of calculation and conjecture. The theory was that its radiations could be transmitted through any protective substance and that it disintegrated quickly and silently. It was believed to be able to cover a surface of millions of square miles in twenty-four hours, exterminating all living beings.

He was looking at the top of a

hill when he saw a human figure emerge. The captain focused his television: there was Pierre in his space suit; he saw him wave his arms; his knees bent and he fell to the ground.

"He's less than five hundred yards away, Max. His radio must be out of order. Go and bring him back by yourself. Don't go near the swamp! Understand? Don't even look at it!"

Max stopped next to the group of rocks where Joe was found.

"A hundred and fifty yards to your left, Max!"

"I can't go on with the tractor, captain. I'm leaving it here."

The ground was rocky but Max managed to advance rapidly. Sometimes a rock would hide the rocket from him. Other times he had to slip between masses of granite set close together.

"There's Pierre, captain! He's dragging his feet. I'm going after him."

"Hurry, Max. Maybe he's crazy, like Joe. Be careful."

Pierre disappeared near the hill. No cracks or caves could be seen where Pierre might have gone in. Max searched the ground with his torch: an opening began at the foot of the hill and sank into the ground with a slight downward slope.

"It's like a tunnel, captain."

"Go on, Max. Try the ground at every step before you advance."

The passage widened out at about forty yards from the entrance. Its solid slippery floor suggested an artificial origin. Max had to be most careful not to slip.

"No footprints, captain. The floor is covered with a thin coating of silt. This must have been a mine or a shelter."

Now and again the tunnel turned. Sometimes it sloped downward and sometimes it rose, always gradually, so that it was impossible to calculate its level with regard to the top. After having advanced a thousand yards Max calculated that he must be somewhere near the landing place.

All of a sudden the man felt overcome by an unexpected sense of peace and quiet. Gone was the tension that had not left him since he began to follow Pierre. He went forward again with unlooked for enthusiasm and contentment. A hundred yards ahead a pale light from outside entered the tunnel.

"The tunnel is ending, captain."

"What about Pierre?"

"Nothing yet. But I'm sure I'm going to find him."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Premonition."

"Stop having premonitions! What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. I feel very well. It's something new."

"Come back, Max! Do you understand? Come back at once!"

"Don't shout so loud, captain! You make me deaf. There's Pierre!"

"Pierre?"

"Yes . . . but . . . I'm back where I started from!"

"What's that? What do you mean?"

"Ha! Ha! Old Pierre . . . He's walking toward the rocket! He's less than fifty yards away, captain. He's nearing the rocket from behind. D'you understand? Look North. I'm coming out of the tunnel. I can see Pierre's footprints in the sand—"

A howl was heard.

"Stop, Max! Nobody's coming. To the North there's only a plain three miles long. Go back! It's an order!"

"But . . . I'm only a hundred yards from the rocket. Pierre is waiting for me right next to it. He's waving to me! My God! The ground's sinking!"

The captain followed Max's course. The tunnel's mouth opened on a level with the swamp which stretched as far as the eye could see, quiet and glimmering.

"Juan: Max saw a mirage. Do you notice how the glow has faded? As soon as it's light we'll load the rocket and take off."

"Let's not wait any more, captain. Come back and let's return at once!"

"Are you crazy, Juan? What do you think we've come for? A

pleasure trip? Or do you think the death of two men will make me return empty-handed?"

"And the visions? How do you explain them?"

"Heaven knows! Some optical disturbance caused by the changing luminosity."

The captain fell silent. All at once the swamp had lost its wavy appearance; its glowing surface turned dull and took on the appearance and solidity of concrete. At the man's feet there was now a huge airfield lit by a radiance like moonlight. On the left rose a lofty control tower. In the center of the vision, proud and shining, rose a space ship ready to take flight. The captain stifled a cry: on the ship's side could be seen its identification number.

Five uniformed figures emerged, one by one, from a trap door on the left. The captain recognized himself as the one heading the group. One after the other he recognized Juan, Joe, Max and Pierre walking quickly toward the rocket.

One by one—himself at the end—they disappeared inside the space ship. There could be no doubt about it; he was watching the take-off of his own rocket when it went out into interstellar space some time back. Lights changed at the control tower. Once again he heard the flight chief's hard dry voice counting the seconds. Instinctively he

stepped back when the count ended.

Waves of fire and smoke appeared under the ship, reaching almost as far as the captain. Slowly it began to rise, supported by ten fiery columns which hit the ground in clouds of sparks. He thought he could hear the furious roar of the atom disintegrated in the combustion chamber to set free one megaton of domesticated energy.

The vision changed: the same place now under a midday sun. A rocket was coming down on the same spot of the recent take-off. He recognized his own rocket, although badly battered. A man got out and was lost in the crowd before the captain could recognize him. Of one thing he was certain: it wasn't himself.

Suddenly the onlookers became excited: several arms pointed skywards. The crowd fled precipitately. Only then did he recognize the pilot as he ran past, not three yards away, looking upwards in horror. It was Juan.

Another rocket was coming down on a long, fantastically shaped tongue of fire. It resembled his own, although no identification signs could be seen on its shining side. On landing it shivered all over as if it were not entirely solid. It touched the ground raising a huge phosphorescent wave, blue in color, which clouded the scene like a mist. Before the

man's feverish gaze the rocket began to crumble rapidly; its sides turned to jelly and slid to the ground like a shining waterfall. Soon it was nothing but a shapeless mound of radioactive matter speedily flowing over the rocket-drome. The first rocket exploded and crumbled away. The control tower shook and dissolved like a snowman under the sun. Night fell.

At the captain's feet stretched a furiously boiling expanse. It bubbled in silence for several seconds; it quieted down gradually and returned to its usual state of a softly glistening sandy waste.

The man gave a hoarse cry.

"That . . . that's element Z!" he stammered. Then he shouted hoarsely: "Juan! Juan!"

Nobody answered.

"Juan! Juan! What's wrong? Is the radio out of order?"

He tried the transmitter with nervous fingers. No use. He thought he felt a thousand eyes looking at him. He even imagined he heard a low sarcastic laugh from the swamp. He started to run back through the tunnel.

"No. We won't return. They'd follow us. If we go back the Earth will be turned into a planet like this one. Men's spirits will remain chained to radioactive quicksands, to form the last element. I must sacrifice myself. And Juan. I'll lock him up in his cabin and I'll



steer the rocket to the other end of the universe."

He had to climb. He slipped at every step of that endless tunnel. What could it have been before? Doubtless the race that peopled the planet in the past had searched for minerals like men did: tearing the vitals of the earth to quench their thirst for riches and power.

His heart was hammering. His temples beat, a bitter taste was on his tongue. At last he was in the open. He stopped to regain his breath. East, the sky was red. The dying sun was on the point of rising. He had been over two hours in the tunnel! Before he could master his amazement he saw a red light emerge from the landing field. A flame flowing powerfully under a well-known object.

"God! The rocket! Juan! Wait for me!" He ran wildly on, raising his arms skywards.

"Juan!"

The rocket had gathered speed. The sky was turning red. Against it you could hardly see the jet flames which carried the rocket back to earth. Juan hadn't waited any more. Terrified by the solitude, the captain's silence and the

intense luminosity of the swamp, he had fled.

The captain ran this way and that. He climbed, he fell and rose again with powerful bursts of energy. At last, exhausted and defeated, he went to lean on some low black rocks. Behind them stretched the swamp. The sun's scarlet light, mixed with the bluish glow, produced a ghostly effect.

The captain, hoarsely panting, saw that a familiar shape began to rise from the swamp in a furious swirl of radiant particles. It was a rocket. Below it there was a storm of blue bubbles and waves. It rose, lurching grotesquely. Behind it, the blood-red globe of the sun emerged slowly. Its rays touched the sides of the ascending ship.

The captain, his mouth, eyes and skin dry, saw that it was gathering speed with extraordinary swiftness. His expert gaze saw it set a Southeasterly course. It was about to enter the escape orbit. With a very few seconds' delay it had started in pursuit of Juan.

And it carried within it the coveted element.



*Evan had suffered most of his life from a nagging little worry about whether he was, or was not, there today.*

## The End of Evan Essant ...?

by Sylvia Edwards

"HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN suffering from this feeling that you are about to pass out of the picture, as you put it?" the psychiatrist asked as he made a notation on the new case-history card headed, "Essant, E."

"It's never seemed so imminent as it does now," the thin, long-legged young man with the horn-rimmed spectacles replied, "but I was haunted by the idea even as a child. I was always near-sighted, and before I was fitted with the proper glasses, everything a short distance away would blur. I thought I blurred like that when people looked at me, I could look at myself in a mirror and verify it. Then one of my teachers—I think it was in the second or third grade—explained the pun in my name to the class one day, and after that the kids would chant doggerel at me,

*'Evan Essant, fade away—  
Are you here or not today?'*

"Evanescent," the doctor said as if to himself, "very interesting!"

"My mother has a limited command of English," the patient explained. "She just didn't realize that the name she gave me, when put before our family name, sounds like a word. But as a kid, I thought she'd done it on purpose. And I was a little ashamed of her, because of her foreign accent. To compensate, I set out to master the language. But my father would have been happier if I'd developed my muscles instead of my vocabulary. He was a stocky, powerfully built man, a fireman on the railroad. I've often wished I were more like him, and I guess he did, too."

"You were an only child?" the doctor asked.

"I always thought I was. Until today, I believed I was the only son my mother ever bore. But you won't understand about that until I tell you the rest of it. After my father died, in a wreck, the pension was barely enough to take care of my mother, so I had to quit school and earn my living. The

Army wouldn't have me, of course, on account of my eyes, and I didn't have the nerve to ask for a job. What employer would want a nonentity like me? But I would write a story, and put stamps on it, and mail it, and sometimes they didn't come back."

"Do you write under your own name?"

"Why do people always ask a writer that? No, I picked the one field in which I could make no name for myself whatever."

"You mean you signed your stories, 'Anonymous'?"

"Not even that. These were confession stories. Evidently you never read a confession magazine, doctor."

"I can't recall that I did," the doctor admitted.

"Well, look at one, sometime. There are no authors. There is a title, then a first person story. In the place where the by-line belongs, there's nothing."

"Significant," the doctor commented. "Were you under a compulsion to write for this one type of magazine only?"

"Possibly. Looking back, it does seem that I went out of my way to make sure there would be no printed evidence of my existence. But at the time I was thinking of practical reasons. Since I had the confession technique down pat, and was dependent on writing for a living, my agent advised me not to spend too much time experi-

menting. Not that I was particularly proud of being a confession writer. There are plenty of markets and pretty good rates, but it's not the type of writing a man ordinarily does. These stories deal with the problems of female characters between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two."

"What kind of problems?" the doctor asked.

"Well, here are the titles of some of my stories. *Were We Too Young for Love—Was It Really Love He Wanted—Was It Wrong to Give Him Love?—I Lost the Love of My Baby's Father—I Blamed Her for Stealing My Husband's Love—Love Came Too Soon—Could I Ever Love Him Again. . . .* Do you want to hear any more of them?"

"No, that gives me a rough idea."

"Rough is right. The trouble was, I didn't believe in love at first sight. But the minute the female character meets a crew-cut male character with a strong body and a weak mind, she always knows he is the one. As a matter of fact, I didn't believe in love, period. Yet I had to write about it in order to eat."

"Perhaps you just didn't believe anyone could love a nonentity, as you call yourself," the doctor suggested.

"I guess that was it. But I gritted my teeth, and made a living of a sort from confessions for about

six years. I went a long time between haircuts, and lived in a furnished room with a single window overlooking an alley. I didn't care how the place looked, because nobody ever came to see me. I'd pound my portable grimly all day, and in the evening, when I emerged from my cell, I'd wrap myself in a cloak of invisibility. The other tenants passed me in the halls as if I weren't there. Even the landlady didn't speak to me unless the rent was due. Sundays, I went to my mother's for dinner, the rest of the time I cooked in a converted closet called a kitchenette. I didn't have a car, I'd never been on a dance floor, I didn't drink and I was never invited to any parties. I didn't even go to the movies very often—other fellows my age would be there with their dates. So I spent most of my evenings at the branch public library.

"I hadn't lived much, but I lived vicariously in the printed page. I read about everything from Aard-Vark to Xenophobia. But after a certain pretty librarian started to work there, I didn't get so much reading done. I'd sit at a table facing the desk, pretending to read, but watching her quick, feminine motions over the top of the book. Sometimes I pretended to take notes while I composed sonnets about her. I did a lot of daydreaming about how to break the ice, but I never got to first base with the librarian. A crew-cut male

character with a strong body and a weak mind stole her right out from under my nose."

"I gathered as much," the doctor said sympathetically.

"But shortly after this, something very surprising happened. If you'll pardon my talking like a writer, it was completely out of character for me."

"I see," the doctor said, forming a steeple with the finger-tips of his two hands, "and the minute you saw the young lady, you knew she was the one."

"I didn't say that!" Evan protested, sitting up on the couch. Then, as he sank back again, he added, rather sheepishly, "But that's how it happened, for both of us. My agent had just sent me a check for a story, so I put on my one good suit and took a bus to downtown Ellay to have a decent meal for a change. I was sitting at a small table in Clifton's cafeteria, eating lunch.

"There were a bunch of slick chicks at another table nearby, with pony tails, too much eye makeup, skin-tight Capri pants and men's shirts too big for them. They were giggling and cutting up, obviously angling for some strange men to pick them up. They were too young to be doing that, too—one of them still had braces on her teeth.

"Another girl came walking across the room with her tray, and the contrast between her and these

others—well, you could tell at a glance that she was a lady. She was wearing a modest full skirt, and a demure little ruffled shirt-waist buttoned high at the throat, and she didn't walk in a suggestive manner, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," the doctor assured him.

"Well, when this girl put her tray on my table, and sat down in the chair opposite me, our eyes met over the Spanish rice, and we knew. I don't know how I had the nerve to speak to her—I guess I was just talking aloud, to myself. I said I'd written that scene a hundred times, and never believed until now that it could actually happen.

"Are you *really* a writer?' she asked, making it sound as if being a writer was the most wonderful thing in the world. I modestly admitted that I'd had quite a few short stories published, and she asked the usual question, 'Do you write under your own name?' I didn't intend to admit, at this point, that I'd never had a by-line. I certainly didn't want her to call me mister, and I wasn't going to say, 'My name is Evan Essant,' and have her laugh in my face. So I got tongue-tied, and she came to my rescue.

"Please don't tell me,' she begged. 'Let me give you a name that fits you.' So she thought a minute and said, 'I'm going to call

you Mark.' That unlimbered my tongue, and I asked why Mark fit me. She said, 'Because you'll make your mark in the world.'

"Even after Elaine met my mother, and knew my right name is Evan, she kept on calling me Mark, and every time I heard her say it, I remembered the meaning she attached to it. Elaine Kincaid and I saw a lot of each other. There was something about being with her, about the tone of her voice and the way she looked up to me, that made me feel like somebody, for the first time in my life. If a girl like her could believe in me, how could I help beginning to believe in myself? Then, when I got the idea of marrying her—"

"This was *your* idea?" the doctor interrupted.

"Of course it was. Elaine isn't the type to cheapen herself by throwing herself at men. But on the other hand, I couldn't quite bring myself to asking her in so many words—I had so little to offer her. By this time, however, I'd confessed I wrote confessions, and Elaine said she wanted to read some of my stories. So I just gave her a magazine. She got the point right away. She read the story to herself up to the place where the male character proposes. Then she read the proposal out loud, and said, 'Oh, Mark, you have such a poetic way of asking a girl to marry you—how can I resist you?' So it was all settled."

"Clever of you to give her a magazine when she asked for it," the doctor commented drily.

"That's what Elaine thought. She said it was the most original way of proposing she'd ever heard of, and the girls at the office would never get over it. I'm trying to think of the full name of the outfit she works for—she generally just calls it Northwest—"

"Northwest Mounted Police?" the doctor suggested, helpfully.

"No! Northwest Fidelity Mutual, I think. It's an insurance company. She said she wanted to keep her job for at least a year after we were married, so I could quit grinding away at confession stories, and write a book."

"Did her parents approve of this?" the doctor asked.

"Not exactly. Her father's blustering didn't bother me much—I put it down to his chronic bad temper. But her mother really got my goat. She called me—a nobody."

"You shouldn't have taken it literally."

"That's what Elaine said. That I should pay no attention to her mother; she'd soon be talking out of the other side of her mouth, bragging about her son-in-law, the famous author. Elaine was of age, so there wasn't much they could do about it. But under the circumstances, we didn't want her folks spending a lot of money on an elaborate church wedding. So we

had a quiet ceremony before a J.P. on a Saturday afternoon, with the Kincaids and my mother as witnesses. To say my mother was delighted is an understatement. She had almost reconciled herself to the idea that I'd be a bachelor all my days, but not quite.

"We moved into a comfortable furnished apartment Elaine found; the only piece of furniture we had to buy was a desk for my typewriter, to replace the battered table I'd used in my furnished room. The following Monday, when Elaine went to her office, I started outlining my book. It was to be a science-fiction novel called SOL, the autobiography of the sun, told as if it were a conscious entity."

"Sounds like an ambitious project," the doctor said.

"Oh, I was full of ambition. I did a lot of research, and turned out more finished wordage than I ever had before. Elaine is a cracker-jack typist, she copied each chapter in the evenings as I finished it. Besides that, she's a wonderful cook. I was gaining weight, in spite of my heavy writing schedule."

"You didn't plan on having a family right away, I gather," the doctor said.

"No, the apartment building doesn't allow children. We figured on using the advance royalties from the book as the down payment on a little house—then no

landlord could dictate to us like that. I was well into chapter seven, in which Sol shrinks to a white dwarf star, throwing off great showers of planetesimal material as it contracts. And just as the sun was giving birth to its family of planets, Elaine informed me that she was pregnant. I don't know which was the more cataclysmic event, from my point of view.

"I was still trying to grasp the full import of this revelation when she sprung the rest of it. She wanted me to be free to continue working on the book full time, and not to rush it, so she intended to keep on working for five or six months—five or six months, mind you—and then ask her father for money.

"She was talking like a stock character in an old-style confession story, the brave little unwed mother carrying the fatherless child. So what did that make me? Nobody. How my mother-in-law would love to have *that* to throw up to me! I wasn't going to give her the satisfaction. I'd show them who wore the pants in this family!

"When I got my one good suit out of the cleaners, I could wear the pants all right, but the vest wouldn't button. Maybe it was Elaine's good cooking, or maybe my chest had expanded two inches since I learned I was a prospective papa. At the employment agency,

they were looking for a man who could handle the English language, to dictate letters. They sent me to one of the big oil companies, where I was given some aptitude tests and hired over several other applicants, in spite of my lack of business references. A man named Bowen had been transferred to their Cincinnati office, and they were in a hurry to fill his position before a backlog of mail piled up, so they told me to report for work in the morning. It was a good thing I didn't try to wear the vest, because on the way home I took a deep breath and a button popped off my shirt.

"I decided to send the book to my agent the way it was—seven completed chapters and an outline of the rest. Publishers seldom sign a contract with an unknown author for an uncompleted book, but I was in such an optimistic mood that I felt SOL was good enough to be one of the rare exceptions. If it brought contract, I could complete it in the evenings. Elaine had been working two shifts, and if a little thing like her had that much stamina, some extra work certainly wasn't going to hurt me any."

"Well, bless my superego!" the doctor exclaimed, "She *did* make a man of you!"

"There remained the question of what pen-name to use. Elaine's name for me, Mark, was a natural for the first part. We were casting

around for a surname when it struck both of us at once—Clifton, in honor of the cafeteria where we met. I rolled a sheet of paper into my typewriter and typed out a title page,

“SOL—a novel by Mark Clifton.

“Reading over my shoulder, Elaine said, ‘Mark Clifton. That’s good. Somehow it just *sounds* like a science-fiction writer.’

“I thought it was good, too. In fact, I liked it so well that I even used it for the return address on the envelope, and wrote it over my own name on the mailbox downstairs. The next morning, I mailed the manuscript on my way downtown, without any cover letter to my agent, without any explanation to him of how a nameless confession writer whose checks he used to make out ‘E. Essant’ had suddenly become a science-fiction writer using the pseudonym of ‘Mark Clifton.’ Then I dismissed the matter from my mind and concentrated on my new job.

“I’ve been working on the eighteenth floor of a new air-conditioned building, in a big office that houses sixteen correspondents. We handle a large volume of mail from the general public—letters addressed to the Company rather than to any specific department, branch, or individual. I soon learned that most of my fellow correspondents, having been hired for the same reason I was,

are frustrated writers. I was accorded considerable respect because I had actually sold some short stories, and particularly because I had a book-length going the rounds.

“Elaine planned on quitting her job very soon—she was just waiting until the girls at the office could ‘surprise’ her with a baby shower. That was a wonderful time for us. Copying the book had been keeping us home evenings, but now we went for long walks together. Funny, but I’d never really noticed before how little she is. She was always so capable and energetic, I’d thought of her as larger. But as we walked down the street, she hardly came up to my shoulder, and she seemed to lean on my arm more than she used to. It made me throw my shoulders back and breathe deep, stand tall, instead of slumping over to minimize my height as I used to do.

“The most wonderful day of all was the day my agent’s telegram arrived. Elaine hadn’t felt so well that morning, and had stayed home from work, so she called me up and read it to me over the phone. I remember every word of it.

“‘GOOD WORK, MARK. R&S OFFER CONTRACT. SOL. A THOUSAND ADVANCE, HALF ON SIGNING, HALF ON COMPLETION JUNE FIFTEEN. CAN DO?’ —BARNEY.

“Lucy Prentice, the branch



switchboard operator on our floor, listened in as usual and in fifteen minutes had the news all over the office. My fellow-workers came over to shake my hand, the vice-president in charge of public relations, who heads up five departments including ours, sent me a note in the inter-office mail, and even Miss Smith, the office manager, a sour old maid if there ever was one, extended grudging congratulations.

"One of the biggest and oldest publishing houses in the country, the first publishers to read SOL, had grabbed the first book manuscript I ever submitted in uncompleted form. Neither Elaine nor I saw anything fishy in that. She said she knew all along I had it in me and phoned her mother to indulge in some I-told-you-so talk. I sent Barney a wire consisting of two words, 'YES, MARK.'

"But it didn't seem quite real until the following night, at eleven P.M., when the contract arrived air-mail special delivery. I took it down to the office next morning and signed it with the name that was to appear on the book before a notary in the comptroller's office on the tenth floor. Then I put an air-mail stamp on it and deposited it lovingly in a sack of company mail. That was a Saturday, I picked Elaine up at Northwest at noon and we went out to celebrate.

"First we went to look at a car

I'd seen advertised and before I knew it I'd signed another contract, but this time with my right name. I needed a car, of course; if I was going to finish the book by June fifteenth, I couldn't waste so much time commuting by bus. But the salesman talked me into a later model and higher payments than I'd anticipated.

"Then we picked up the first tailor-made suit I'd ever owned in my life, which I'd ordered the week before. Elaine put on the short formal she never gets a chance to wear, and we wound up in a rather plush restaurant where they have an orchestra. I protested that I couldn't dance, but we ordered a bottle of champagne; after all, signing a contract for a first novel is something that happens only once in a lifetime. After two glasses of it, that dance floor didn't look so formidable. Elaine said I was doing fine, and a couple of hours later, I remember vaguely that I was dancing in a haze of champagne with a blonde in a green dress with sequins all over it that clung to her like scales to a fish. After that Elaine took me home; she said I was learning too fast.

"Two days later, the doorbell woke us an hour before the alarm clock was due to ring. I expected it to be another air-mail special with my copy of the contract, signed by the publishers, and Barney's check for four hundred and fifty, the

first of what I hoped would be a long series of royalty checks on SOL. Instead it was a night-letter. I signed my pen name and tore it open. It read,

"R&S LEGAL STAFF SAY YOUR SIGNATURE DOES NOT CONFORM TO SIGNATURE ON PREVIOUS CONTRACT. WHAT'S THE MATTER, MARK, HITTING THE BOTTLE? PHONE AT ONCE.  
—BARNEY."

"Elaine came in just as the Western Union boy left, wrapping her blue housecoat around her. I handed her the wire. 'What previous contract?' she asked puzzled.

"I was beginning to have a horrible suspicion as to who had signed the previous contract, but I refused to believe it until the library opened, and I checked the authors' index. I had a migraine coming on and my eyes blurred so I could hardly read the cards, but I found it. No wonder Elaine thought the name 'Mark Clifton' sounded like a science-fiction writer. He is one. Barney would have caught it, but the actual Clifton is his client, too. My address was different, of course, but writers sometimes move. I had made a ghastly, unforgivable mistake."

"Not a mistake," the doctor said, "I would call it a classic case of a buried urge to self-destruction, implemented by unconscious memory. You had read the real Clifton's work and had consciously

forgotten it, but your subconscious retained the name."

"Too pat," Evan objected. "Would it be possible for me to arrange unconsciously to meet a girl in Clifton's cafeteria, and unconsciously convey to her the idea of calling me Mark? At a time, I might add, when I had no use for a pen-name, being a confession writer? And did I unconsciously select the same literary agent who handles Clifton's work, several years before that, just so I could ultimately defeat my own purpose?"

"Quite possible," the doctor said.

"Well, it's no more impossible than some of the other things that have been happening to me, come to think of it," Evan conceded. "At any rate, I ran up a big long-distance bill, conveying my abject apologies to Barney. He said he believed me but he was afraid that when the publishers found out they weren't taking up their option on Clifton's next book, they would withdraw their offer. That's just what they did, though they were very decent about it. They didn't reproach me for trying to cash in on another author's reputation; they simply said that, since this was a first novel, they would prefer to see it in completed form.

"I realized that any other publishers would say the same thing, and when I got the manuscript back, I tried to complete it eve-

nings and week-ends. My job wasn't too demanding, and I'm sure I could have written effectively at night under other circumstances. But every time I looked at SOL, a wave of shame would come over me, driving every creative thought out of my head. I crumpled up every page of new copy I tried to write, and threw the balls of paper in the general direction of the waste basket.

"Finally I decided I had to get the manuscript off my desk, give it a cooling off period. So I put the whole thing in the bottom drawer of the dresser in the bedroom. I'm certain that's where I put it, because I recall there was nothing in the drawer but a lot of old socks Elaine hadn't had time to mend, and I threw them out to make room for the book manuscript.

"To get it off my mind, I tried to write other things, but for the first time in my life, I experienced a complete dearth of ideas. I had gone from the height of optimism about my future as a writer to the depths of pessimism, and I began to think my deathless prose would never reach a wider audience than one customer in Keokuk, Iowa. Of course, even if I wasn't getting anywhere as a writer, I still had a lot of things to be thankful for—my wife, my job, and a baby on the way. But telling myself that was as ineffective as telling a man with an aching molar that his

other teeth are all right. I didn't realize how much more important these other things were to me until I began to lose them, too.

"After the fiasco about the pen-name, Elaine stopped calling me Mark, not wanting to remind me of it. I was Evan Essant, again. One evening, while I was helping her dry the dishes, she said, 'Evan, I hate to tell you this, but I'm afraid the baby was a false alarm.'"

"That's not uncommon," the doctor said.

"In my life it's uncommon," Evan replied, "In fact, it was unprecedented. I couldn't help feeling that the baby was a false alarm because I was a false alarm. I should have seen to it that Elaine took better care of herself, instead of letting her keep on working day and night. Maybe I should have slept on the couch in the living room. Don't you think so, doctor?"

"No, I don't think so, but that's not my specialty. You should follow your obstetrician's orders."

"We hadn't even picked one out. That's another thing I blamed myself for. I should have insisted that she go to a doctor at once."

"Not necessarily. But since there had been no medical confirmation, I am inclined to think that your wife was not actually pregnant, that you have no reason to blame yourself. How did she take it?"

"Better than I did, in some

ways. She said she might as well keep on working until the car was paid for, and I made no objections. My tendency to make decisions had somehow evaporated. Likewise my enthusiasm to do a good job at the office. Little errors have been creeping into my dictation. I've been restless and depressed. I haven't been sleeping well lately and I've lost my appetite, I've lost the weight I gained when we were first married.

"Then last night, after Elaine had gone to bed, I was prowling around the apartment, not knowing what to do with myself. I couldn't find anything I wanted to read, and got the idea of digging SOL out of the bottom drawer, reading it over objectively from the beginning, as if someone else had written it. That way, I thought I might get back into the swing of it.

"Elaine still had the light on, she was propped up on the pillows manicuring her fingernails. I opened the bottom drawer, where I'd put my manuscript a couple of weeks ago, and found it empty. The finished chapters, the two carbons, the outline, even my research notes, had vanished.

"I was having a hard enough time forcing myself to write the concluding chapters; to reconstruct the whole book from the beginning would be virtually impossible. So I worked myself up into a blind rage. I should have known

better than to blame Elaine, who had sweated over it with me. Yet what other rational explanation was there? I accused her of throwing SOL out with the trash. When she denied it, I called her a liar.

"I hardly knew what I was saying. I was just dredging up the vilest, bitterest half-truths I could think of to fling at her. It wasn't really the thought of the wasted work that hurt—it was the thought that she'd lost faith in me. And because I was hurt I wanted to make her suffer for it. I wasn't satisfied until I got her crying so she couldn't stop.

"Then I turned my back on her and went to sleep. I don't know what came over me. I woke up briefly about three A.M., I heard her still sobbing softly, and even then I didn't take her in my arms and comfort her. She finally fell asleep through sheer exhaustion, and didn't hear the alarm clock ring.

"By morning, I'd come to my senses. The loss of the book shrank to insignificance beside the stark realization that by lashing out like that, I might have lost the only good thing that ever came into my lonely, ineffectual life, the woman who lay there beside me, sleeping. I was filled with remorse, but I didn't dare awaken her to tell her so. I was afraid she wouldn't forgive me.

"I shaved with a razor—the electric shaver she gave me for

my birthday makes too much noise. My hands were shaking and I cut myself. I dressed quietly, closed the bedroom door softly behind me, and went to the kitchen to make some breakfast, which I couldn't swallow because I felt like such a heel. I phoned Northwest and told them Elaine wouldn't be in today, that she had a bad cold. On the way downtown, I was thinking that instead of heaping abuses on her head, I should be worshipping at her feet. I was so preoccupied that I got a ticket for driving down the wrong side of the street. I stopped at the florist's shop on the ground floor of the building where I work, selected eleven long-stemmed red roses and a single white one, and told them to deliver them right away.

"By this time I was late for work, and when I got off the elevator on the eighteenth floor, Lucy Prentice seemed disposed to kid me about it. 'May I help you?' she asked, as if I were a stranger to her. So I kidded back, though I really didn't feel up to it. 'I want to see Mr. Essant,' I said. She answered with a straight face, 'We have no Mr. Essant, are you sure you have the right department?'

"Then, when I started to punch in, I found my card missing from its slot. I thought somebody had punched in for me, and misplaced the card, so I went on

to my own desk. The nameplate was missing. I looked for it in the top drawer—no nameplate, and nothing else, either. All the drawers were as bare and empty as the dresser drawer at home, where my manuscript had been. Puzzled, I straightened up, to find myself confronting the office manager.

"'Who took everything out of my desk?' I demanded.

"'That's Mr. Bowen's desk,' she said acidly, 'He was transferred. And who, may I ask, are you?'

"'Bowen's replacement,' I told her. 'As you know!'

"'Personnel has not notified me they hired another man to take his place,' Miss Smith said. By this time all fifteen people at the other desks had turned to look at us. I'd been working among them daily. Yet I didn't see the light of recognition in a single face. I rushed back to the time clock, but I couldn't find my card in any of the slots.

"Until now, my misfortunes had been natural ones, or had seemed so at the time. But this was unnatural, spooky. It was a bad dream, I told myself, and if I could hear Elaine's voice, I would wake up. For the moment I had forgotten that she probably wasn't speaking to me.

"I took the express elevator to the ground floor, closed myself into a drug store phone booth,

and dialed my home number, ringing it long enough to wake the dead. The dead? My God, had she become so despondent she had turned on the gas without lighting the burners? I scraped two fenders backing out of the parking lot, exceeded the speed limit, and took the stairs of the apartment house two at a time.

"The florist's box had already been delivered; it was in the hall, leaning against our door. I burst into the apartment, calling Elaine's name. Except for my own voice and footsteps, the place was silent. It was a relief not to find her lifeless body, and at first I thought she had simply gone to her office. But when I phoned Northwest, she wasn't there. That left me with no alternative but to conclude that she had left me.

"I looked in her closet. As I had expected, her clothes were gone. But as I certainly had not expected, she had taken everything, rather than the contents of an overnight bag. Even the top of her dressing table was bare, not cluttered as it usually is with all the little evidences of femininity, the half-used bottles of perfume, the scattered bobby pins and hairnets tangled up in costume jewelry.

"To go away for a few days to teach me a lesson was one thing; to go away for good was another. My remorse and concern turned to determination. I was going to

bring her back, if I had to carry her. She didn't need to act as if she'd never known a man to lose his temper. Her own father certainly doesn't have the patience of Job. Maybe that was the whole trouble. Elaine was used to a man being master in his own house, and I hadn't acted enough that way. From now on, I was going to change, and I had a hunch that would impress her more than any amount of worshipping at her feet.

"When I dialed the Kincaids' number, my mother-in-law answered, and I asked her, 'Is Elaine there?'

"Yes, she is,' the old lady said. 'But she isn't feeling well. She can't come to the phone.'

"You mean she doesn't want to talk to me,' I said. 'Well, tell her I know she didn't throw the book away, because some other things have been disappearing at the office. I'm sorry I blamed her for it, but she's making too much of an issue of it.'

"I don't understand,' Elaine's mother said.

"Never mind!' I told her, "Just tell Elaine not to unpack her bags, because I'm coming right over to get her.'

"Who is this, anyway?' the old lady demanded.

"Well, who did you think it was?' I asked impatiently.

"One of Elaine's boy friends, I suppose,' she replied.

“‘One of her boy friends!’ I exploded. ‘Listen, Mrs. Kincaid. You may think Elaine has brushed me off for good. I imagine you’d like that. But you have another think coming. She doesn’t have one single, solitary thing she can use in court, and you know it.’

“‘In court?’ my mother-in-law said. ‘You must have the wrong number.’ And she hung up on me.

“At the time, I didn’t see the connection between her reaction and the blank stares of my fellow employees. I just thought I was getting the silent treatment from the whole family, and I wasn’t going to stand for it. I drove grimly out to the Kincaids’ and when my mother-in-law answered the doorbell, I said, ‘All right. I came to apologize. But if she wants me to crawl, I’m not going to do it.’

“‘What on Earth are you talking about?’ the old lady asked me.

“‘You know damn well what I’m talking about,’ I said, and added, as I handed over the flowers, ‘These are for Elaine.’

“Mrs. Kincaid opened the box, though she had no business to, and said, ‘Oh, how lovely.’

“Just then, Elaine’s old man came into the front hall, in his shirt-sleeves, suspenders, and bedroom slippers. ‘Look, Sam,’ his wife said to him, ‘The girls in Elaine’s office sent her some

flowers.’ He grunted, and she added, ‘Well, give the boy a tip.’ Kincaid dug into his pants pocket and started to hand me a quarter.

“That did it.

“‘This has gone far enough,’ I decided, ‘I know my rights and I demand to see Elaine! If she won’t come downstairs, I’ll just have to go up after her. Get out of my way!’

“I took the open box of flowers out of the old lady’s hands and pushed past her. I was in no mood to take no for an answer. But as I started up the stairs, a calloused hand attached to a beefy arm grabbed me by the collar. Elaine’s father held me at arm’s length, glaring at me as if I were a noxious insect he was about to grind to a pulp under his heel. At this point, her mother intervened.

“‘Please don’t lose your temper, Sam,’ she clucked like an hysterical hen. ‘He’s not a delivery boy, after all, he must be the young man who got the wrong number! He was calling another girl named Elaine, and it was such a good excuse to get acquainted—’

“‘You got a funny way of getting acquainted,’ Sam Kincaid said to me, ‘Just what were you intending to do upstairs? Get in bed with my daughter?’

“Well, I wasn’t going to let him bluff me. ‘As a matter of fact,’ I said coolly, ‘That is exactly

what I intend to do, and you can't stop me.'

"It was the wrong answer. Elaine's mother gasped. Her father released my collar, carefully removed my glasses with his left hand, and delivered a short right to the jaw. Fortunately he pulled his punch. He was just giving me the free sample. If he'd put his weight behind it, I would have gone down for the count. As it was, I merely staggered, grabbed the banister, and managed to stay on my feet.

"When my jaw would move again, after a fashion, I mumbled, 'But—don't you know who I am?'

"'No,' Kincaid said. 'And I don't care to find out. I'll give you just thirty seconds to get out of here.' He handed back my glasses and stood there rubbing his knuckles, waiting for the thirty seconds to be up, so he could sock me again.

"I realized, finally, that it wasn't just an act, that he actually didn't recognize me. So I put my glasses on and left. He slammed the door behind me and as an afterthought, opened it again and threw my box of roses after me. They spilled all over the porch. But I vowed I would come back when he wasn't there.

"I am more determined than ever to see Elaine, because I feel she is the key to the whole thing. I was nothing before she came to

me, now I am becoming nothing again. If I regain her, I can face the world again, a whole man. If not, I have a strange feeling that my disintegration will become complete.

"I am sure of only one thing, the thing we were sure of the moment we met, that I love Elaine and that she loves me. I will affirm that though I pass through the vanishing point. But the question is, will she remember me as her husband, even though her parents don't? Is love a strong enough force to penetrate this aura of anonymity that seems to envelop me?

"In search of the answer, I went to the house where I was born and brought up, though I was so confused, I hardly knew how I got there. I had run to my mother, just as I did when I was six and blood was flowing from a cut in my bare foot; I was terrified that all the blood would flow from my body and I would dry up and blow away. Now I sought the same binding of my hurts, the same assurance that I would not vanish.

"When my mother unlocked the door, I just stood there, waiting for her to recognize me. Instead, she said, 'I don't want any,' and started to close the door in my face. Desperately I pushed against it, keeping it open, protesting, 'But mama, I'm not selling anything!'



"'Always they're not selling anything,' she said. 'They only got something to give away. But to get it you got to subscribe to a magazine. I got no money for that.'

"I hollered at her, 'Mama! It's me—Evan. Your son!' and she answered, 'You should make an old woman sad. My son Joe, he got kilt in Korea.'

"'You're dreaming, mama!' I told her. 'I never went to war! I was four-F on account of my eyes.'"

"'Joe had good eyes,' she said, 'He was a strong, healthy man, just like his father. And you don't sell me something just because you call me mama. Everybody calls me mama. Go next door—they got plenty money.'

"I was so shocked that I let her get the door shut. She was telling me that I had never existed, that she had borne a different son, who grew up to be the man I always wanted to be. At first I thought she was losing her mind because she has been too much alone, and still grieves over my father's death.

"Yet how could I prove she was wrong? It seemed that nobody else knew me, either, that whatever slight mark this non-entity has made in the world has been erased. I can't even produce a single printed story with my by-line. Then, with a sense of relief, I recalled that I had excellent

identification in my billfold, a negative photostat with the words, 'Must wear corrective lenses' in the corner, with my name, birth date, the color of my eyes and hair, my height and weight, with the letter 'M' in the square marked 'Sex' and the word 'yes' in the square marked 'Married.' My driver's license would prove everything about me! I swear I had it this morning when I got a ticket. But this afternoon, when I searched for it frantically, it had disappeared, just as my manuscript did—just as my job did.

"That's when I decided to come here. My mother isn't losing her mind—I am. I recognized your name in the classified, doctor, because Elaine's mother mentioned once that she knows you by reputation. I almost hope you tell me that I am mentally deranged. That's bad enough, but at least it's conceivable. It's better than being non-existent."

The young man sat up, swung his long legs over the side of the couch and planted his feet on the floor, waiting, with a strained expression, for the doctor's verdict.

"I shall have to ask you a few questions," the doctor said. "Please answer, even if they sound rather foolish. Who are you, where are you, what year is it, and who's President?"

"I'm Evan Essant, I'm in a psychiatrist's office in Los Angeles, it's nineteen sixty-one, and

the President is Kennedy."

"As I thought, you're oriented in all three spheres," the doctor said. "Walk across the room, please."

The patient took a moment to react to this unexpected command, then complied.

"Now walk toward me," the doctor said, and as the patient was about to collide with the desk, he added, "That's fine. Now sit down and remove your glasses."

The doctor shone a small flashlight into the patient's eyes, then announced, "You don't show the physical symptoms of an active psychosis."

"I thought all a person had to do to get into the booby hatch was to give a doctor a recital like I just gave you," Evan remarked, "It's not that simple, is it?"

"No, it's not that simple," the doctor agreed. "You might be surprised to know how many people try to get into mental hospitals just to avoid facing their problems. Now, you say you used some rather violent language to your wife. Did you ever become physically violent, or attempt suicide?"

"Certainly not!" Evan said, "On the contrary, the very fact that I'm here seems to indicate that I'm trying to preserve myself, if possible."

"Exactly," the doctor said. "It also tends to indicate that you are not psychotic. If you were, you

would be convinced that your interpretation of this series of rejections is a valid one, and you would not seek psychiatric help."

"I do need help," Evan said, "But what can you do in a situation like this?"

"I want you to take some medication and come back to see me again Tuesday," the doctor said, as he wrote a prescription. "But I am inclined to think your mother is the one who may need hospitalization."

"Will pills make people recognize me?" Evan asked, dubiously.

"They will relieve the tension, so you can evaluate this lack of recognition more clearly," the doctor replied. "Naturally, your mother's rejection of you, coming after these other traumatic events, affected you profoundly, and you projected it back onto other people. But once you can relax, you will realize that these other losses have a more reasonable explanation. Then you can begin doing something about them. Report your driver's license lost and get a duplicate. Register at an employment agency. And by all means, effect a reconciliation with your wife, regardless of her parents' objections. You may take that as the doctor's orders."

"I'll follow your orders on that if it's humanly possible," Evan said, "Even if I have to go back to their house after Kincaid is asleep with a ladder long enough

to reach her window sill. But since you seem to have all the answers, doctor, maybe you can advise me what to do about some immediate practical problems."

"What problems, for instance?" the doctor asked.

"Money, for instance. I doubt I even have enough to get that prescription filled. On the way over here I stopped at one of the company stations for gas, and tried to cash a personal check. You can imagine my embarrassment when it faded out as if I'd written it in disappearing ink. Among other things, I've had nothing to eat today, and that makes me feel even more as if I were passing out of the picture. But I don't know whether to settle for a hamburger, or blow the bankroll on a steak dinner. Should I hurry up and spend what money I have in my pockets before it disappears, too, or should I make it last as long as possible?"

"Perhaps you could sell your car to tide you over until you get a job," the doctor suggested.

"I had a car when I came here," Evan agreed. "I've been trying to figure out why, and I think it's because the finance company has more money in it than I do. So far, only my personal possessions that are paid for in full have been disappearing. This suit, shirt, and shoes, were bought on a charge account, so I haven't been arrested for indecency yet. But I

paid cash for my underwear, and it's gone. Likewise my socks."

He expended one of his long legs, pulled up the cuff of his trousers, and exposed a bare, bony ankle.

"That is a problem," the doctor admitted, as he stared at it.

"It may solve itself," Evan said. "My fellow-employees, my in-laws and my mother, could see me, though they didn't recognize me. But on the way over here, something new seems to have been added. I parked across the street, and walked over in a marked cross-walk. A big truck and several cars kept right on going through the pedestrian cross-walk, as if none of the drivers could see me. If I weren't fast on my feet, I'd be on a slab at the morgue, where my visibility or invisibility would be of academic interest only.

"Two people bumped into me on the sidewalk. The elevator operator closed the door in my face, though there was plenty of room for another passenger. The girl in your outer office paid no attention to me until I'd been standing in front of her desk for several seconds. My image seems to register if people look at me long enough, but not at a glance."

The doctor took off his pincenez, polished them, perched them anew on the bridge of his nose, and stared through them intently.

"Do you have trouble seeing me now?" Evan demanded, in alarm.

"Power of suggestion," the doctor said. "Now, suppose we get started? Just lie back and say whatever comes into your mind. But please speak louder. I can't hear you."

Realizing that all memory of the case had been abruptly erased from the doctor's memory, Evan was too stunned to reply. It would have done little good, in any event, for his voice, sounding normal to his own ears, was apparently muffled before it reached the listener as if there were an impalpable glass wall of increasing thickness between. Evan raised his hand before his eyes, and in unbelieving fascination, stared through it.

The doctor picked up a medical journal from his desk, glanced through its pages, then put it down, tilted his desk chair back and contemplated the ceiling. He wrinkled his high forehead, looking perplexed, as if trying to bring into focus some vague thought that lingered in the back of his mind. Finally, with a shrug, he dismissed the matter and pushed a button on his desk.

The door opened promptly and the receptionist entered. "Do

you have a cylinder for me to type while you see your next patient?" she asked.

"What makes you think I was dictating?"

"I thought I heard your voice."

"You were mistaken. I seldom have a free hour, and I was catching up on the journals. Who's in the waiting room?"

"A Mrs. Kincaid brought her daughter, Elaine, age 23, but I'm not sure of the patient's last name. The mother insists it's Kincaid, but Elaine says she's been married. I guess that must be the girl's aberration, that she's married to somebody her mother doesn't even know. You certainly run into some strange things here!"

"Very interesting," the doctor said. "Send the mother in first and I'll get the facts from her while the young lady waits outside for a few moments."

A sudden, aggressive breeze stirred the papers on the desk, ruffling an unused case history card and prescription blank. Then it blew through the open door to the waiting room, ruffling the receptionist's hairdo in passing.

She raised her hand to rearrange her bangs. "It's drafty in here," she complained as she left to carry out the doctor's orders.

