

“This is the first time I’ve been by myself since the first night.”

“Are we responsible for your being here?”

She did not immediately open her eyes. “No.”

“Fasure? You’re not just painting the bones?”

She briefly described the night of her commitment. When she opened her eyes she saw Luciente consulting the watch that whispered.

“It’s running hard for me to comprehend,” Luciente said in his high excited voice. “Might as well be Yif. Your mem has a sweet friend who abuses per and who ... sold your sister?”

“Her pimp, Geraldo. And she’s my niece, not my sister. Geraldo is a pig! He didn’t want her to have his baby.”

Luciente looked deeply embarrassed. Passing his hand over his mouth, he shifted from haunch to haunch, squatting before her. “Uh, I know you people ate a great deal of meat. But was it common to feed upon person? Or is this slavery, I thought wiped out by your time?”

The urge to cry was still burning her eyes. “Sometimes we have nothing to feed on but our pain and each other ... . What’s that about meat?”

“How did this Geraldo sell per flesh then, and pigs too?”

“She hustles!” Seeing blank incomprehension, she snorted and said harshly, “Put. Tart. Whore.”

Luciente began fiddling with the wrist gadget again till she reached out to stop him. Small bones he had, little heavier than hers. “Who do you talk to with that?”

“My kenner? It ties into an encyclopedia—a knowledge computer. Also into transport and storage. Can serve as locator-speaker.” Luciente’s face changed suddenly and he smiled. “Oh. Had to do with sex. Prostitution? I’ve read of this and seen a drama too about person who sold per body to feed per family!”

“I suppose nobody in your place sells it, huh? Like they say about Red China.”

“We don’t buy or sell anything.”

“But people do go to bed, I guess?” Connie sat up, holding herself across the breasts as she shook back her lank hair. “I suppose since you’re alive and got born, they must still do that little thing, when they aren’t too busy with their computers?”

“Two statements don’t follow.” Luciente gave her a broad smile. “Fasure we couple. Not for money, not for a living. For love, for pleasure, for relief, out of habit, out of curiosity and lust. Like you, no?”

Like sunshine in her cell, he looked so human squatting there she heard herself ask half coyly, “Do you like women?”

“All women?” Luciente looked at her with that slight scowl of confusion. “Oh, for coupling? In truth, the most intense mating of my life was a woman named Diana—the

fire that annealed me, as Jackrabbit says in a poem. But it was a binding, you know, we obsessed. Not good for growing. We clipped each other. But I love Diana still and sometimes we come together ... . Mostly I've liked males."

"I thought so." Why should that make her feel gloomy? He had shown no signs of sexual interest, except for all that patting and hand holding. But shouldn't a figment of her mind at least satisfy her? Perhaps being crazy was always built on self-hatred and she would, of course, see a queer.

"You're lonely here, and I just let you down. Truly, I'm not rigid and I like you." Luciente took her hands between his warm, dry, calloused palms. "What is this place? You seem to be locked in. I've seen holies about your prisons and concentration camps. Is this such a place?"

"No. I'd rather be in prison. Unless you're on an indeterminate, at least you know when you're getting out. They can keep me here till I go out with my feet in the air. It's a loony bin—a mental hospital."

Luciente consulted his wrist. "Oh, a madhouse! We have them." He looked around. "But it seems ... ugly. Bottoming."

"Are yours so fancy?"

"Open to the air and pleasant, fasure. I never stayed in one myself—"

"Big deal!" She pulled her hands free.

"But Jackrabbit has—just before we fixed each other, and we've been sweet friends three years. Bee and I have been lovers twelve now, isn't that strange? Not to stale in so long. And Diana goes mad every couple of years. Has visions. Per earth quakes. Goes down. Emerges and sets to work again with harnessed passion ... . But I have to say this—in truth you don't seem mad to me. I know I've never gone down myself, I'm too ... flatfooted ... earthen somehow, so it's beyond my experience. Bee tells me that I'm the least receptive person in our base, and person has to scream in my ear to get through ... . I don't mean to pry or make accusations, but are you truly mad?"

"Here they say if you think you aren't sick, it's a sign of sickness."

"You're sick?"

"Sick. Mad."

"We do not use these words to mean the same thing." Luciente tilted his head to one side. "Could it be you're bluffing? Truly, I have never gone down, but I have been close to Diana when person was far inward, and ... you seem too coherent. Perhaps you're tired, unable to cope for a while? Sometimes, among us, this happens."

"I don't think there's a thing wrong with me, aside from seeing you—that's the best sign of being crazy I can think of."

"No, I'm in touch with you, really." Luciente scowled at the room. "This place bottoms me. Would you like to take a walk?"

"The door's locked. Or do you have a key?"

“Not a walk here or now. I wish to invite you home with me for a short visit Say an hour?”

“You mean the way you come here?”

“Wouldn’t you like to see my village?”

“I’d like seeing anything but these four filthy walls, believe me. But could I get back?” She hooted with laughter. “Why should I care? Better if I get stuck anyplace instead of rotting here!”

“Sadly, you can’t get stuck in my time. A lapse of attent would probably break our contact.” Luciente rose gracefully and extended his hand for her to grasp. “As I’ve remarked, the appearance is not a physical presence, but is ... as if it were. Now we’ll see if this trick works. To confess, I haven’t a wispy guess if I can really pull you into my time. But the worst that can happen is that we open our eyes and are still in this drab room. Only fit for a storeroom for machinery!”

“You ought to try it twenty-four hours a day. It breaks you, finally.”

“Then why did you come here? It seems inadequate.”

“I didn’t walk, you can count on that. I was dragged screaming. My brother Luis committed me.”

“Our madhouses are places where people retreat when they want to go down into themselves—to collapse, carry on, see visions, hear voices of prophecy, bang on the walls, relive infancy—getting in touch with the buried self and the inner mind. We all lose parts of ourselves. We all make choices that go bad ... . How can another person decide that it is time for me to disintegrate, to reintegrate myself?”

“Here you get put in if your family doesn’t want you around or other people don’t, and that’s about the long and short of it.” She finally stuck out her hand and let Luciente pull her to her feet.

“The first time is supposed to be the hardest, but frankly, we’re the first contacts to try. That’s the theory anyway, for what it weighs. Here comes the practice, NINO.”

“Nino? Niño?”

NINO: Nonsense In, Nonsense Out—that’s the motto on every kenner. It means your theory is no better than your practice, or your body than your nutrition. Your encyclopedia only produces the information or misinformation fed it. So on.” Luciente gently drew her against him and held her in his arms so their foreheads touched. “You’re supposed to be a top catcher and I’m supposed to be a superstrong sender ... . As people say, with theory and a nail, you’ve got a nail.”

Pressed reluctantly, nervously against Luciente, she felt the coarse fabric of his shirt and ... breasts! She jumped back.

“You’re a woman! No, one of those sex-change operations.”

“If you hop around, we’ll never get it right ... . Of course I’m female.” Luciente looked a little disgusted.

She stared at Luciente. Now she could begin to see him/her as a woman. Smooth hairless cheeks, shoulder-length thick black hair, and the same gentle Indian face. With a touch of sarcasm she said, “You’re well muscled for a woman.” In anger she turned on her heel and stalked a few paces away. A dyke, of course. That bar in Chicago where the Chicana dykes hung out shooting pool and cursing like men, passing comments on the women who walked by. Yet they had never given her that sense of menace a group of men would—after all, under the clothes they were only women too.

“I’m not unusually strong.” Luciente’s face was screwed up with confusion. She still held out her hands to draw Connie to her. “About middling. We do more physical work than most people did in your time, I believe. It’s healthier, and of course you lugs were burning up all those fossil fuels ... . You seem surprised that I am female?”

Feeling like a fool, Connie did not choose to reply. Instead she paced to the locked door with its peephole and then to the radiator. Luciente spoke, she moved with that air of brisk unself-conscious authority Connie associated with men. Luciente sat down, taking up more space than women ever did. She squatted, she sprawled, she strolled, never thinking about how her body was displayed. It was hard to pace with dignity in the tiny space between the stained mattress and the wall. Connie no longer felt in the least afraid of Luciente.

“Please, Connie.” Luciente came over and cautiously put an arm around her shoulders. “I don’t understand what’s wrong. Let’s give it a try. We didn’t even carry out our experiment. Do you really want to stay here all day? It doesn’t bottom you?”

“To the bone.” She stood awkwardly and let Luciente pull her close and lean their foreheads together. Hardly ever did she embrace another woman along the full length of their bodies, and it was hard to ease her mind. She could feel Luciente concentrating, she could feel that cone of energy bearing down on her. It reminded her of the old intensity of a man wanting ... something—her body, her time, her comfort—that bearing down that wanted to grab her and push her under. But she was weary and beaten and she let herself yield. What had she to lose?

Although she could sense in Luciente a bridled impatience, the woman held her gently. A harnessed energy to be doing drove this plant geneticist with breasts like a fertility goddess under the coarse fabric of a red work shirt. A woman who liked her: she felt that too. A rough ignorant goodwill caressed her.

Then she smelled salt in the air, a marsh tang. A breeze ruffled the loose rag of dress, chilling her calves. Under her feet she felt stone. A gull mewed, joined by another somewhere above her. Luciente relaxed her grip. “Home free. Will you stand there all day with your eyelids bolted down? Look!”

Rocket ships, skyscrapers into the stratosphere, an underground mole world miles deep, glass domes over everything? She was reluctant to see this world. Voices far, near, laughter, birds, a lot of birds, somewhere a dog barked. Was that—yes, a rooster crowing at midday. That pried her eyes open. A *rooster*? Fearfully she stared into Luciente’s face, broken open in a grin of triumph. “Where are we?”

“You might try looking around! This is where I live.” Luciente took her by the arm and swung around to her side. “This is our village. Roughly six hundred of us.”

She looked slowly around. She saw ... a river, little no-account buildings, strange structures like long-legged birds with sails that turned in the wind, a few large terracotta and yellow buildings and one blue dome, irregular buildings, none bigger than a supermarket of her day, an ordinary supermarket in any shopping plaza. The bird objects were the tallest things around and they were scarcely higher than some of the pine trees she could see. A few lumpy free-form structures overrun with green vines. No skyscrapers, no spaceports, no traffic jam in the sky. “You sure we went in the right direction? Into the future?”

“This is my time, yes! Fasure, look how pretty it is!”

“You live in a village, you said. Way out in the sticks. Like if we went to a city, it’d be ... more modern?”

“We don’t have *big* cities—they didn’t work. You seem disappointed, Connie?”

“It’s not like I imagined.” Most buildings were small and randomly scattered among trees and shrubbery and gardens, put together of scavenged old wood, old bricks and stones and cement blocks. Many were wildly decorated and overgrown with vines. She saw bicycles and people on foot. Clothes were hanging on lines near a long building—shirts flapping on wash lines! In the distance beyond a blue dome cows were grazing, ordinary black-and-white and brown-and-white cows chewing ordinary grass past a stone fence. Intensive plots of vegetables began between the huts and stretched into the distance. On a raised bed nearby a dark-skinned old man was puttering around what looked like spinach plants.

“Got through, uh?” he said to Luciente.

Luciente asked, “Can you see the person from the past?”

“Sure. Had my vision readjusted last month.”

“Zo!” Luciente turned, hopping with excitement. “Good we were cautious in your time. I may be visible there too—that could bring danger!”

“Why isn’t it dangerous for me to be seen here?”

“Everybody knows why you’re here.”

“Everybody except me.” The roofs of the huts—that’s all she could call them—were strange. “What’s on top? Some kind of skylights?”

“Rainwater-holding and solar energy. Our housing is above ground because of seepage—water table’s close to the surface. We’re almost wetland but not quite, so it’s all right to build here. I’ll show you other villages, different ... . I guess, compared to your time, there’s less to see and hear. That time I came down on the streets of Manhattan, I’d thought I’d go deaf! ... In a way we could half envy you, such fat, wasteful, thing-filled times!”

“They aren’t so fat for me.”

“Are you what would be called poor?”

Connie bristled, but then shrugged. “I’ve been down and out for a while. A run of hard times.”

Luciente put an arm around her waist and walked her gently along. A gaudy chicken strutted across the path, followed by another. The path was made of stone fitted against stone in a pattern of subdued natural color. Along it mustard-yellow flowers were in bloom. Low-growing tulips were scattered like bright stars on the ground.

She caught the whiff for a moment before she saw them. “Goats! Jesús y María, this place is like my Tío Manuel’s in Texas. A bunch of wetback refugees! Goats, chickens running around, a lot of huts scavenged out of real houses and the white folks’ garbage. All that lacks is a couple of old cars up on blocks in the yard! What happened—that big war with atomic bombs they were always predicting?”

“But we like it this way! Oh, Connie, we thought you’d like it too!” Luciente looked upset, her face puckered. “We’d change it if we didn’t like it, how not? We’re always changing things around. As they say, what isn’t living dies ... . I’m always quoting homilies. Jackrabbit says my words run out in poppers.” Luciente saw her blank look. “The miniature packaged components of circuitry? Jackrabbit means all in a box.” Luciente was still frowning with worry.

“So you have some machines? It isn’t religious or anything?”

“Fasure we have machines.” Luciente tapped her knicker. She seemed more confident in her native air. “When you see more, you’ll like better.” Her arm around Connie gave affectionate squeezes as they walked and with her free arm she pointed, she waved, she gestured and struck postures. She talked louder and faster. “We raise chickens, ducks, pheasants, partridges, turkeys, guinea hens, geese. Goats, cows, rabbits, turtles, pigs. We of Mattapoissett are famous for our turtles and our geese. But our major proteins are plant proteins. Every region tries to be ownfed.”

“Own what?”

“Ownfed. Self-sufficient as possible in proteins.” Luciente stopped short and clapped both hands firmly on Connie’s shoulder. “I bump around at this, but I just thought of something important. You’re right, Connie, we’re peasants. We’re all peasants.”

“Forward, into the past? Okay, it’s better to live in a green meadow than on 111th Street. But all that striving and struggling to end up in the same old bind. Stuck back home on the farm. Peons again! Back on the same old dungheap with ten chickens and a goat. That’s where my grandparents scratched out a dirt-poor life! It depresses me.”

“Connie, wait a little, trust a little. We have great belief in our ways. Let me show you ... . *No!* Let our doing show itself. Let people open and unfold ... . Think of it this way: there was much good in the life the ancestors led here on this continent before the white man came conquering. There was much brought that was useful. It has taken a long time to put the old good with the new good into a greater good ... . You’re freezing. Let’s get you a jacket. Then you must come and meet my family at lunch.”

“I’m not going to meet a bunch of strangers in this filthy bughouse dress. I’m not! Besides, I’m not hungry. Thorazine kills my appetite.”

“We can work on that later. We may be able to teach you to control the effects of the drug ... . But about the clothing—come, we’ll get you some and a jacket. I’m sensitive as rock salt, as Bee and Jackrabbit both tell me. So come to my house a minute and we’ll find something.” Luciente guided her through a maze of paths and huts and small gardens where people who must be women because they carried babies on their backs were planting seeds. They hurried past a series of covered fish ponds and greenhouses, to a hut near the river where domestic and wild ducks mingled, feeding among the waterweeds. They had come nearer the hill of spidery objects, which had to be windmills turning. Again she remembered windmills on the dry plains, on ranches without electricity. The hut was built of old cement blocks eroded in soft contours and overrun with a large climbing rose just opening red sprays of crinkled leaflets. “I bred that Wait till you see it bloom! Called Diana. Big sturdy white with dark red markings and an intense musk fragrance, subzero hardy. It’s popular up in Maine and New Hampshire cause it’s so hardy for a climber. I bred back into Rugosa using Molly Maguire stock ... . Oops! I barge on. Come!”

The door was unlocked and in fact had only a catch on the inside. Windows on two sides lit the room. The cherry and pine furniture was sturdy: a big desk and a big worktable and a big bed, over which a woolen coverlet was casually pulled, hanging down at a corner. The floor was wooden and on it two bright woven rugs lay with a pattern of faces peering like tropical fruit out of foliage. Drawings and kids’ paintings were tacked up here and there, as were graphs and charts, stuck on the wall somehow. Obviously Luciente liked red and gold and rich brown.

“Three of you live here?”

“Three? No. this is my space.”

“I thought you lived with two men. The Bee and Jackrabbit you’re always talking about.”

“We’re sweet friends. Some of us use the term ‘core’ for those we’re closest to. Others think that distinction is bad. We debate. Myself, I use core, cause I think it means something real. Bee, Jackrabbit, Otter are my core—”

“Another lover!”

“No, Otter’s a handfriend, not a pillowfriend. We’ve been close since we were sixteen. Politically we are very close ... .”

“But if you live alone, who do they live with?”

Luciente looked mildly shocked. “We each have our own space! Only babies share space! I have indeed read that people used to live piled together.” Luciente shuddered. “Connie, you have space of your own. How could one live otherwise? How meditate, think, compose songs, sleep, study?”

“Nobody lives with their family? So what about kids? Mothers and kids must live

together.”

“We live *among* our family. Today you’ll meet everybody in my family and my core except Bee, who’s on defense till next month. All my other mems are around, I think ... .” Luciente slid aside a door and took out pants and a shirt. “If these don’t suit, take what you like. I was told you have body taboos? I’ll wait outside while you dress.”

Alone, Connie got into the clothes quickly. Luciente was taller and a little broader in the shoulders, but Connie was broader in the hips and behind, so that at first she could not close the pants. Then she found an adjustment in the seams so that they could be tightened or loosened, lengthened or shortened. A woman would not outwear them if she gained or lost twenty pounds. Well, they’d invented one new thing in this Podunk future. After she put on the shirt, she looked around the room. By the desk a screen was set into the wall. A television? Curious, she pressed the On button.

“Good light, do you wish visual, communication, or transmission? You have forgotten to press your request button,” a woman’s voice said. When Connie went on staring at it, it eventually repeated itself exactly, and she realized it was recorded.

She pushed T for transmission, she hoped. The screen began flashing the names of articles or talks, obviously in plant genetics. As the screen flashed the meaningless titles, she read the other buttons. One said PREC, so she tried it. A description like a little book review came on and remained there for two minutes.

ATTEMPTS TO INCREASE NUTRITIONAL CONTENT IN WINTER GRAIN (TRTTICALE SIBERICA) SUITABLE SHORT SEASON NORTHERN CROPS MAINTAINING INSECT & SMUT RESISTANCE. PROMISING DIRECTION. FULL BREEDING INFO. JAMES BAY CREE, BLACK DUCK GROUP, 10 PP. 5 DC. 2 PH.

Feeling watched, she shut the set off guiltily and jumped back. Then she saw that a large, long-haired cat the color of a peach had got up from a window ledge—a shelf built on the inside for a row of plants and perhaps the cat itself to sun on. The cat strode toward her with a purposeful air, hopped on a chair, and faced her expectantly. “Mao? Mgnao?” The cat blinked, averted its gaze, then glanced back. It repeated the gesture several times, each time more slowly, with a pause in between when it kept its amber stare fixed on her face. She felt a little scared. Did it think she was some kind of big mouse? Did it expect to be fed? Finally with a snort the cat hopped off the chair and pointedly, she could not help feeling, turned its back and flounced off to the sunny window. But it kept its ears cocked toward her.

As she opened the door, she found Luciente squatting outside in the rough grass like a peon, watching a small dark blue butterfly. She looked as if she could squat there all day. Well, what did I expect from the future, Connie asked herself. Pink skies? Robots on the march? Transistorized people? I guess we blew ourselves up and now we’re back to the dark ages to start it all over again. She stood a moment, weakened by a sadness she could not name. A better world for the children—that had always been the fantasy; that however bad things were, they might get better. But if Angelina had a child, and that child a child, this was the world they would finally be born into in five generations:



how different was it really from rural Mexico with its dusty villages rubbing their behinds into the dust?

“It’s a Spring Azure,” Luciente said. “Ants milk them.”

“Do you have any children?”

“Below the age of twelve, forty-nine in our village. We’re maintaining a steady population.”

“I mean you: have you had any children?”

“I myself? Yes, twice. Besides, I’m what they call a kidbinder, meaning I mother everybody’s kids.” Taking her arm, Luciente nudged her toward the blue dome she pointed out as a fooder. “Let’s hurry. I put in a guest slip for you, in case we got through. I’m mother to Dawn. I was also mother to Neruda, who is waiting to study shelf farming. Person will start in the fall; I’m very excited. Course, I no longer mother Neruda, not since naming. No youth wants mothering.” All this time Luciente was hustling her along the stone path toward the translucent blue dome.

Connie waited to get a word in. “So how old are your children?”

“Neruda is thirteen. Dawn is seven.”

That put Luciente at least into her thirties. “Is your lover Bee their father? Or the other one?”

“Father?” Luciente raised her wrist, but Connie stopped her.

“Dad. Papa. You know. Male parent.”

“Ah? No, not Bee or Jackrabbit. Comothers are seldom sweet friends if we can manage. So the child will not get caught in love misunderstandings.”

“Comothers?”

“My coms”—she pronounced the o long—“with Dawn are Otter and Morningstar—you’ll meet them right now.”

The room they entered took up half the dome and was filled with big tables seating perhaps fifteen at each, mostly dressed in the ordinary work clothes that Luciente wore, the children in small versions. The pants, the shirts, the occasional overalls or tunics came in almost every color she could name, many faded with washing and age, although the fabrics seemed to hold up. Everybody looked to be talking at once, yet it wasn’t noisy. The scene was livelier than institutional feeding usually made for. A child was climbing on a bench to tell a story, waving both arms. At the far end a man with a mustache was weeping openly into his soup and all about him people were patting his shoulders and making a big fuss. People were arguing heatedly, laughing and telling jokes, and a child was singing loudly at the table nearest the door. Really, this could be a dining room in a madhouse, the way people sat naked with their emotions pouring out, but there was a strong energy level here. The pulse of the room was positive but a little overwhelming. She felt buffeted. Why wasn’t it noisier? Something absorbed the sound, muted the voices shouting and babbling, the scrapes of melody and laughter, the

calls, the clatter of dishes and cutlery, the scraping of chairs on the floor—made of plain old-fashioned wood, as far as she could tell. Unless it was all some clever imitation? She could not believe how many things they seemed to make out of wood. Some panels in the wall-ceiling of the dome were transparent and some were translucent, although from the outside she had not seen any difference.

“No reason to look in. The fooder has to be well soundproofed, or on party nights, at festivals, nobody who didn’t want to carry on would be able to sleep. The panes with the blue edge come out. We get the breeze from the river—when it gets too hot, we take the panels out.” Luciente was heading for a table on the far side, where everyone except the littlest child stopped eating to watch them approach. “Some you can see through and some not, because some of us like to feel closed in while we eat and some—like me—want to see everything. The fooder is a home for all of us. A warm spot.”

On the translucent panels designs had been painted or baked in—she could not tell—in a wild variety of styles and levels of competence, ranging from sophisticated abstracts, landscapes, and portraits to what must be children’s drawings. “Where did the art come from?”

Luciente looked surprised. “The walls? Why, from us—or some of us. I don’t fiddle with it. I’m one of the sixty percent who can’t. We find all the arts fall out in a forty/sixty ratio in the population—doesn’t seem to matter whether you’re talking about dancing or composing or sculpting. Same curve. Me myself, I drum magnificently!”

Like a child! She could not imagine any woman of the age they must share saying in El Barrio or anyplace else she had lived, “Me myself, I drum magnificently!” Indeed, they were like children, all in unisex rompers, sitting at their long kindergarten tables eating big plates of food and making jokes. “I can see wanting to look at your own child’s drawing. But wouldn’t other people get tired of it?”

They had reached the table through a sea of spicy odors that touched her stomach to life. Two places were vacant, set with handsome heavy pottery dishes in earth colors, glass tumblers on the heavy side, and cutlery of a smooth substance that was neither silver nor stainless steel and perhaps not even metal. Someone—slender, young—leaped up and hugged Luciente, held out his?/her? arms to her, checked the gesture, and smiled a brilliant welcome. “You got through! Wait till everybody hears about this!”

“Never mind. Did you save us lunch? I’m thinning by the second,” Luciente said, hugging the youth back.

They were literally patted into their seats and she found herself cramped with nervousness. Touching and caressing, hugging and fingering, they handled each other constantly. In a way it reminded her again of her childhood, when every emotion seemed to find a physical outlet, when both love and punishment had been expressed directly on her skin.

Large platters of food passed from hand to hand: a corn-bread of coarse-grained meal with a custard layer and a crusty, wheaty top; butter not in a bar but a mound, pale, sweet and creamy; honey in an open pitcher, dark with a heady flavor. The soup was

thick with marrow beans, carrots, pale greens she could not identify, rich in the mouth with a touch of curry. In the salad were greens only and scallions and herbs, yet it was piquant, of many leaves blended with an oil tasting of nuts and a vinegar with a taste of ... sage? Good food, good in the mouth and stomach. Pleasant food.

Luciente was saying everyone's name, leaving her battered. Nobody seemed to have more than one. "Don't you have last names?"

"When we die?" Barbarossa, a man with blue eyes and a red beard, raised his eyebrows at her. "We give back with the name we happen to have at that time."

"Surnames. Look, my name is Consuelo Ramos. Connie for short. Consuelo is my Christian name, my first name. Ramos is my last name. When I was born I was called Consuelo Camacho. Ramos is the name of my second husband: therefore I am Consuelo Camacho Ramos." She left out Álvarez, the name of her first husband, Martin, for simplicity.

They looked at each other, several adults and children consulting the kenners on their wrists. Finally Luciente said, "We have no equivalent."

She felt blocked. "I suppose you have numbers. I guess you're only called by first names because your real name—your identification—is the number you get at birth."

"Why would we be numbered? We can tell each other apart." The tall intense young person was staring at her. Jackrabbit, Luciente had said: therefore male. He had a lot of very curly light brown hair and he wore the sleeves of his pale blue work shirt rolled up to expose several bracelets of hand-worked silver and turquoise on each wiry arm.

"But the government. How are you identified?"

"When I was born, I was named Peony by my mothers—"

"Peony sounds like a girl's name."

"I don't understand. It was the name chosen for me. When I came to naming, I took my own name. Never mind what that was. But when Luciente brought me down to earth after my highflying, I became Jackrabbit. You see. For my long legs and my big hunger and my big penis and my jumps through the grass of our common life. When Luciente and Bee have quite reformed me, I will change my name again, to Cat in the Sun." He produced on his thin face a perfect imitation of Luciente's orange cat squeezing its eyes shut. "But why have two names at one time? In our village we have only one Jackrabbit. When I visit someplace else, I'm Jackrabbit of Mattapoissett."

"You change your name any time you want to?"

"If you do it too often, nobody remembers your name," Barbarossa said solemnly in his schoolmaster's manner. "Sometimes youths do that the first years after naming."

The old brown-skinned ... woman?—it confused Connie to be so unsure—introduced as Sojourner was giggling. "They're always trying out fancy new labels every week till no one can call them anything but Hey you or Friend. It slows down by and by."

"All right—you have those things on your wrist. Somewhere there's a big computer.

How does it recognize you?”

“My own memory annex is in my kenner,” Luciente said. “With transport of encyclopedia, you just call for what you want.”

“But what about the police? What about the government? How do they keep track of you if you keep changing names?”

Again a great buzz of confusion and kenner checking passed around the table, with half of them turning to each other instead.

“This is complicated!” The old woman Sojourner shook her head. “Government I think I grasp. Luciente can show you government, but nobody’s working there today.”

“Maybe next time. I will try to study up on this, but it’s very difficult,” Luciente moaned.

“We should all study to help Luci,” a child said.

“In the meantime, maybe you could ask something easier? You said something about the paintings?”

“It doesn’t matter. I just thought it was funny you put up the kids’ stuff. I mean everybody wants to look at their own kid’s pictures, but nobody wants to look at anybody else’s.”

A slight blond man, Morningstar, peered into her face with puzzlement. “But they’re all ours.”

“We change the panels all the time,” Jackrabbit said. “For instance, say I make one and later it stales on me. I make a new one. Or if everybody tires of one, we discuss and change. I did that whole big river namelon on the east, cause people wanted.”

Luciente put down her fork. “What’s wrong, Connie?”

“Connie’s worn out,” Jackrabbit said. “Strangers, every lug asking questions, holding the contact. You imagine there’s no energy drain in catching.”

Luciente put an arm around her. “You look gutted. Remember this food will not sustain.”

“Why not?” She felt thick with fatigue and the room swayed. “I can taste it.”

“As in dreams. You experience *through* me ... . We better go back.”

“Finish your lunch first.” The voices seemed to drift around her and her eyelids drooped.

“This exhaustion worries me. I must teach you exercises—”

“Not here. Can’t think. Too many people.”

“Come! Give me your arm. We’ll visit again. This is only a false spring, a January thaw of beginning. Back you go.”

She felt leaden, her feet wading through loose sand. As they shuffled out, Luciente looked worried. Standing at last on the stone walk, Connie mumbled, “Clothing. Must change.”

“Your body is where it was, unchanged in dress. Understand, you are not really here. If I was knocked on the head and fell unconscious, say into full nevel, you’d be back in your time instantly ... .” Luciente drew her into the firm embrace with their foreheads touching. She was too spent to do more than fall into Luciente’s concentration as into a fast stream, the waters churning her under. She came to propped against the wall of the seclusion room. The tears had dried on the sleeve of her faded dress. She lay down at once on the bare, piss-stained mattress and fell asleep.

## FIVE

Connie sat on the porch with a towel around her shoulders for warmth. The chilly drizzly June day smelled like a basement under the low gray sky. She was so glad to be outside, even on the porch whose rusted screens gave a sepia wash to the walks and brick buildings, that she did not care if her behind hurt from the chill of the warped floorboards. She felt a keen enjoyment too of being alone for the first time since isolation. No one else had come out in the damp and the cold.

She gloried in breathing outdoor air, in seeing more than four walls, in smelling trees instead of medicine and diarrhea and disinfectant. The gray of the day soothed her. Strong colors would have burned her eyes. Every day was a lesson in how starved the eyes could grow for hue, for reds and golds; how starved the ears could grow for conga drums, for the blare of traffic, for dogs barking, for the baseball games chattering from TVs, for voices talking flatly, conversationally, with rising excitement in Spanish, for children playing in the streets, the Puerto Rican children whose voices sounded faster, harder than Chicano Spanish, as if there were more metal in their throats.

She felt Luciente pressing on her clearly for the first time since they had let her out of seclusion: not those brushes of presence that rose and faded but the solid force of concentration bearing around her. She resisted. To sit on the porch was still new, in a convalescent pleasure like the first time out of bed after a long illness. Still, she felt Luciente pressing on her and it was like, oh, refusing to answer the door to a friend who knew she was at home. How could she think of Luciente as a friend? But she had begun to.

“Me too, in truth,” the voice formed in her mind. “I’ve missed you.”

“Why don’t you take shape? Nobody’s out here but me.”

“Shut your eyes. Let’s go into my space. Today, in my year, the weather is better.”

“Do you control the weather?”

“The sharks did in the 1990s—pass the term. I mean before us. But the results were the usual disasters. It rained for forty days on the Gulf Coast till most of it floated out to sea. Let’s see, the jet stream was forced south from Canada. They close to brought on an ice age. There was five years’ drought in Australia. Plagues of insects ... Open your eyes.”

They were standing in Luciente’s hut in sun streaming through the south window, which was open and covered with a fine-mesh screen. “You must still have mosquitoes!”

“They’re part of the food chain. We bred out the irritant ... . About weather, when it gets disastrous, sometimes we adjust a little. But every region must agree. When a

region is plagued by drought, grasp, we usually prefer to deliver food than to approve a weather shift. Because of the danger. We're cautious about gross experiments. 'In biosystems, all factors are not knowable.' First rule we learn when we study living beings in relation ... . You're looking thin!" Luciente reproved her, leaning close.

"You say that like it was bad. Isn't thin beautiful to you? I've been dumpy for three years. Not that I don't look as lousy as I feel in that bughouse."

"Jackrabbit is thin beautiful. Bee is big beautiful. Dawn is small beautiful. Tilia is creamy orange beautiful." Luciente nodded at her cat, who stood up expectantly. "Tilia told me you're stupid, and I explained that people of your time did not talk with cats."

She remembered the orange cat stalking away. It stared at her boldly now, with malice she felt. "People of my time talk to cats, dogs, hamsters. To parakeets and goldfish. Lonely people talk to the wall. Listen, the bughouse is full of women who started talking to the Blessed Virgin Mary because their old man wouldn't listen."

"I mean in sign languages. For instance, Tilia and I talk sign language based on cat signs but modified—because many things must be said between cat and human different from what is said cat to cat."

"Oh? What do you talk about? The taste of raw mouse?"

"Much is simply expressing affection, anger, disappointment. I want, Tilia wants. Fish, milk, yogurt, to go out, peace and quiet, catch the mouse, don't touch that bird. Groom me. Let me work. Tilia does have a strong aesthetic sense and comments freely on flimsies and even on costumes. The last coverlet for the bed Tilia loathed and buried so persistently—that shit-covering gesture—that I had to trade it for another."

"Could you speak to her now? Ask her if she believes in God or what she thinks about public nudity."

"You don't believe me!"

"Either you're putting me on or you're crazier than I am."

"I'll teach you how to meet a cat. Cats are formal about introductions. I got flack last time. Look Tilia can express feeling puffed. If Tilia takes a flying leap onto my chest at first dawn from the top of the wardrobe, I get a clear notion that cat is dissatisfied with my conduct." Luciente squinted, held her eyes shut for a few seconds, opened them again, squinted again, repeating the whole sequence, and then looked pointedly away. "This is how you meet a cat if your intentions are friendly. If you mean harm—for instance, you are approaching a cat standing over the body of a local chickadee—then you stare hard, you glare."

Connie sank on the broad bed, giggling. "You look ... ridiculous."

"To a cat I presume I always look ridiculous. Awkward creatures by comparison, waddling around in clothes. *Come!* Talking is ridiculous to animals who commune through scents, colors, body language—all our minute posturing with the tongue and lips and teeth." Luciente made a wide-eyed pleading face. "Come on, just do it once and we can get on with the day's exploring. Just do it and get it over with."

“You want me to make faces at your cat?”

“Just be introduced. Tilia thinks you’re hostile.”

“All my life I been pushed around by my father, by my brother Luis, by schools, by bosses, by cops, by doctors and lawyers and caseworkers and pimps and landlords. By everybody who could push. I am damned if I am going to be hassled by a cat.”

Luciente looked back levelly with her eyes like black beans. “Person must not do what person cannot do. Let’s go. No,” she said to Tilia and reached out Tilia stalked to the door, raised a paw, and slashed at it. Luciente let her out and on the far side of the screen door she paused and buried the house and its inhabitants with that gesture of disdain.

They followed the cat out. The rose on the hut was in full bloom, its scent spicing the air. The roses were luscious semi-double white cups marked on the skirts with dark crimson. “Your rose is beautiful.”

“Let me cut you one.” Luciente used a clippers from a knife with many parts. “For your hair.”

“My hair. I’m embarrassed. I hate it this way.”

“Why not change it, then?”

“I used to dye it along the part where it turned white. But in the hospital I can’t fix it.”

“When we wish to change our hair color, we change the proteins. It doesn’t grow out as it was.” Luciente was urging her along, arm around her shoulders. In a summer sleeveless shirt of a muted gold, her body was obviously female. Connie smiled to herself. Perhaps it was the lighter clothing, perhaps it was a matter of expectations—anyhow, Luciente now looked like a woman. Luciente’s face and voice and body now seemed female if not at all feminine; too confident, too unself-conscious, too aggressive and sure and graceful in the wrong kind of totally coordinated way to be a woman: yet a woman.

“I wish I could help you with your hair,” Luciente said. “Myself, I never alter my appearance except for dressing up at festivals. But many of us play with appearance.”

“Tell me about this making faces at animals. You do it with puppy dogs and mice and termites too?”

“We have a holiday, Washoe Day, when we celebrate our new community, named for a heroine of your time—a chimpanzee who was the first animal to learn to sign between species. Now we have rudimentary sign languages with many mammals. Some, like apes, use sign language with each other. Most, like cats and dogs, have other ways of communing and only sign to us.”

“Tell me—what do you say to a cow you’re about to eat?”

“Exactly. It’s changed our diet. So has the decision to feed everyone well. For each region we try to be ownfed and until the former colonies are equal in production, mammal meat is inefficient use of grains. Some regions raise cattle on grasses—”



“You never eat meat? It must be like living on welfare.”

“We do on holidays, and we have a lot of them. As a way of culling the herd. We say what we’re doing. They know it. In the same spirit, in November we hunt for a short period. That is, our village does. We’re Wamponaug Indians. We need some experience with free-living animals as prey and predator, to body the past of our tribe fully ... . Though I confess I never hunt. Some of us would just as soon lapse that custom, but we lack the votes to do it.”

“You’re what? Blond Indians? Indians with red beards?”

“Barbarossa dyes per beard, in truth. Isn’t it pretty? It was brown before.”

“You! You look like me. My ancestors were Mayans, but they were hardly Wamponaug! That’s no more alike than ... Italians and Swedes!”

“We’re all a mixed bag of genes,” Luciente said. “Now I know where we’ll go.” She diddled with her kenner. “G’light, it’s me, Luciente. Can you meet us at the brooder? I’m with Connie, the person from the past. Get White Oak to fill for you. We’ll work running hard later.” She turned back to Connie. “I asked Bee to meet us at the brooder. That’s the yellow just-grew on the east. So much to glide over!” Luciente broke into a jog, saw that she was leaving Connie behind, and waited. “You set the pace.”

“Bee is your boyfriend just out of the army? Was he drafted?”

“Grafted? Everybody takes turns. We can all use arms, we’re all trained in fighting hand to hand, we can all manage facets of more complicated operations. I can shoot a jizer.”

“Women too? Did you have to go?”

“Fasure I’ve gone. Twice, Once at seventeen and once when we had a big mobe. I fought both times.”

“Fought? And you won’t go hunting?”

Luciente paused, her eyes clouding over. “A contradict. I’ve gone through a worming on it, yet it stays. Grasp, you never know whether you’re fighting people or machines—they use mostly robots or cybernauts. You never know ... . Still I’d go again. At some point after naming, you decide you’re ready to go.”

“Ha! I bet lots of people decide never to go. Or does someone decide for you?”

“How could they? It’s like being a mother. Some never mother, some never go to defend.” Luciente frowned, tugging her hand through her thick black hair. “On defense your life can hang on somebody. If person didn’t want to be there, person might be careless and you might suffer. If person didn’t want to mother and you were a baby, you might not be loved enough to grow up loving and strong. Person must not do what person cannot do.”

“Ever hear of being lazy? Suppose I just don’t want to get up in the morning.”

“Then I must do your work on top of my own if I’m in your base. Or in your family, I must do your defense or your child-care. I’ll come to mind that. Who wants to be

resented? Such people are asked to leave and they may wander from village to village sourer and more self-pitying as they go. We sadden at it.” Luciente shrugged. “Sometimes a healer like my old friend Diana can help. Diana the rose. A healer can go back with you and help you grow again. It’s going down and then climbing a hard path. But many heal well. Like you, Diana catches.”

The yellow building was odd, like a lemon mushroom pushing out of the ground. Decorated with sculpted tree shapes, it was windowless and faintly hummed. She realized that except for the creaking of windmills, this was the first sound of machinery she had heard here. Indeed, the door sensed them and opened, admitting them to an antechamber, then sliding shut to trap them between inner and outer doors in a blue light.

“What is all this?” She shifted nervously.

“Disinfecting. This is the brooder, where our genetic material is stored. Where the embryos grow.”

The inner doors zipped open, but into space that looked more like a big aquarium than a lab. The floor was carpeted in a blue print and music was playing, strange to her ears but not unpleasant. A big black man leaning comfortably on a tank painted over with eels and water lilies waved to them. “I’m Bee. Be guest! Be guest to what I comprehend was a nightmare of your age.”

“Bottle babies!”

“No bottles involved. But fasure we’re all born from here.”

“And are you a Wamponaug Indian too?”

Bee smiled. He was a big-boned, well-muscled man with some fat around his midriff, and he moved more slowly than Luciente, with the majesty and calm of a big ship. He steered placidly among the strange apparatus, the tanks and machines and closed compartments, something that beat slowly against the wall like a great heart, the padded benches stuck here and there. Either Bee was bald or he shaved his head, and the sleeves of his rose work shirt wererolled up to reveal on each bicep a tattoo—though the colors were more subtle and the drawing finer than any she had seen. On his left arm he had, not the cartoon of a bee, but a Japanese-looking drawing of a honeybee in flight. On his right he wore a shape something like a breaking wave. “Here embryos are growing almost ready to birth. We do that at ninemonth plus two or three weeks. Sometimes we wait tenmonth. We find that extra time gives us stronger babies.” He pressed a panel and a door slid aside, revealing seven human babies joggling slowly upside down, each in a sac of its own inside a larger fluid receptacle.

Connie gaped, her stomach also turning slowly upside down. All in a sluggish row, babies bobbed. Mother the machine. Like fish in the aquarium at Coney Island. Their eyes were closed. One very dark female was kicking. Another, a pink male, she could see clearly from the oversize penis, was crying. Languidly they drifted in a blind school. Bee pressed something and motioned her to listen near the port. The heartbeat, voices

speaking.

“That can’t be the babies talking!”

“No!” Bee laughed. “Though they make noise enough. Music, voices, the heartbeat, all these sounds they can hear.”

“Light, Sacco-Vanzetti. How’s it flying?” Luciente said.

The kid was maybe sixteen. Lank brown hair in braids, swarthy skin, the kid wore a yellow uniform much like everybody’s work clothes. “Is this the woman from the past?”

Luciente performed the introductions.

Sacco-Vanzetti, whose sex she could not tell, stared. “Did you bear alive?”

“Come on Sacco-Vanzetti, don’t be narrow!” Luciente made a face.

“If you mean have I had a baby, yes.” She stuck out her chin.

“Was there a lot of blood?”

“I was knocked out, so how do I know?”

“Was it exciting? Did it feel sexual?”

“It hurt like hell,” Connie snapped, turning back to the wall of babies. “Were you all born from this crazy machine?”

“Almost everybody is now,” the kid said. “I have to go down to threemonth to check the solutions. I’ll be in touch. If you remember more about live bearing, I’d be feathered to hear about it.” The kid went out.

Bee closed the viewing port. “Wamponaug Indians are the source of our culture. Our past. Every village has a culture.”

The way he picked up on that question as if it had just been asked, the way a question floated in him patiently until he was ready to answer it: a memory of sweet and of jagged pain. Maybe she just had a weakness for big black men soft in the belly who moved with that massive grace, although Claud had moved differently. Because of his blindness Claud had held his head a little to the side. She had always thought of a bird. Birds turned the side of the head toward you because their eyes were on the sides, and Claud saw with his ears. “I suppose because you’re black. In my time black people just discovered a pride in being black. My people, Chicanos, were beginning to feel that too. Now it seems like it got lost again.”

Luciente started to say something but visibly checked herself.

Bee beamed, ambling toward another tank where he opened the viewing port. “I have a sweet friend living in Cranberry dark as I am and her tribe is Harlem-Black. I could move there anytime. But if you go over, you won’t find everybody black-skinned like her and me, any more than they’re all tall or all got big feet.” He paused, looking intently at a small embryo, fully formed and floating just at his shoulder level. “At grandcil—grand council—decisions were made forty years back to breed a high proportion of darker-skinned people and to mix the genes well through the population. At the same

time, we decided to hold on to separate cultural identities. But we broke the bond between genes and culture, broke it forever. We want there to be no chance of racism again. But we don't want the melting pot where everybody ends up with thin gruel. We want diversity, for strangeness breeds richness."

"It's so ... invented. Artificial. Are there black Irishmen and black Jews and black Italians and black Chinese?"

"Fasure, how not? When you grow up, you can stick to the culture you were raised with or you can fuse into another. But the one we were raised in usually has a ... sweet meaning to us."

"We say 'we,'" Luciente began, "about things that happened before we were born, cause we identify with those decisions. I used to think our history was exaggerated, but I'm less sure since I time-traveled." Luciente drew them toward the next port.

"I don't think I want to look at any younger ... babies." The little third-month child the doctor had shown her in the basin. Her stomach lurched. "I don't feel too good."

"We'll leave." Bee took her arm. "Maybe it's the filtered air? Grasp, the plasm is precious. Life flows through here for sixteen villages in all, the whole township."

Outside she took a deep breath of salty air and detached herself from Bee. Claud's sore delicate pride, like an orchid with teeth. What could a man of this ridiculous Podunk future, when babies were born from machines and people negotiated diplomatically with cows, know about how it had been to grow up in America black or brown? Pain had honed Claud keen. This man was a child by comparison. "You saying there's no racism left? Paradise on earth, all God's children are equal?"

"Different tribes have different rites, but god is a patriarchal concept." Luciente took Bee's arm and hers. "Our mems, our children, our friends include people of differing gene mixes. Our mothers also."

"But Bee's kids would be black. Yours would be brown."

"My child Innocente has lighter skin than you do." Bee stopped to admire a walk lined with rosebushes blooming in yellows and oranges and creamy whites. "There's no genetic bond—or if there is, we don't keep track of it."

"Then this kid isn't really your child?"

"I *am* Innocente's mother."

"How can men be mothers! How can some kid who isn't related to you be your child?" She broke free and twisted away in irritation. The pastoral clutter of the place began to infuriate her, the gardens everyplace, the flowers, the damned sprightly looking chickens underfoot.

Luciente urged her along. "We're walking Bee back to the lab. Where I'd be with the rest of our plant genetics base except for you. Bee and I work together. Maybe that's why we've been sweet friends so long, twelve years already."

"I thought it's cause I'm too lazy to run from you the way any sane lug would. I never

noticed other cores who worked in the same base stuck so long.”

“We’re so ill suited we can’t give up. Connie, apple blossom, listen to me—”

“Be on guard when Luci calls you soft names.” Bee managed to saunter more slowly than they walked and yet keep up.

“It was part of women’s long revolution. When we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we’d never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers. Every child has three. To break the nuclear bonding.”

“Three! That makes no sense! Three mothers!” She thought suddenly of Three Kings Day and the Anglo Christmas carol that Angelina had learned off the TV. She could hear Angie’s fluty voice singing monotonously but with a limpid joy in monotony (the security):

We three kings of Oregon are  
bearing gifts we travels a far.

Tears burned her lids. Angelina, Angelina, if you had three mothers like me, you’d be dead instead of sold off to some clean-living couple in Larchmont. They said you were lucky to be taken at four. I didn’t understand till I got out what they’d done! Lucky to be taken from me.

Angelina, child of my sore and bleeding body, child of my sad marriage that never fit right, like a pair of cheap shoes that sprouts a nail in the sole. But you fit right. The nurse said I would have to show you, but you reached right for my breast. You suckled right away. I remember how you grabbed with your small pursed mouth at my breast and started drawing milk from me, how sweet it felt. How could anyone know what being a mother means who has never carried a child nine months heavy under her heart, who has never borne a baby in blood and pain, who has never suckled a child. Who got that child out of a machine the way that couple, white and rich, got my flesh and blood. All made up already, a canned child, just add money. What do they know of motherhood?

She was sitting against the wall on the porch, tears trickling from her eyes. Had pain broken the hallucination? She did not care. She hated them, the bland bottleborn monsters of the future, born without pain, multicolored like a litter of puppies without the stigmata of race and sex.

Then at last she felt something. At once she begged, "Luciente, let me visit!"

The presence grew stronger. "Grasp, you could be a sender too. What a powerful and unusual mix!"

"Don't flatter me."

"Why not praise strengths? Speak good when you can, and critting doesn't sting. Clear, now, clear hard."

She felt Luciente's firm embrace and then she stood in her hut.

"We lost you suddenly last time." Luciente hugged her. "You weren't injured?"

"I think if I remember something too well it breaks this—whatever you call this link."

"Could be you stop catching when your attent shifts. I guess we'll get used to these abrupt discorporatings and hoppings to and fro in time." Luciente was wearing shorts and a sleeveless shirt. She reminded Connie of an athlete, of a woman tennis player; except that they were hardly ever as dark as Luciente. Bee, on the bed's edge, wore a long red and black robe covered with fine embroidery that stiffened it, with a softly rolled hood cast back on his broad shoulders.

"Come!" Luciente urged her, huskiness catching with haste. "Hurry! Bee's coms wait."

Indeed, squatting carefully outside so as not to stain their costumes were two women as dressed up as Bee, women she recognized from the lunch table. One wore a long shirt and leggings of soft pale deerskin much worked with shell and quill appliqué; she had braided her long black hair with strips of dyed leather into a tower precariously fastened. The other's chestnut hair was loose and she wore long filigree earrings and a flowing blue gown. With quick grace both women rose to greet them.

Sitting a little apart on a stone was a fair-haired girl, yes, of thirteen or so. This child was easy for Connie to distinguish because her cotton shirt was open all the way down like a jacket, and her small cups of breasts were visible as she got up and turned toward them. The skin of her chest looked tattooed. Connie stared. As they moved into a close group, she could see it was paint. The girl wore pants and that open shirt and had at her feet a basket, which now she swung up to wear like a rucksack. She also picked up a bow and slung it over her shoulder. Connie could see at her waist a knife sheath, hanging under the shirt-as-jacket.

"This is our child, Innocente. Innocente, here is Connie, from the past." Bee turned to her, stately today in his movements. "This day is Innocente's naming. Otter, Luxembourg, and I are about to leave together by floater to see per safely landed. We've been Innocente's mothers, and this is end-of-mothering."

"As if you won't be tumbled to get rid of me!" Innocente stuck out her tongue at him.

"You guessed it. We plan to drop you in the bay."

"Except that you float like a bladder." Otter, the woman in deerskin, spoke.

"When I'm eaten by a bear, you'll bottom!"

Otter slipped her arm around Innocente. "A skinny bit like you? And tough! Like

chewing on locust wood.”

“Do you not want to go?” asked Luxembourg, in the flowing blue dress. “Say it—don’t comp yourself. If the time isn’t ripe, wait. We’re not nipping to let you escape us.”

Innocente screwed up her nose, kicking at the stone with new-looking heavy boots. “Fasure I want to go. It’s not that I’m running eager to get away from you lugs. Only, my two best friends are already youths. I think it’s time. I keep dreaming about going. Besides, what a ticky name you stuck me with. What am I supposed to be innocent of?”

“You said that twice you dreamed going,” Otter commented. “That sounds right. Nobody ever feels yin-and-yang sure.”

“Of that or anything else on earth.” Bee stroked the child’s shoulder. “You have me to blame. Innocente was a naming from the heart, partly for Luciente, who speaks Spanish. We’d been lovers only a short time. Partly I liked the sound, pretty in my mouth. Finally I’d just finished a task period working on reparations to former colonies, when I came home and put in to be a mother. I’d been traveling for a year in Latin America. It made me brood about those centuries of the rape of the earth, the riches stolen, the brutalizing and starving of generations ... toward that day when all trace of that pillaging will be healed ... . That’s how you got named. It’s up to you now to improve on it.” Bee stepped back. “Did you sharpen your knife?”

“Fasure. I checked everything. Canteen, stringing of my bow, arrow points.” Innocente looked at Connie. “Are you *coming*?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Just where are you going?”

“Where it’s been decided.” Innocente gave a dry, choppy laugh.

“Innocente will be dropped into one of the wilderness areas we use,” Luciente said. “This is how we transit from childhood to full member of our community.”

“Drop her in the wilderness? Alone?” Her voice rose.

“Fasure I’ll be alone,” Innocente said with indignation. “What point would there be, at now? I’ve been in the woods plenty.”

Connie turned to Bee. “Does she stay out there overnight?” They had to be crazy.

“For a week. Then the aunts person selected—advisers for the next years—return for per. Not us.” Otter adjusted her elaborate hair.

“But *they* won’t be able to speak to me for threemonth when I come back.” Innocente sounded gleeful. “They aren’t allowed to.”

“Lest we forget we aren’t mothers anymore and person is an equal member. Threemonth usually gives anyone a solid footing and breaks down the old habits of depending,” Otter went on.

“Suppose she breaks a leg. Suppose she’s bitten by a snake. Suppose she gets appendicitis!”

Bee smiled at her almost sadly. “We take the chance. We have found no way to break dependencies without some risk. What we can’t risk is our people remaining stuck in old

patterns—quarreling through what you called adolescence.”

“A rite of passage that doesn’t involve some danger is too much a gift to create confidence,” Luxembourg said in her soft, rather deep voice.

“I’m afraid to go ... but I’m willing, fasure. How come you don’t talk to me? You only talk to them,” Innocente said to Connie.

“How can you know what you’re getting into? You’re only a child!” She turned to Bee. “It’s criminal dropping her with wild animals and poison ivy and who knows what? How is she supposed to eat and clean herself and take care?”

“I know what to eat in the woods! I’m twelve and a half, not four. I can fly a floater myself, you ask if I can’t! There’s only one other twelve-year-old who flies a floater alone in this whole township. You can’t expect me to go through life with an unearned name, stuck on me when I wasn’t conscious yet! How can I go deep into myself and develop my own strength if I don’t get to find out how I am alone as well as with others? ... Zo?”

Luciente took Connie’s hand. “I see it’s strange to you. But your young remained economically dependent long after they were ready to work. We set our children free.”

Bee shook out the folds of his robe. “Come see us off. It’s time. Come with us in the floater if you like, or stay with Luciente and person can show you the children’s house. We have an hour’s flight. We want Innocente to have long hours of daylight to fix camp, scout food, and take stock of the area.”

Innocente strode off and they fell in behind. Soon they were ambling together, Innocente arm in arm with Luxembourg, who murmured in her ear soft cautions and advice, while Luciente and Otter walked linked, Luciente telling a broad story about Neruda’s naming.

“You’re just going to toss her out in a parachute into the woods and run away?” Connie asked Bee.

“Parachute? We lower per to the ground and mark the spot with a radio beacon and big red marker.”

Luciente leaned close, grinning. “We haven’t misplaced a child yet. You’re right, accidents happen ... . But why try to control everything? Grasp, we think control interferes with pleasure and with communing—and we care about both.”

“I won’t go along. I don’t want to see a child abandoned!”

“Connie, can’t you see Innocente wants to go?”

“Kids can be brainwashed into wanting any piece of garbage. My ... own child cried for a week once for a mechanical walking man she saw on the TV that cost so much I couldn’t believe it. Should I have let us go hungry two weeks to buy it to stop her tears?”

“We’ll see them away. They’ll be happier alone. It’s tender, end-of-mothering. Comprend, we sweat out our rituals together. We change them, we’re all the time changing them! But they body our sense of good.”



Gently Bee adjusted Innocente's jacket. "Don't slow or trance till you build your shelter, grasp?"

As they came over a small rise, they faced a bigger hill. Cut into its side was what appeared to be a hangar, its top standing open like a box with the lid up. Three grasshopper machines the size of police helicopters stood inside. The hangar was built much larger than needed to accommodate them, as if sometimes it might hold more of them or something else besides.

A blond woman wearing overalls came toward them from the floater in front. She was tanned, her cropped hair was shoved up in a bandanna, her nose reddened by the sun, her eyes wide and blue, and her wiry arms were daubed with grease. "Zo, a good naming, Innocente. You're off now?"

"You got the floater ready, Red Star?"

"Alt checked. You flying today?"

"Ha! They said no. What do you think?"

"You don't even know where you're going, or have you guessed?"

"If I did, they'd change it"

Slowly other people came drifting toward the hangar from the cornfields, the intensively cultivated gardens, from the fooder and brooder, from huts scattered among the gardens, from the free-form buildings they called just-grews. From the river docks where she could see a variety of conventional and odd, high-in-the-water fishing boats, diving gear, nets and winches, more people strolled toward them. They embraced Bee, Otter, and Luxembourg, they waited for Innocente to leave prowling over the machine so they could greet her. Luciente remained with Connie up on the rise, a little apart. This day had the feeling of a slightly formal but familial occasion, of a great big clan saying goodbye to someone going off to the army or getting married. Of course they were far too many for a real family. Not even her own Comacho clan back in El Paso, with additional strength up on a visit from Chihuahua, could muster such numbers to see them off when they left in their old Ford for Chicago and the promise of work in the steel mills, the last time she had seen gathered in one spot so many people related by blood.

Except of course they weren't. Nobody here knew what that meant. They just acted as if they were. They were kissing and hugging and Otter was beginning to weep. Innocente finally turned from her perhaps embarrassed fumbling with the floater to let people greet her. Even she did not seem to find the embraces or the tears upsetting. Luciente had left Connie to hug Bee, and both of them were crying. Big fat tears rolled down Bee's broad face. Imagine Claud crying! Even when they sentenced him, he had grinned and shrugged and said out of the corner of his mouth, "Shit, could be worse. Time's hard, but you do it, and it's gone." Once again they reminded her of children, even the men. Only Innocente did not weep, stubbornly eager.

Blowing her nose on a big multicolored handkerchief, Luciente clambered back to her.

“Ah me, ah my,” she was sighing as she came. Bee and Jackrabbit were embracing now, that skinny rambling kid who was Luciente’s lover too.

“Luciente, sometimes a child must have to do without mothers. If someone dies? If someone goes away? What would happen to your child if suppose you went to California? Is there still a California, or did it fall in the sea? Are you allowed to go, or do you have to stay here? Anyhow, could you take your daughter, or wouldn’t your comothers let you?”

“Ay, so many questions! Fasure I can go if I want to. How would I work well, how would I contribute to my village if I didn’t want to be here? We try not to leave when we’re mothering. But if I comped I had to go, Dawn would stay. Because to leave would be a terrible uprooting. Then if the child was old enough, person would choose a third mother. If not, we’d volunteer. Every child has three. If we die, the same.” Luciente blew her nose again, emphatically, in the handkerchief of complex and gaudy pattern (a gift handkerchief, Connie thought: I bet people still give each other handkerchiefs when they can’t think of anything else).

The drifting to and fro, the greeting and well-wishing, the embracing and weeping, the patting and hugging and hand clasping, rose to a frenzied peak and Bee, Otter, and Luxembourg in their finery climbed into the floater with Innocente. Luxembourg was piloting. They all waved and shouted. Baskets of lunch were handed in and what looked like a bottle of champagne. “Come back with a strong name!” “Till when, Innocente! I’m going next week!” “Take care!” “Have a powerful dream!” “Don’t fix on lonely!” “See you in a week!”

At last the floater, painted with a swirly design in pastels, put out a bag apparatus above it and rose slowly, gracefully, and quietly. It soared to perhaps a thousand feet and then sailed off, with another device turning and twittering on it. Smoothly it paddled off through the air silent as a balloon and was soon gone. Once again Luciente blew her nose in the handkerchief of many colors and stuffed it in a pocket of her shorts as Jackrabbit strode from the eddies of leavetaking to hug her. Yes, they were not like Anglos; they were more like Chicanos or Puerto Ricans in the touching, the children in the middle of things, the feeling of community and fiesta. Then, after all that carrying on, everybody walked away cheerful enough, serene. Jackrabbit sauntered with his hand cupped on the nape of Luciente’s neck.

“Luciente, that handkerchief—was it a present?” Connie asked.

“This one? Fasure, from Dawn for Mothers’ Day. Dawn made it p’self!”

“Mother’s Day?” She laughed. “You still have Mother’s Day!”

“We have tens and tens of holidays,” Jackrabbit boasted. “For famous liberators. For important events, like the domes-ticking of corn and wheat. The turning of the sun north and south. Famous struggles ... Didn’t your society use rituals to body what you thought good? Like your football games, parades, public executings—”

“We didn’t do that! That was the old times, way before.”

“I thought on your primitive holies—”

“TV, you mean? At least we had regular programs!”

“Didn’t you view bombings, burnings, stabbings? Shootings of people? In every group, spectaclers body ideas of good. Always people try to be good as they see it, no?” His free hand waved.

They were strolling down the hill toward the village. “I don’t know. We have a religious idea of being good—a bit like what you call good, being gentle and caring about your neighbor. But to be a good man, for instance, a man is supposed to be ... strong, hold his liquor, attractive to women, able to beat out other men, lucky, hard, tough, macho we call it, *muy hombre* ... not to be a fool ... not to get too involved ... to look out for number one ... to make good money. Weil, to get ahead you step on people, like my brother Luis. You knuckle under to the big guys and you walk over the people underneath ... .” She shrugged wearily, passing the huts crawling with grape vines and roses, the orchards hung with small green fruit, the covered tanks where fish were spawning under translucent domes. Growth seemed to swarm over the land. “Good? My mother was good. What did it get her except to bleed to death at forty-four? Looking like she was sixty.” She wished sharply for a cigarette, but she had not seen any here and she remembered Luciente’s fear. “I was never able to do good enough to feel good, never able to do bad enough to do me any good.”

An older woman came up beside them, holding out her hand to Connie. “I’m White Oak. I work in the same base as Bee and Luciente. You’ve been pointed out to me and, grasp, we gossip about you. But we’ve never met. My child named perself this month too—I mean the one who was my child. That one is Thunderbolt now, and we can’t talk for another seven weeks.”

“Thunderbolt!” Luciente savored it. “I hope we’re not in for a summer of titanic names. Leaping Lightning. Stupendous Fireball. The Earth Dances, The Stars Stand Still. Heroic Revolutionary Fervor. Mao Susan B. Ferenzi. Freedom Through Constant Struggle.”

“I suppose you selected Luciente right off,” Jackrabbit crooned, giving her hair a tug. “I suppose you were too sensible, even at thirteen, ever to pick a silly name.”

“Actually I called myself White Light when I came from my naming, so you see I haven’t drifted far. But to confess, I went through the usual oddities. When I was first with Diana, I called myself Artemis.”

“Actually the twin of Artemis was Apollo. Or did you want to *be* Diana?” Jackrabbit moved beside them, loose-jointed, shambling. “You wanted the moon, Luci, instead of recognizing yourself a creature of the broad pragmatic day.”

“I was Panther for a while myself,” White Oak said. “As if I’d ever see one, except on the holi. And Liriope—that’s a plant we were breeding for erosion control on the old blast sites when I was first in our base.”

“I fancy that one,” Jackrabbit said. “Liriope ...” He leaped ahead to assume a position

as flowering plant, head hung back, mouth open, arms arched above his head.

“Venus flytrap,” White Oak said. “Don’t tease *me*. I remember too well when you moved here, you were going through a name a week.”

“Lord Byron, One Who Crests the Wave, Dark Moon, Wild Goose ...” Luciente crooned.

“And I walked into the fooder one day and you told me you were going to give me my name of the week, Wild Porkchop. That was the first time I noticed you. Now you’d better forget—I’m meaner than you are!” He hopped to Connie’s side. “Did you never have another name? Or do you just keep changing that second name?”

They were walking a broad path beside the tidal river. Every twenty feet wooden benches stood. White Oak took a seat at a table, inviting them to stare at the flow of the currents, the tide washing slowly in. A high in the water Goat skimmed past them, going downriver against the tide.

“It’s funny, but the way you talk reminds me of people in ... in the institution where I’m locked up ... . A lot of the time we don’t talk to each other there, but there are ... fewer fences than outside. Anyhow, in a way I’ve always had three names inside me. Consuelo, my given name. Consuelo’s a Mexican woman, a servant of servants, silent as clay. The woman who suffers. Who bears and endures. Then I’m Connie, who man aged to get two years of college—till Consuelo got pregnant. Connie got decent jobs from time to time and fought welfare for a little extra money for Angie. She got me on a bus when I had to leave Chicago. But it was her who married Eddie, she thought it was smart. Then I’m Conchita, the low-down drunken mean part of me who gets by in jail, in the bughouse, who loves no good men, who hurt my daughter ... .”

When she stopped short, the others were silent but did not seem scared or judgmental. As usual, Luciente spoke first. “Maybe Diana could help you to meld the three women into one.”

“I had a waning self in me when I was thirteen. The things I wanted, I didn’t think I should want, so I put them out of myself to plague and threaten me.” Jackrabbit spoke with an ironic lilt, but not an irony aimed at her. “I tore so, I saddened I’d gone through my naming. I wanted to return to the children’s house, with my mothers ready to fuss when I called them. I had begun to train as a shelf diver, but I didn’t want to do that; at the same time I couldn’t feel what I did want ... . You don’t at core believe you’re three women—that’s a useful way to talk about your life. But I did believe the ocean was trying to drown me, cause I felt swallowed by the training ... .”

“What happened to you?” she asked him.

“I went mad with fear. In the madhouse I met Bolivar and he was good for me in learning to say that initial ‘I want, I want.’ I had played a lot as a child with paints and with holies and I felt ... most alive then. I had to do that in the center of my life. I had to follow my comp through and even push it. So Bolivar and I went to study with Marika of Amherst. Then I studied in Provincetown with Blackfish. You see, I’m a needy

type and every time I lack, I add on. The next time I jagged, I grabbed Luciente.”

“You came from Fall River?” White Oak asked him.

He nodded. “I moved here to be with Bolivar.”

“Our gain.” White Oak grinned. “Not for your winning disposition always, but you make pretty things and strong holies. In the shop yesterday I was screen-batching the new tintos of Luciente turning her belly up to the sun.”

“White Oak, you graze me,” Luciente said. “How can you say it’s my belly?”

“Person has a good belly,” Jackrabbit said. “I like good round bellies. Like yours, White Oak.”

They were flirting right in front of Luciente and nobody seemed to care. White Oak must have been twenty-five years older than Jackrabbit, although they were so athletic it was hard to tell for sure. White Oak’s hair was abundant and worn loose, but she had a network of deep laugh lines around her eyes and mouth.

White Oak’s kenner made a noise. “Here I am, White Oak,” she said to it.

“Zo, are we running to crack the new test today or not?” A sharp voice rose from her wrist. “We’re limping with Bee off till three and Luciente off till who knows when.”

“Flying.” White Oak sighed. “Since coordinating this six, Corydora watches the clock as if it could couple with per!”

“No slinging mates. Corydora’s doing a good job,” Luciente said. “Even if person does try to hand me guilt on a plate about being called up for the time proj. Too bad you lugs have to stiff it twice as hard.” She made a mock-pious face.

“Corydora’s your boss?”

“We coordinate by lot,” Luciente explained as White Oak jogged off. “For sixmonth at a time.”

“Why do it that way?” Connie asked. “Some people know how to run a lab, and some people don’t, right?”

“Whenever we decide we’re ripe to join a work base, we fuse as full members. We share the exciting jobs and the dull jobs. We don’t think telling people what to do is a real world skill. Now, joining a base ... Some people stay on where they study. Others go away to study and then come home—”

“Place matters to us,” Jackrabbit said. “A sense of land, of village and base and family. We’re strongly rooted. People of your time weren’t? So I’ve been told—lacking Luciente’s time traveling. On per it’s wasted, too. I bet that one talks a blue streak in your century and looks at nothing.”

Connie laughed. “Where I am now, there’s not much to see ... . You ... went mad a second time?”

“Jackrabbit’s jealous of my assignment. Jackrabbit catches like you, but person transmutes everything! ... I always choose catchers!” Luciente frowned at her big strong

hands.

“I’m jealous of everybody’s gifts. I want to be everybody and feel everything and do everything. Wherever I am, where I’m not plagues me. As long as I don’t have to get up too early in the morning to do it all.” He stretched languidly. “The second time I was mad, Diana helped me. I’m *sure* Luci has talked about Diana. At great length.”

“We’re jealous of each other’s past,” Luciente said with sudden gloom. “We’ll have to have a worming someday.”

“I don’t dread a worming, all that attent ... . Diana was just emerging from per own journey down, and was more helpful than I can easily say. I only needed twomonth and I came out with a stronger healing than the first.”

“Do you tell everyone you meet that you’ve been mad twice?” She resented his casual, almost boastful air. She lugged that radioactive fact around New York like a hidden sore. To find out she had been in an institution scared people—how it scared them. Not a good risk for a job. They feared madness might prove contagious.

Jackrabbit looked into her eyes with piercing curiosity. “Why not? Why keep that from you any more than studying with Marika?”

“In my time you’d be ashamed ... . When people find out, they pull away so fast I can see it. Jerky. Afterward, if they have to deal with me, they’re thinking all the time that I might suddenly go berserk and start climbing the walls or jumping out the window. Or they don’t believe anything I say.”

“People of your time confuse me, for they seem neither strongly unknowing nor strongly outgoing. Except in couples. Unstable dyads, fierce and greedy, trying to body the original mother-child bonding. It looks tragic and blind!”

Luciente said quickly, “I’ve known Connie for some time, and I wouldn’t call per blind. Connie has a high capacity to respond to others. We should not sound arrogant because we have a more evolved society—we came from them, after all!”

“More evolved!” Connie snorted. “I’d say things have gone backward!”

“Our technology did not develop in a straight line from yours,” Luciente said seriously, looking with shining black gaze, merry, alert in a way that cast grace notes around her words. “We have limited resources. We plan cooperatively. We can afford to waste ... nothing. You might say our—you’d say religion?—ideas make us see ourselves as partners with water, air, birds, fish, trees.”

“We learned a lot from societies that people used to call primitive. Primitive technically. But socially sophisticated.” Jackrabbit paced, frowning. “We tried to learn from cultures that dealt well with handling conflict, promoting cooperation, coming of age, growing a sense of community, getting sick, aging, going mad, dying—”

“Yeah, and you still go crazy. You still get sick. You grow old. You die. I thought in a hundred and fifty years some of these problems would be solved, anyhow!”

“But Connie, some problems you *solve* only if you stop being human, become metal,

plastic, robot computer. Is dying itself a *problem!*” Luciente got up to cast a last, lingering glance at the river. “Come. Bee prompted I show you the children’s house.”

“I can’t resist that! A house for kids?” Her legs felt heavy. Suddenly she was slipping back into her drugged real body in real time. A surge of sadness flowed through her hips and belly. Worse, finally, than never to be loved again was never to hold a child next to her body. Her child. Her flesh. She felt a slackening through her, that beginning to slip out of her connection with Luciente, back to the asylum. For an instant she breathed the stifling heat of the closed isolation room, she smelled its stale fecal smell, its smell of caged and fearful bodies. She fought like a swimmer going down. She cast a soundless appeal toward Luciente: Help me! For a long nauseated moment she blurred over and she was no place, lost, terrified.

## SEVEN

Jackrabbit was towering over her, lifting her to her feet. His thin face furrowed with serious intent. He held her against him, supporting her in a close hug with one long bony arm while the other hand gently stroked her hair back from her forehead. “Don’t sadden. Little Pepper and Salt, don’t fade on us.” Her face was level with his unbuttoned work shirt, his tanned chest prickly with brass hairs, and his voice burred through the skin into her. “We’d be stupid not to sense you’re confined wrongly. That you hurt and sadden there and no one seems to want to help you heal. That you’re fed drugs that wound your body. Enjoy us. Don’t fade from old pain and return to present pain. Guest here awhile.”

Unmistakably, as his voice burred against her and his hand kneaded her neck, urging her to relax, she felt the rise of his erection, his hardening against her. She tried to wriggle free, and he at once released her.

“I catch sexually.” He shrugged. “Don’t upset more. Truly I meant to calm you.”

“Doesn’t he drive you crazy with jealousy? Why do you let him act this way?” she asked Luciente, who was trying to control a giggling fit.

“Jackrabbit means it—person was trying to comfort you. But person wants to couple with everybody.”

“Aw, not *everybody*. Not *all* of the time.”

“Just most of the people most of the time.” Luciente put one arm through hers and one through Jackrabbit’s. “To the children’s house.”

When was a pass not a pass? When did nineteen-year-old artists throw their arms around women twice their age from the loony bin? Little Pepper and Salt: what a thing to call her, meaning her hair with the white streak along the part growing out raggedy. That reminded her too of her Texas family, for they would give each other blunt nicknames like One Arm and Old Dimwit. Anglos thought that cruel, and she had come to accept the judgment and to expect a veneer of polite refusal to admit seeing.

“Don’t you people ever have to work?” she asked irritably. They were passing greenhouses set into the earth, the sound of falling water. “All those adults taking off to watch a twelve-year-old go for a ride. You all have a *mañana* attitude for real.”

“We have high production!” Luciente’s black eyes glinted indignation. “Mouth-of-Mattapoisett exports protein in flounder, herring, alewives, turtles, geese, ducks, our own blue cheese. We manufacture goose-down jackets, comforters and pillows. We’re the plant-breeding center for this whole sector in squash, cucumbers, beans, and corn. We build jizers, diving equipment, and the best nets this side of Orleans, on the Cape.



On top we export beautiful poems, artwork, holies, rituals, and a new style of cooking turtle soups and stews!”

“Why isn’t anybody in a hurry? Why are the kids always underfoot? How can you waste so much time talking?”

Jackrabbit waved his arms windmill fashion. “How many hours does it take to grow food and make useful objects? Beyond that we care for our brooder, cook in our fooder, care for animals, do basic routines like cleaning, politic and meet That leaves hours to talk, to study, to play, to love, to enjoy the river.”

“At spring planting, at harvest, when storms come, when some crisis strikes, Connie, we work, we stiff it till we drop ... . The old folks story about how they used to have to stiff it all the time. How long the struggle was to turn things over and change them. After, what a mess the whole ying-and-yan of it was from peak to sea.” Luciente waved off into the distance. “Now we don’t have to comp ourselves that hard in ordintime ... . Grasp, after we dumped the jobs telling people what to do, counting money and moving it about, making people do what they don’t want or bashing them for doing what they want, we have lots of people to work. Kids work, old folks work, women and men work. We put a lot of work into feeding everybody without destroying the soil, keeping up its health and fertility. With most everybody at it part time, nobody breaks their back and grubs dawn to dust like old-time farmers ... . Instance, in March I might work sixteen hours. In December, four ...”

“You said you made jizers, comforters. Where are the factories?”

“We just passed the pillow and comforter factory.”

“Can I see it?” When she met Eddie, she had been working in a loft where many Spanish-speaking women sewed children’s clothes.

Jackrabbit bounded ahead and the door opened. Inside the opaque peach cube, she saw no one. The machinery made the most noise she had heard in the village. “Is this all automated?” she shouted.

“Fasure,” Jackrabbit shouted back. “Who wants to stuff pillows? I tore one open once hitting Bolivar over the head. What a mess! Gets up your nose. And the padded jackets with down—they’re very warm but who would want to stuff every patch?”

“They’re stuffed first, then sewn,” she said. “So nobody works in this factory? Not even a supervisor?”

“It’s mechanical,” Luciente said. “The analyzer oversees it, with constant monitoring and feedback. In operations like the brooder, most everything is automated, but we need human presence because mistakes are too serious.”

“This runs off solar energy?”

“No, methane gas from composting wastes.”

“Okay, you can automate a whole factory,” she said as they walked back into the sunshine. “So why do I see people grubbing around broccoli plants picking off

caterpillars? Why is everybody running around on foot or bicycles?”

“We have so much energy from the sun, so much from wind, so much from decomposing wastes, so much from the waves, so much from the river, so much from alcohol from wood, so much from wood gas.” Luciente checked them off on her fingers. “That’s a fixed amount. Manufacturing and mining are better done by machines. Who wants to go deep into the earth and crawl through tunnels breathing rock dust and never seeing the sun? Who wants to sit in a factory sewing the same four or five comforter patterns?”

“There are ten, in fact,” Jackrabbit said. “I counted them.”

“Only you have been in enough beds to be sure,” Luciente said with a tucked-in smile. They walked on toward a joined group of free-form buildings of sinuous curves suggesting a mass of eggs, but with long loops thrown off and high arches and arcades. This just-grew was the color of terra cotta. A vine ran all over the south side, with big velvet flowers that gave off a fragrance of cloves. Bird feeders hung from every protrusion, out of windows, on posts. The roof was studded with bird-houses and a pigeon coop built in, as if the masonry broke into lace through which pigeons went fluttering and cooing.

Small gardens ran right among the clump of buildings, vegetables and flowers intermixed, tomato plants growing with rosebushes and onions, pansies and bean plants. Some were planted in open borders and some were surrounded by a thin shimmery fence like spiderweb. Out over the bay a towering mass of gray clouds was forming as the wind rose.

“Smells like rain,” Jackrabbit said. “The day’s turning.”

“I hope if it’s going to rain, Innocente has time to complete a shelter.” Luciente eyed the clouds. “Hope Bee and Otter get back before the storm. Lux too, I mean,” she added guiltily.

“When I was on my naming, it rained every damned day,” Jackrabbit said. “I should have come back Drowned Rat.”

In one of the spiderweb gardens an old man with a bush of white hair and a gnarled face, arms like driftwood scoured by salt and wind, was picking peas into a basket and weeding into another, with two kids of nine or ten working on either side.

“How come they aren’t in school?” she asked. “Is school out already for the summer?”

“That *is* school,” Luciente said, drawing Connie nearer to them.

“This one is lamb’s-quarters, no?” one kid was asking.

“Can you eat it?”

“Fasure.”

“Look at the shape of the pea flowers. Most legumes have irregular flowers with five petals—see, the two lower ones join in a keel, like the keel on the fishing boats. The two at the sides are like spread wings. Then you have one on top. Most legumes have leaves

like these.”

“Alternate. Compound. With these twisty things that hold on?”

“Tendrils. Some have thorns instead. After we’re done weeding, we’ll look for a tree that’s evolved in a typical legume way, that has thorns a couple of inches long.” His fingers showed the size.

As they strolled on, she said, “But they can’t possibly learn as much that way as they would in a classroom with a book!”

“They can read. We all read by four or so,” Jackrabbit said. “But who wants to grow up with a head full of facts in boxes? We never leave school and go to work. We’re always working, always studying. We think, what person thinks person knows has to be tried out all the time. Placed against what people need. We care a lot *how* things are done.”

“Every seven years you get a sabbatical,” Luciente said. “You’re off production for a year and all you’re liable for is family stuff. Some go study in their field. Some learn a language or travel. Hermit in the wilderness. Pursue some line of private research. Or paint. Or write a book.”

Connie had been craning her head around. “I see a lot of old people here. Is this building like an old folks’ home too?”

Outside on the first lawn of grass she had seen here, a circle of small children sat crowding around an old woman with her hair in braids and the face of a defiant eagle. In spite of her age she still had some teeth—they were too yellowed and irregular to be dentures—and she was telling a story in a high quavering dramatic voice. “Then Green Fire came to Box Turtle and when Box Turtle saw, Box Turtle closed per box tight with a hissing of air.” Her ancient brown claw hands became the turtle closing. “Green Fire sat down quietly, tucking per feet under, and waited. And waited. And waited. Finally Box Turtle slowly opened the shell a little peek and peered out.”

“When I was little, that was my favorite story,” Jackrabbit said. “I imagined when I was twelve I would take that name, Green Fire.”

“Box Turtle’s little leathery head stuck out of the shell and per little red eyes stared at Green Fire. ‘What do you want, long-legged one?’ asked Box Turtle.

“‘I want to learn to hide as you do,’ Green Fire said.

“‘Hiding is easy when you know how,’ said Box Turtle. ‘But first you must trade me your long legs that run so fast, before you can learn to hide the way I do.’”

“Sappho perself made that tale long ago.” Jackrabbit was watching the old woman with admiration. “Many people now tell that story, but none better. At Icebreaking I taped per telling with the latest varia for the holifile. Sappho’s tales have great strength and radiance.”

Luciente snapped her fingers. “We never answered your question.” They passed under an archway into a room full of books on shelves, screens set into alcoves, displays and

cameras and sound equipment and art supplies. A dozen kids were busy in the room. An old man—or perhaps woman—with the wiry, brittle body of spry old age was showing a small child how to work television sets that spewed reams of paper at the touch of a dial. Jackrabbit ambled off to see what some kids were doing, working on a small holi projector. Luciente stayed at her side, saying, “We believe old people and children are kin. There’s more space at both ends of life. That closeness to birth and to death makes a common concern with big questions and basic patterns. We think old people, because of their distance from the problems of their own growing up, hold more patience and can be quieter to hear what children want. Not everyone who teaches the young is old—we all teach. The kids work with us. We try to share what we have learned and what we don’t know ... . I think maybe growing up is less mysterious with us since the adult world isn’t separate. What better place to learn anatomy than in a clinic? What better place to learn botany than a field of corn? What better place to study mechanics than a repair shop?”

“How can Red Star repair a floater with a mob of kids underfoot?”

“A mob of kids?” Luciente shook her hair back roughly. “I puzzle, I admit ... . We think about kids so different it makes us crosstalk, my friend ... . We ask a lot of our kids but ... politely? It’s not the one-to-one bind you had with your daughter, from what you say. We have more space, more people to love us. We grow up closest to our mothers, but we swim close to all our mems—or some, at least!” Luciente grinned. “We have handfriends and pillowfriends among other children in the children’s house ... . It’s hard for me to inknow what it would feel like to love only *one* and have only *one* soul to love me.”

Wandering through the rooms, she found some low-ceilinged, some opening into fisheye windows, into greenhouses and porches. Some rooms crept into nooks and crannies, small staircases. Others led them to courts full of plants, delicate apparatus, sundials and water clocks, star maps and telescopes. A fountain gurgled. In it three naked children waded with a curly puppy. Birds hopped in the vines, carp lazed in a small stream that flowed through a room whirring with machines into a courtyard, where a construction project was going on with children of seven or eight wielding miniature hammers, planes, and saws.

In a dark room that smelled fresh and cool, a naked girl was listening to what she said shortly was a Bach sonata for unaccompanied flute. How ... fancy it was in here. Room where the walls were mosaics of old bottles. Room of stark white blocks with rude mats on the floor. Room where a thin film of gauze like those spidery fences was all that separated inside and outside. Everywhere children went about their play and their business with adults, with older and younger children, with dogs, with rabbits, children with what Luciente told her were powerful microscopes, spectroscopes, molecular scanners, gene readers, computer terminals, light pencils, lightweight sound and light holi cameras and transmitters that created an image so real she could not believe till she passed her hand through that the elephant in the center of the room was only a three-dimensional image. She walked through the elephant unable to prevent her heart from

racing as it raised its huge tusked head and trumpeted.

“You think because we do not bear live, we cannot love our children,” Luciente said in a soft, husky voice, cupping Connie’s elbow in her big calloused hand. “But we do, with whole hearts.”

The nursery: round high room on the ground floor, room with a circle of windows and a small floating dome in the ceiling; here babies babbled, cried, spat, cooed. A young person in a long green loose gown slit up the sides to the thighs sat barefoot, playing a stringed instrument and singing in a sweet alto, and with a treadle board rocking a brace of cradles. A child was playing with one of the babies, tickling and making faces. The infants lay in low cradles with slatted sides that moved on runners to and fro. Connie counted five babies, including one yelling its lungs out, and then three empty cradles, also rocking.

Barbarossa burst in, out of breath. “I hear you, I hear you. You almost blew the kenner off my wrist, you rascal! What a pair of lungs.” He picked up the crying baby. “They can hear you ten miles out on the shelf farm, you hairy little beast!” He sat down with the baby on a soft padded bench by the windows and unbuttoned his shirt. Then she felt sick.

He had breasts. Not large ones. Small breasts, like a flat-chested woman temporarily swollen with milk. Then with his red beard, his face of a sunburnt forty-five-year-old man, stern-visaged, long-nosed, thin-lipped, he began to nurse. The baby stopped wailing and begun to suck greedily. An expression of serene enjoyment spread over Barbarossa’s intellectual schoolmaster’s face. He let go of the room, of everything, and floated. Her breasts ached with remembrance. She had loved breastfeeding—that deep-down warm milky connection that seemed to start in her womb and spread up through her trunk into her full dark-nippled breasts. Her heavy breasts opened to Angelina’s flower face, the sweet sunflower cradled in her arm. She had been borne on the currents of that intimate sensual connection, calmer, gentler than making love but just as enormous and satisfying. She had nursed Angelina until Eddie had absolutely insisted that she stop; for eight months she had nursed her. Angie had been a fat healthy baby. Only after Eddie had made her stop breast-feeding had Angie turned cranky about eating and become the thin doelike child of the photographs.

She felt angry. Yes, how dare any man share that pleasure. These women thought they had won, but they had abandoned to men the last refuge of women. What was special about being a woman here? They had given it all up, they had let men steal from them the last remnants of ancient power, those sealed in blood and in milk.

“I suppose you do it all with hormones,” she said testily.

“At least two of the three mothers agree to breast-feed. The way we do it, no one has enough alone, but two or three together share breast-feeding.”

“Why bother? Don’t tell me you couldn’t make formula?”

“But the intimacy of it! We suspect loving and sensual enjoyment are rooted in being

held and sucking and cuddling.”

“Where are the babies from the empty cradles? Are they sick?”

“Outside with mothers or somebody! Oftentimes when we’re working, we take the baby in a backpack. They get fresh air. When breast-feeding ends, everybody who feels like it lugs them around.”

“Suppose you took Barbarossa’s baby and he wanted it. Wouldn’t he get sore?”

“What are kenners for? You ask.”

She stared at the room, blue and lemon and grass green. Sunlight melted through the circle of windows and a muted vegetable light passed through the dome. The windows stood open to the breezes now. The person in green was changing a diaper and wiping the cradle. Both diaper and wipe-up went down a chute.

“Well, at least you’re not so crazy about ecology that you wash diapers.”

“They’re made from cornhusks and cobs, and they compost. Very soft. Feel.” The diapers tore off a large roll hung from a stand in the form of a snake dancing, with many tinkling bells attached. Over the cradles mobiles turned and twittered. No pink and blue, no Disney animals prancing, no ugly cartoon pigs decked in human clothes. The nursery was airy, soothing, full of rustling and little bells and wind chimes and the sound of the stringed instrument, the cradles rocking. On the window seat, Barbarossa cuddled his baby to his breast, all the stern importance melted from his features. She could almost hate him in the peaceful joy to which he had no natural right; she could almost like him as he opened like a daisy to the baby’s sucking mouth.

The person in green was cuddling the baby just changed and singing a slightly mournful lullaby:

“Nobody knows  
how it flows  
as it goes.

Nobody goes  
where it rose  
where it flows.”

“Where’s Jackrabbit?” Connie asked, realizing that somewhere in the maze of rooms and courtyards he had slipped away.

“Gone to play. This house seduces you.”

“Nobody chose  
how it grows  
how it flows.

How it grows

how it glows  
in the heart of the rose ...”

As they went up a broad shallow stairway, that song, plaintive and endless, followed after them.

“Except in the nursery and among the very young, the kids don’t have toys,” she said suddenly.

“Most of what children must learn, they learn by doing. Under five, fasure they need toys to learn coordination, dexterity; they practice tenderness on dolls ... . I’m looking for Magdalena.” Casually Luciente flicked her kenner. “Magdalena? Ah, person is coming. Magdalena is unusual. Person does not switch jobs but is permanent head of this house of children. It is per calling. Sometimes a gift expresses itself so strongly, like Jackrabbit’s need to create color and form, like Magdalena’s need to work with children, that it shapes a life. Person must not do what person cannot do—you have heard us say this a hundred times; but likewise, person must do what person has to do.”

A small figure with velvety black skin—she had to be a woman from the delicacy of her bones—a long neck, hair cut to her scalp in an austere tracery of curls, descended toward them, smiling slightly. She came drifting down, stooping to pick off dead leaves from the vine that grew over one side of the open stairs. She was no taller than a ten-or eleven-year-old.

“Magdalena has no family. Person wants this instead. Person is chaste and solitary among adults,” Luciente said as Magdalena came slowly toward them.

“You mean an old maid?”

“I don’t know this term. You speak it with contempt?”

“Yeah, it’s an insult. A woman who can’t get a man.”

“Connie, we don’t get each other. And we respect people who don’t want to couple. It’s per way: the way for Magdalena.”

In a high chirpy voice like a cricket, Magdalena greeted her. “Be guest, woman from the past.” She stuck out her tiny hand. Her grip was warm, sun-heated ebony. “I’m Magdalena.”

“You’re the only woman I met here who has a real name. I mean like somebody from my block.”

“It’s the name of a woman burned to death for witchcraft in Germany many centuries ago. A wisewoman who healed with herbs. I saw per in my naming trance.” Magdalena smiled, a blink of ivory in her quick face. Was she sixty? More? Maybe old people here retained an ongoing strength because they felt useful. When she thought of getting old it always made her feel scared and low in her mind, old age as grim as those witch masks kids bought in the candy store and wore in the streets of El Barrio at Halloween.

“I wanted to know about the toys. You have all those gadgets here. Compared to your huts, it’s ... fancy. Nice. But I don’t see many toys for the older kids. Can’t you afford to

get them toys? I see nobody rich here, but I don't see anybody poor. I think of how sad it's been for families like mine who could never give their kids the beautiful dolls with real hair, the sleds, the bikes and racing cars they see advertised. If I had a house of children, I'd give them every toy in the world! I wouldn't hold *nothing* back!"

Magdalena touched her on the cheek. "They play farming and cooking and repair and fishing and diving and manufacture and plant breeding and baby tending. When children aren't kept out of the real work, they don't have the same need for imitation things. I have studied about the care of children in earlier ages, so I understand more than Luciente what you're talking about. In that time, Luciente, they had many toys for teaching sex roles to children. Children were kept in separate buildings all day and even after puberty were not supposed to begin full lives."

Slowly they descended the broad stairs to the bottom and moved off along an arcade. As they turned a corner, in a little nook that was both bower and bench, a rampant twining vine of wisteria ancient and knotted like muscles held in its protective grasp a curved wooden bench that was a lovely size for curling up and napping or reading, for sitting and feeling sorry for oneself, for daydreaming, for imagining voyages and adventures, for whispering secrets to a best friend. There two children, a boy and a girl six or seven, had hung their light summer tunics on the vine like flags and they were seriously engaged in an attempt to have sex together. It did not look like an attempt that would prove immediately successful, but it was one into which they were putting great effort.

The girl gave them a quick indignant glare. Magdalena pulled Connie away by the arm, Luciente having withdrawn even more quickly. As Magdalena dragged her away, Connie asked, "Aren't you going to stop them?"

Magdalena dropped her arm and began to laugh and although Luciente tried for a moment to keep a straight face she began to laugh with her. Connie stopped, furious. "They're babies! If they were ... playing with knives you'd stop them. What's wrong with you?"

Magdalena shook her head in wonder. "They learn how to use knives ... . Mostly they learn sex from each other. If a child has trouble, we try to heal, to help, but—"

"They can hurt each other!"

"How? If a child is rough, the other children deal with that. If I notice a child bullying, I try to work with that child, the mothers and family, to strengthen better ways."

Luciente nudged her in the ribs. "Zo, as a child you never played sex with other children? Not ever?"

Connie paced on, frowning. She leaned on the railing of the courtyard. "Oh. Sure." In fact, her brother Luis had taken her pants down under the porch and poked at her with his fingers, finishing with warnings not to tell Mamá. She had not liked the prodding by Luis, who had kept his own pants on, but it had given her an idea. Casually and a lot more gently, she had begun fooling around together with José, her favorite brother, one



year and two months younger.

She took care of him often. Luis didn't have to and he would be off with the boys. She would take José by the hand and they would play together. Ninety-nine games out of a hundred they played with paper dolls, with José's wooden duck, with Luis's wagon if he left it there, with dolls made out of wild flowers, games of school, of sitting at imaginary tables eating meals of grass soup and scolding babies, of charros, of detectives, of general bang-bang. But every so often they climbed into the old car up on blocks behind the chicken coop next door and they touched each other where it felt best to touch. They did not need to warn each other not to say anything. Both of them sensed that what felt really good must be forbidden. It was a silent, pleasurable game that had stopped certainly by the time they moved to Chicago. But not one ounce of Connie's flesh believed it had done her any harm.

"Okay," she said slowly. "Maybe it don't hurt. But I know if I saw my daughter playing that way, I'd have to stop her. I'd feel so guilty if I didn't! I'd feel like a bad mother, a rotten mother."

"How interesting," Magdalena said politely, with her head cocked. "Our notions of evil center around power and greed—taking from other people their food, their liberty, their health, their land, their customs, their pride. We don't find coupling bad unless it involves pain or is not invited." She paused before a closed door. "Come. Watch a lesson."

Inside, a little boy with red-brown skin sat curled up in a wooden chair wearing a metallic cap like a gold hairnet. His eyes were closed and he was breathing slowly as if in sleep. Magdalena cautioned her with a tiny hand to keep quiet. The boy opened his eyes and turned to a screen on which a moving light showed waves that slid evenly across.

"Good, Sparrow! Now without the guide." An old man sat against the wall like a bag of bones, with only shreds of white hair clinging to his huge skull.

"What is he learning?"

"Pulse and blood pressure," the boy said. "How do you start in your village?"

"Start what?"

"Inknowing," the child said wonderingly. "Do you call it different where you come from?"

She turned to Magdalena, who said, "In your day some of it was called yoga, some meditating, some biofeedback, and some had no name at all."

"We aren't mad to control," Luciente said, "but we want to prevent overreacting—heart attacks, indigestion, panic. We want to get used to knowing exactly what we feel, so we don't shove on other people what's coming from inside."

"We want to teach unknowing and outknowing." Magdalena gestured apology and swept the women gently back into the hall, shutting the door. "To feel with other beings. To catch, where the ability exists—instance, so strongly in you. We teach

sharpening of the senses. Coning, going down, how to reach nevel, how to slow at will.”

“What is all that stuff?”

“States of consciousness. Types of feeling.”

“How can you teach somebody to feel? From a book you can learn the multiplication tables. But how can you teach love?”

“But every mother always has. Or failed to.” Seeing something in Connie’s face, Magdalena went on quickly. “We educate the senses, the imagination, the social being, the muscles, the nervous system, the intuition, the sense of beauty—as well as memory and intellect. Anyhow, we try!” She laughed again, that laugh that picked immediately at Luciente and made her grin too. “People here in our bony skulls”—lightly Magdalena rapped on Connie’s forehead—“how easy to feel isolate. We want to root that forebrain back into a net of connecting.” She turned back to Luciente, smiling broadly. “Here comes Jackrabbit with Dawn. By the road, your child grows better and better at the arts of defense. You’ll be feathered when you see the next demo!”

Long-limbed rangy Jackrabbit came loping through an archway, making high neighing sounds. A brown-skinned girl with dark braids clung to his neck, laughing with a wide-open mouth that showed her small teeth. Avid teeth flashed. Arms hung on tight. She clung to his neck and laughed and laughed and kicked his ribs with her bare feet. She was about seven, wearing a lavender summer tunic, and she had a scab on her small round, her heavily tanned, her kissable knee. How she laughed, like dry bells, like bells partly muffled, how she laughed: her golden-brown eyes met Connie’s. Connie’s heart turned in her chest. Her heart sharpened into a dagger and stopped.

“Angelina!” she cried out, and her voice burst from her like a bubble of blood from her mouth. Then she was back in the isolation cell, flat against one wall as if she had been thrown there. She held both hands against her striving chest.

Angelina! Or any brown-skinned girl child of seven or so with golden-brown eyes. How did she know what Angelina would look like after three years? She wouldn’t be barefoot in Scarsdale.

Suddenly she assented with all her soul to Angelina in Mattapoisett, to Angelina hidden forever one hundred fifty years into the future, even if she should never see her again. For the first time her heart assented to Luciente, to Bee, to Magdalena. Yes, you can have my child, you can keep my child. Even with your obscenities and your talking cats. She will be strong there, well fed, well housed, well taught, she will grow up much better and stronger and smarter than I. I assent, I give you my battered body as recompense and my rotten heart. Take her, keep her! I want to believe she is mine. I give her to Luciente to mother, with gladness I give her. She will never be broken as I was. She will be strange, but she will be glad and strong and she will not be afraid. She will have enough. She will have pride. She will love her own brown skin and be loved for her strength and her good work. She will walk in strength like a man and never sell her body and she will nurse her babies like a woman and live in love like a garden, like that children’s house of many colors. People of the rainbow with its end fixed in earth, I

give her to you!