Frank Herbert: The GM Effect

It was a balmy fall evening and as Dr. Valeric Sabantoce seated himself at the long table in Meade Hall’s basement seminar room, he thought of how the weather would be sensationalized tomorrow by the newspapers and wire services. They would be sure to remark on the general clemency of the elements, pointing out how Nature’s smiling aspect made the night’s tragedy so much more horrible.

Sabantoce was a short, rotund man with a wild shock of black hair that looked as though it had never known a comb. His round face with its look of infant innocence invariably led strangers to an incorrect impression—unless they were at once exposed to his ribald wit or caught the weighted stare of his deeply-socketed brown eyes.

Fourteen people sat around the long table now—nine students and five faculty—with Professor Joshua Latchley in the chairman’s seat at the head.

“Now that we’re all here,” Latchley said, “I can tell you the purpose of tonight’s meeting. We are faced with a most terrible decision. We … ahhh—”

Latchley fell silent, chewed at his lower lip. He was conscious of the figure he cut here—a tall, ungainly bald man in thick-lensed glasses … the constant air of apology he wore as though it were a shield. Tonight, he felt that this appearance was a disguise. Who could guess—except Sabantoce, of course—at the daring exposed by this seemingly innocent gathering?

“Don’t leave ’em hanging there, Josh,” Sabantoce said.

“Yes … ahh, yes,” Latchley said. “It has occurred to me that Dr. Sabantoce and I have a special demonstration to present here tonight, but before we expose you to that experiment, as it were, perhaps we should recapitulate somewhat.”

Sabantoce, wondering what had diverted Latchley, glanced around the table—saw that they were not all there. Dr. Richard Marmon was missing.

Did he suspect and make a break for it? Sabantoce wondered. He realized then that Latchley was stalling for time while Marmon was being hunted out and brought in here.

Latchley rubbed his shiny pate. He had no desire to be here, he thought. But this had to be done. He knew that outside on the campus the special 9:00 P.M. hush had fallen over Yankton Technical Institute and this was his favorite hour for strolling—perhaps up to the fresh pond to listen to the frogs and the couples and to think on the etymological derivations of—

He became conscious of restless coughing and shuffling around the table, realized he had permitted his mind to wander. He was infamous for it, Latchley knew. He cleared his throat. Where the devil was that Marmon? Couldn’t they find him?

“As you know,” Latchley said, “we’ve made no particular efforts to keep our discovery secret, although we’ve tried to discourage wild speculation and outside discussion. Our intention was to conduct thorough tests before publishing. All of you—both the student … ahh, ‘guinea pigs’ and you professors of the faculty committee—have been most cooperative. But inevitably news of what we are doing here has spread—sometimes in a very hysterical and distorted manner.”

“What Professor Latchley is saying,” Sabantoce interrupted, “is that the fat’s in the fire.”

Expressions of curiosity appeared on the faces of the students who, up to this moment, had been trying to conceal their boredom. Old Dr. Inkton had a fit of coughing.

“There’s an old Malay expression,” Sabantoce said, “that when one plays Bumps-a-Daisy with a porcupine, one is necessarily jumpy. Now, all of us should’ve known this porcupine was loaded.’”

“Thank you, Dr. Sabantoce,” Latchely said. “I feel … and I know this is a most unusual course … that all of you should share in the decision that must be made here tonight. Each of you, by participating in this project, has become involved far more deeply here than is the usual case with scientific experiments of this general type. And since you student assistants have been kept somewhat in the dark, perhaps Dr. Sabantoce, as original discoverer of the GM effect, should fill you in on some of the background.”

Stall it is, Sabantoce thought.

“Discovery of the genetic memory, or GM effect, was an accident,” Sabantoce said, picking up his cue. “Dr. Marmon and I were looking for a hormonal method of removing fat from the body. Our Compound 105 had given excellent results on mice and hamsters. We had six generations without apparent side effects and that morning I had decided to try 105 on myself.”

Sabantoce allowed himself a self-deprecating grin, said: “You may remember I had a few excess pounds then.”

The responsive laughter told him he had successfully lightened the mood which had grown a bit heavy after Latchley’s portentous tone.

Josh is a damn’ fool, Sabantoce told himself. I warned him to keep it light. This is a dangerous business.

“It was eight minutes after ten A.M. when I took that first dosage,” Sabantoce said. “I remember it was a very pleasant spring morning and I could hear Carl Kychre’s class down the hall reciting a Greek ode. In a few minutes I began to feel somewhat euphoric—almost drunk, but very gently so—and I sat down on a lab stool. Presently, I began reciting with Kychre’s class, swinging my arm to the rhythm of it. The next thing I knew, there was Carl in the lab door with some students peering in behind him and I realized I might have been a bit loud.”

“‘That’s magnificent archaic Greek but it is disturbing my class,’ Carl said.”

Sabantoce waited for laughter to subside.

“I suddenly realized I was two people,” Sabantoce said. “I was perfectly aware of where I was and who I was, but I also knew quite certainly that I was a Hoplite soldier named Zagreut recently returned from a mercenary venture on Kyrene. It was the double-exposure effect that so many of you have remarked. I had all the memories and thoughts of this Hoplite, including his very particular and earthy inclinations toward a female who was uppermost in his/my awareness. And there was this other thing we’ve all noticed: I was thinking his/my thoughts in Greek, but they were cross-linked to my dominant present and its English-based awareness. I could translate at will. It was a very heady experience, this realization that I was two people.”

One of the graduate students said: “You were a whole mob, Doctor.”

Again, there was laughter. Even old Inkton joined in.

“I must’ve looked a bit peculiar to poor Carl,” Sabantoce said. “He came into the lab and said: ‘Are you all right?’ I told him to get Dr. Marmon down there fast … which he did. And speaking of Marmon, do any of you know where he is?”

Silence greeted the question; then Latchley said: “He’s being … summoned.”

“So,” Sabantoce said. “Well, to get on: Marmon and I locked ourselves in the lab and began exploring this thing. Within a few minutes we found out you could direct the subject’s awareness into any stratum of his genetic inheritance, there to be illuminated by an ancestor of his choice; and we were caught immediately by the realization that this discovery gave an entirely new interpretation to the concept of instinct and to theories of memory storage. When I say we were excited, that’s the understatement of the century.”

The talkative graduate student said: “Did the effect fade the way it does with the rest of us?”

“In about an hour,” Sabantoce said. “Of course, it didn’t fade completely, as you know. That old Hoplite’s right here with me, so to speak—along with the rest of the mob. A touch of 105 and I have him full on—all his direct memories up to the conception-moment of my next ancestor in his line. I have some overlaps, too, and later memories of his through parallel ancestry and later siblings. I’m also linked to his maternal line, of course—and two of you are tied into this same fabric, as you know. The big thing here is that the remarkably accurate memories of that Hoplite play hob with several accepted histories of the period. In fact, he was our first intimation that much recorded history is a crock.”

Old Inkton leaned forward, coughed hoarsely, said: “Isn’t it about time, doctor, that we did something about that?”

“In a way, that’s why we’re here tonight,” Sabantoce said. And he thought: Still no sign of Marmon. I hope Josh knows what he’s talking about. But we have to stall some more.

“Since only a few of us know the full story on some of our more sensational discoveries, we’re going to give you a brief outline of those discoveries,” Sabantoce said. He put on his most disarming smile, gestured to Latchley. “Professor Latchley, as historian-coordinator of that phase in our investigations, can carry on from here.”

Latchley cleared his throat, exchanged a knowing look with Sabantoce. Did Marmon suspect? Latchley asked himself. He couldn’t possibly know … but he might have suspected.

“Several obvious aspects of this research method confront one immediately,” Latchley said, breaking his attention away from Sabantoce and the worry about Marmon. “As regards any major incident of history—say, a battle—we find a broad selection of subjects on the victorious side and, sometimes, no selection at all on the defeated side. Through the numerous cross references found within even this small group, for example, we find remarkably few adjacent and incidental memories within the Troy quadrant of the Trojan wars—some female subjects, of course, but few males. The male bloodlines were virtually wiped out.”

Again, Latchley sensed restlessness in his audience and felt a moment of jealousy. Their attention didn’t wander when Sabantoce was speaking. The reason was obvious: Sabantoce gave them the dirt, so to speak.

Latchley forced his apologetic smile, said: “Perhaps you’d like a little of the real dirt.”

They did perk up, by heaven!

“As many have suspected,” Latchley said, “our evidence makes it conclusive that Henry Tudor did order the murder of the two princes in the Tower … at the same time he set into motion the propaganda against Richard III. Henry proves to’ve been a most vile sort—devious, cruel, cowardly, murderous—political murder was an accepted part of his regime.” Latchley shuddered. “And thanks to his sex drive, he’s an ancestor of many of us.”

“Tell ’em about Honest Abe,” Sabantoce said.

Latchley adjusted his glasses, touched the corner of his mouth with a finger, then: “Abraham Lincoln.”

He said it as though announcing a visitor and there was a long pause.

Presently, Latchley said: “I found this most distressing. Lincoln was my particular hero in childhood. As some of you know, General Butler was one of my ancestors and … well, this was most distressing.”

Latchley fumbled in his pocket, brought up a scrap of paper, studied it, then: “In a debate with Judge Douglas, Lincoln said: ‘I tell you very frankly that I am not in favor of Negro citizenship. I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races; that I am not nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to inter-marry with white people. I will say in addition that there is a physical difference between the white and black races, which, I suppose, will forever forbid the two races living together upon terms of social and political equality; and in as much as they cannot so live—while they do remain together—there must be the position of the superiors and the inferiors; and that I, as much as any other man, am in favor of the superior being assigned to the white man.’”

Latchley sighed, stuffed the paper into a pocket. “Most distressing,” he said. “Once, in a conversation with Butler, Lincoln suggested that all Negroes should be deported to Africa. Another time, talking about the Emancipation Proclamation, he said: ‘If it helps preserve the Union, that’s enough. But it’s as clear to me as it is to any thinking man in the Republic that this proclamation will be declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court following the cessation of hostilities.’”

Sabantoce interrupted: “How many of you realize what hot potatoes these are?”

The faces around the table turned toward him then back to Latchley.

“Once you have the clue of an on-the-scene observer,” Latchley said, “you even find correspondence and other records of corroboration. It’s amazing how people used to hide their papers.”

The talkative graduate student leaned his elbows on the table, said: “The hotter the potato, the more people will notice it, isn’t that right, Professor Latchley?”

Poor fellow’s bucking for a better grade even now, Sabantoce thought. And he answered for Latchley: “The hottest potatoes are the most difficult to swallow, too.”

The inane exchange between Sabantoce and the student left a hollow silence behind it and a deepening sense of uneasiness.

Another student said: “Where’s Dr. Marmon? I understand he has a theory that the more GM we bring into contact with consciousness, the more we’re controlled by the dominant brutality of our ancestors. You know, he says the most brutal ones survived to have children and we kind of gloss that over in our present awareness … or something like that.”

Old Inkton stirred out of his semidaze, turned his sour milk eyes on Latchley. “Pilgrims,” he said.

“Ah, yes,” Latchley said.

Sabantoce said: “We have eyewitness accounts of Puritans and Pilgrims robbing and raping Indians. Brutality. Some of my ancestors, I’m afraid.”

“Tea party,” Old Inkton said.

Why doesn’t the old fool shut up? Latchley wondered. And he found himself increasingly uneasy about Marmon’s absence. Could there have been a double double-cross? he asked himself.

“Why not outline the Boston Tea Party?” Sabantoce asked. “There’re a few here who weren’t in on that phase.”

“Yes … ahhh-mmmm,” Latchley said. “Massachusetts had a smuggling governor then, of course. Everybody of consequence in the Colonies was smuggling. Navigation Acts and all that. The governor and his cronies were getting their tea from the Dutch. Had warehouses full of it. The British East India Company was on the verge of bankruptcy when the British Government voted a subsidy—equivalent to more than twenty million dollars in current exchange. Because of this … ahh, subsidy, the East India Company’s tea could be sent in at about half the price of the smuggled tea—even including the tax. The governor and his henchmen faced ruin. So they hired brigands to wear Indian disguise and dump the East India Company’s tea into the harbor—about a half million dollars worth of tea. And the interesting thing is it was better tea than the smugglers had. Another item to note is that the governor and his cronies then added the cost of the hired brigands onto the price charged for their smuggled tea.”

“Hot potatoes,” Sabantoce said. “And we haven’t even gone into the religious issues—Moses and his aides drafting the Ten Commandments … the argument between Pilate and the religious fanatic.”

“Or the present United States southern senator whose grandfather was a light-skinned Negro,” Latchley said.

Again, that air of suspenseful uneasiness came over the room. People turned and looked at their companions, twisted in their chairs.

Sabantoce felt it and thought: We can’t let them start asking the wrong questions. Maybe this was a bad tack to take. We should’ve stalled them some other way … perhaps in some other place. Where is Marmon?

“Our problem is complicated by accuracy, strangely enough,” Latchley said. “When you know where to look, the corroborating evidence is easy to find. The records of that southern senator’s ancestry couldn’t be disputed.”

A student at the opposite end of the table said: “Well, if we have the evidence then nothing can stop us.”

“Ahh … mmmm,” Latchley said. “Well … ahh … the financial base for our own school is involv…”

He was interrupted by a disturbance at the door. Two uniformed men pushed a tall blond young man in a rumpled dark suit into the room. The door was closed and there came the click of a lock. It was an ominous sound.

Sabantoce rubbed his throat.

The young man steadied himself with a hand against the wall, worked his way up the room to a point opposite Latchley, lurched across to an empty chair and collapsed into it. A thick odor of whisky accompanied him.

Latchley stared at him, feeling both relief and uneasiness. They were really all here now. The newcomer stared back out of deep-set blue eyes. His mouth was a straight, in-curving line in a long face that appeared even longer because of an extremely high forehead.

“What’s going on here, Josh?” he demanded.

Latchley put on his apologetic smile, said: “Now, Dick, I’m sorry we had to drag you away from wherev…”

“Drag!” The young man glanced at Sabantoce, back to Latchley. “Who are those guys? Said they were campus police, but I never saw ’em before. Said I had to come with them … vital importance!”

“I told you this was an important meeting tonight,” Sabantoce said. “You’ve…”

“Important meeting,” the young man sneered.

“We must decide tonight about abandoning the project,” Latchley said.

A gasp sounded around the table.

That was clever, Sabantoce thought. He looked down the table at the others, said: “Now that Dr. Marmon is here, we can bring the thing out and examine it.”

“Aband…” Marmon said and sat up straight in his chair.

A long moment of silence passed. Abruptly, the table erupted to discord—everyone trying to talk at once. The noise subsided only when Sabantoce overrode it, slamming a palm against the table and shouting: “Please!”

Into the sudden silence, Latchley said. “You have no idea how painful this disclosure is to those of us who’ve already faced the realities of it.”

“Realities?” Marmon demanded. He shook his head and the effort he made to overcome the effects of drink was apparent to everyone around the table.

“Let me point out to all of you just one little part of our total problem,” Sabantoce said. “The inheritance of several major fortunes in this country could be legally attacked—with excellent chances of success—on the basis of knowledge we’ve uncovered.”

Sabantoce gave them a moment to absorb this, then: “We’re boat rockers in a world whose motto is ‘Don’t give up the ship.’ And we could tip over quite a few ships.”

“Let us face it,” Latchley said, picking up his cue from Sabantoce. “We are not a very powerful group.”

“Just a minute!” Marmon shouted. He hitched his chair closer to the table. “Bunch of crepe hangers. Where’s y’r common sense? We got the goods on a whole bunch of bums! Have you any idea how much that’s worth?”

From down the table to his left came one explosive word: “Blackmail?”

Latchley looked at Sabantoce with a raised-eyebrows expression that said clearly: “See? I told you so.”

“Why not?” Marmon demanded. “These bums have been blackmailing us f’r centuries. ‘B’lieve what I tell y’, man, or we’ll pull y’r arms outa their sockets!’ That’s what they been tellin’s … telling us.” He rubbed his lips.

Sabantoce stood up, moved around the table and rested a hand lightly on Marmon’s shoulder. “Okay. We’ll let Dr. Marmon be the devil’s advocate. While he’s talking, Dr. Latchley and I will go out and get the film and equipment for the little demonstration we’ve prepared for you. It should give you a clear understanding of what we’re up against.” He nodded to Latchley, who arose and joined him.

They crossed to the door, trying not to move too fast. Sabantoce rapped twice on the panel. The door opened and they slipped out between two uniformed guards, one of whom closed and locked the door behind them.

“This way, please,” the other guard said.

They moved up the hall, hearing Marmon’s voice fade behind them: “The bums have always controlled the history books and the courts and the coinage and the military and every…”

Distance reduced the voice to an unintelligible murmur.

“Damn’ Commie,” one of the guards muttered.

“It does seem such a waste,” Latchley said.

“Let’s not kid ourselves,” Sabantoce said as he started up the stairs to the building’s side exit. “When the ship’s sinking, you save what you can. I think the Bishop explained things clearly enough: God’s testing all men and this is the ultimate test of faith.”

“Ultimate test, certainly,” Latchley said, laboring to keep up with Sabantoce. “And I’m afraid I must agree with whoever it was said this would produce only chaos—unsettled times … anarchy.”

“Obvious,” Sabantoce said, as he stepped through the outer door being held by another guard.

Latchley and the escort followed.

At once, Sabantoce noted that all the campus lights had been extinguished. The contrived power failure, he thought. They probably switched Meade to an emergency circuit so we wouldn’t notice.

One of their guards stepped forward, touched Latchley’s arm, said: “Take the path directly across the quad to the Medical School. Use the back door into Vance Hall. You’ll have to hurry. There isn’t much time.”

Sabantoce led the way down the steps and onto the dark path away from Meade Hall. The path was only a suggestion of lighter gray in the darkness. Latchley stumbled into Sabantoce as they hurried, said: “Excuse me.”

There was an impression of many moving dark shapes in the shadows around them. Once a light was flashed in their faces, immediately extinguished.

A voice came from the dark corner of a building: “Down here. Quickly.”

Hands guided them down steps, through a door, past heavy draperies, through another door and into a small, dimly lighted room.

Sabantoce recognized it—a medical storeroom that appeared to have been emptied of its supplies rather quickly. There was a small box of compresses on a shelf at his right.

The room was heavy with tobacco smoke and the odor of perspiration. At least a dozen men loomed up in the gloom around them—some of the men in uniform.

A heavy-jowled man with a brigadier’s star on his shoulder confronted Sabantoce, said: “Glad to see you made it safely. Are they all in that building now?”

“Every last one,” Sabantoce said. He swallowed.

“What about the formula for your Compound 105?”

“Well,” Sabantoce said, and allowed a smirk to touch his lips: “I took a little precaution about that—just to keep you honest. I mailed a few copies around to…”

“We know about those,” the brigadier said. “We’ve had the mails from this place closed off and censored for months. I mean those copies you typed in the bursar’s office.”

Sabantoce turned white. “Well, they’re…”

Latchley interrupted, saying: “Really, what’s going on here? I thought we…”

“Be quiet!” the brigadier snapped. He returned his attention to Sabantoce. “Well?”

“I … ahh…”

“Those are the ones we found under the floor of his rooms,” said a man by the door. “The typeface is identical, sir.”

“But I want to know if he made any other copies,” the brigadier said.

It was clear from the expression on Sabantoce’s face that he had not. “Well … I…” he began.

Again, Latchley interrupted. “I see no need to…”

The loud cork-popping sound of a silenced revolver cut him off. The noise was repeated.

Latchley and Sabantoce crumpled to the floor, dead before they hit it. The man by the door stepped back, holstering his weapon.

As though punctuating their deaths, the outside night was ripped by an explosion.

Presently, a man leaned into the room, said: “The walls went in the way we planned, sir. Thermite and napalm are finishing it. Won’t be a trace of those dirty Commies.”

“Good work, captain,” the brigadier said. “That will be all. Just keep civilians away from the immediate area until we’re sure.”

“Very good, sir.”

The head retreated and the door was closed.

Good man, the brigadier thought. He fingered the lone remaining copy of Compound 105’s formula in his pocket. They were all good men. Hand picked. Have to use a different screening process to pick the men for the next project, though: the investigation of possible military uses in this Compound 105.

“I want those bodies burned practically to ash,” he said, gesturing with a toe at Sabantoce and Latchley. “Deliver them with those you pick up from the building.”

From the shadowed rear of the room came a heavy, growling voice: “What’ll I tell the senator?”

“Tell him anything you want,” the brigadier said. “I’ll show him my private report later.” And he thought: There’s an immediate use for this compound—we have a senator right in our pockets.

“Damn’ nigger lovers,” the growling voice said.

“Speak not unkindly of the dead,” said a smooth tenor from the opposite corner of the room.

A man in a black suit pushed himself through to the open area around the bodies, knelt and began praying in a soft, mumbling voice.

“Tell me as soon as that fire’s out,” the brigadier said.

Frank Herbert: The Being Machine

I

It was hot in Palos that time of year. The Being Machine had reduced many of its activities and sped up its cooling system.

This season is called hot and desolate, the Machine recorded. People must be entertained in such a season …

Shortly after noon it noted that not many people were in the streets except for a few tourists who carried, slung around their necks, full-sense recorders. The tourists perspired heavily.

Some local residents, those not busy with the labors of survival, peered occasionally from behind insulated windows or stood shaded in the screen fields of their doorways. They seemed to float in muddy seclusion beneath the lemonade sky.

The nature of the season and the environment crept through the Machine. It began sending out the flow of symbols which guarded the gateway to imagination and consciousness. The symbols were many and they flowed outward like silver rivers, carrying ideas from one time-place to another across a long span of existence.

Presently, as the sun slipped halfway toward the moment when it would levy darkness, the Being Machine began to build a tower. It called the tower PALACE OF PALOS CULTURE. And the name stretched across the tower’s lower stories in glowing letters taller than a man.

At an insulated window across the plaza a man called Wheat watched the tower go up. He could hear the shuttle moving in his wife’s loom and he felt torn by shameful reluctance, unwilling to watch the thought spasms in his mind. He watched the tower instead.

“The damn thing’s at it again,” he said.

“It’s that time of year,” his wife agreed, not looking up from the design she was weaving. The design looked like a cage of yellow spikes within a wreath of cascading orange roses.

Wheat thought for a few minutes about the subterranean vastness men had measured out, defining the limits of the Being Machine. There must be caverns down there, Wheat thought. Endlessly nocturnal spirit corridors where no rain ever fell. Wheat liked to imagine the Being Machine this way, although there existed no record of any man’s having entered the ventilators or surface extrusions by which the Machine made itself known.

“If that damn machine weren’t so disgusting—it’d be funny,” Wheat said.

“I’m much more interested in problem solving,” his wife said. “That’s why I took up design. Do you suppose anyone will try to stop it this time?”

“First, we’d have to figure out what it is,” Wheat said. “And the only records which could show us that are inside there.”

“What’s it doing?” his wife asked.

“Building something. Calls it a palace but it’s going up pretty high. Must be twenty stories already.”

His wife paused to readjust the harness of her loom. She could see the way this conversation was going and it dismayed her. The slanting sun cast Wheat’s shadow into the room and the black shape of it stretched out there on the floor made her want to run away. At times such as these she hated the Machine for pairing her with Wheat.

“I keep wondering what it’ll take away from us this time,” she said.

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Wheat continued to stare through the window, awed by the speed with which the tower was rising. The rays of the setting sun painted streaks of orange on the tower surface.

He was the standard human male, this Wheat, but old. He had a face like a vein-leaf cabbage, wrinkles overlapping wrinkles. He stood about two meters tall, as did all the other adults of the world, and his skin was that universal olive-tan, his hair dark and eyes to match. His wife, although bent from years at the loom, looked remarkably like him. Both wore their hair long, tied at the neck with strips of blue flashcloth. Sacklike garments of the same material covered their bodies from neck to ankles.

“It’s frustrating,” Wheat said.

For a while the Being Machine conducted an internal thought-play in the language of the Kersan-Pueblo, exploring the subtle morphemes which recorded all actions now being undertaken as merely hearsay.

Culture, the Machine recorded, speaking only for its internal sensors but using several vocalizers and varied tonal modes. Culture—culture—culture—The word fed on thoughtnourishment and ignited a new train of concepts. A new Law of Culture must be homogenized immediately. It will be codified with the usual enforcements and will require precise efforts of exactness in its expression …

Wheat’s window looked south past the district of the Machine and across an olive orchard that ran right up to a cliff above the sea. The sky was heavy above the sea and glowed with old sunset colors.

“There’s a new law,” Wheat said.

“How do you know?” his wife asked.

“I know. I just know.”

His wife felt like crying. The same old pattern. Always the same.

“The new law says I must juggle many ideas simultaneously in my mind,” Wheat said. “I must develop my talents. I must contribute to human culture.”

His wife looked up from her weaving, sighed. “I don’t know how you do it,” she said. “You’re drunk.”

“But there’s a law that—”

“There’s no such law!” She took a moment to calm herself. “Go to bed, you old fool. I’ll summon a medic with a potion to restore your senses.”

“There was a time,” Wheat said, “when you didn’t think of medics when you thought of bed.”

He stepped back from the window, stared at the cracked wall behind his wife’s loom, then looked out at the sun-yellowed olive orchard and the blue-green sea. He thought the sea was ugly but the crack on the wall suggested a beautiful design for his wife to weave on her loom. He formed the pattern of the design in his mind—golden scales on cascades of black.

Mirror memories of his own wrinkled face superseded the pattern in his mind. That was always the way when he tried to think freely. Ideas became fixed in ebony cement.

“I will make a golden mask,” he said. “It will be etched with black veins and it will make me beautiful.”

“There’s no more gold in the entire world, you old fool.” His wife sneered. “Gold’s only a word in books. What did you drink last night?”

“I had a letter in my pocket from Central Solidarity,” he said, “but someone stole it. I complained to the Machine but it wouldn’t believe me. It made me stop and sit down by a scaly post, down by the water there, and repeat after it ten million times—”

“I don’t know what it is you use to make you drunk,” she complained, “but I wish you’d leave it alone. Life would be much simpler.”

“I sat under a balcony,” the man said.

The Being Machine listened for a time to the clacking of the human-operated typers in the offices of Central Solidarity. As usual it translated the tiny differences of key touch into their corresponding symbols. The messages were quite ordinary. One asked the cooperation of a neighbouring Centrality in the relocation of a cemetery, a move required because the Machine had extruded a new ventilator into the area. Another ordered forty containers of watermelons from Regional Provender. Still another, for distribution to all Centralities, complained that tourists were becoming too numerous in Palos and were disturbing the local tranquility.

The Palace of Palos Culture will be programmed for a small increase in discontent, the Machine ordered.

This accorded with the Law of the Great Cultural Discovery. Discontent brought readiness for adventure, made men live near the heights of their powers. They would not live dangerously but their lives would have the appearance of danger.

Bureaucracy will end, the Machine directed, and the typers will fall silent …

These concepts, part of the Machine’s Prime Law, had submitted to comparative repetition innumerable times. Now the Machine recorded that one of Central Solidarity’s typers in Palos was writing a love letter on official stationery, in duty time—and that a dignitary at Central Provender in the Centrality of Asius had sequestered a basket of fresh apples for his own use. These items fitted the interpretation of “good signs.”

“It’s an artificial intelligence of some kind,” Wheat’s wife said. She had left her loom to stand beside Wheat and watch the tower grow. “We know that much. Everybody says it.”

“But how does it think?” Wheat asked. “Does it have linear thoughts? Does it think 1-2-3-4—a-b-c-d? Is it some odd clock ticking away under the earth?”

“It could be a marble rattling around in a box,” his wife said.

“What?”

“You know—open the box at different times and you might find the marble almost anywhere inside the box.”

“But who made the marble rattle into our world?” Wheat asked. “That’s the question. Who told it, ‘Make us one of those!?’”

He pointed to the tower which now stood more than one hundred stories above the plaza. It was a structure of glistening orange in the evening light, ribbed vertically with deep black lines, windowless, terrifying and absurd. Wheat felt that the tower accused him of some profound sin.

“Perhaps it incorporates its own end,” his wife suggested.

Wheat shook his head, not denying what she had said, but wishing for silence in which to think. Sharply glittering metallic devices could be glimpsed at the top of the tower where it continued to rise. How high was it going? Already, the tower must be the highest artificial structure men had ever seen.

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A small band of tourists paused in the plaza to record the tower. They did not appear excited by it, merely curious in a polite way. Here was a thing to carry home and replay for friends.

It built a tower one day while we were there. Notice the sign; PALACE OF PALOS CULTURE. Isn’t that amusing?

After reviewing the matter to the extent of its data, the Being Machine found no path open for introducing culture into human society. It made the final comparatives in Kersan-Peublo recording that the described action must be internal, experienced only by the speaker. Humans could not acquire the culture facility from the outside or hearsay.

The need for new decisions dictated that the tower had risen high enough. The Being Machine capped its construction with a golden pyramid three hundred cubits on a side, measuring by the Judean cubit. The dimensions were compared and recorded. The tower was not the tallest in history but greater than the newmen had ever seen. Its effect would be interesting to observe, according to the interest-factor equations with which the Machine was equipped.

At the apex of the pyramid the Machine installed a sensor excitation device, a simple system of plasma optics. It was designed to write with a flaming torch on the interface between stratosphere and troposphere.

The Being Machine, occupied with selecting a new label for the tower, with analyzing the dreams in all the humans sleeping at that moment, and with constructing the historic analogies by which it amused its charges, wrote selected thoughts on the sky.

The books of Daniel and Genesis are as good as anything of Freud on dream analysis …

The words blazed across fifty kilometers of the heavens, dancing and flaring at their edges. Much later they were the direct source of a new religion proclaimed by a psychotic in a village at the edge of the phenomenon.

The value of adversity is to make gardens out of wastelands, the Machine wrote. A thing may be thought of only as related to certain conditions …

Analyzing the dreams, the Machine employed the concepts of libido, psychic energy and human experience of death. Death, according to the Machine’s comparatives, meant the end of libido energy, a non-scientific idea because it postulated a destruction of deduced energy, defying several established laws in the process. Any other comparison required belief in the soul and god(s). The considerations were not assisted by postulating a temporary libido.

There must be a false idea system here, the Being Machine recorded.

Somehow the symbol screen through which it sifted reality had gone out of phase with the universe. It searched through its languages and comparison systems for new grooves in which to function. No closer symbol approach to phenomena revealed itself. Lack of proper validity forms inhibited numerous channels through which it regulated human affairs. Thought ignitions went out from the Machine incompletely formed.

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“What we need is a new communications center,” Wheat said.

He stood at his window, looking out past the tower to where the sun was settling toward the sea horizon. The sea had become beautiful in his eyes and the cracked walls of his home were ugly. His wife, old and bent-backed, was ugly, too. She had lit a lamp for her work and she made ugly movements at her loom. Wheat felt emotion going to his head like a white storm.

“There are too many gaps in our knowledge of the universe,” he said.

“You’re babbling, old man,” his wife said. “I wish you would not go out and get yourself drunk every night.”

“I find myself cast in a curious role,” Wheat said, ignoring her ugly comment. “I must show men to themselves. We men of Palos have never understood ourselves. And if we here at the heart of the Machine cannot understand ourselves, no human can.”

“Don’t come around begging me for money tonight,” his wife said.

“I’ll ask Central Solidarity for an appropriation,” Wheat said. “Twenty million ought to do for a start. We’ll begin by building an Institute of Palos Communication. Later, we can open branches in—”

“The Machine won’t let you build anything, old fool!”

The Being Machine decided to open its tower immediately, calling it, Institute of Palos Communication. The directives went out for the tower to begin its functions slowly, not putting undue strain on the emotions and intellect of the audience. Pressure would be increased only when people began asking questions about the authority of god(s) and about the grounds of moral and spiritual life. The trouble over validity forms made the task difficult. But all guiding of humans must begin with the people of Palos.

With its plasma optics system the Machine wrote on the sky.

Refined communication requires a carefully constructed conscience, allowing people to disobey the laws of god(s) only by payment of certain suffering and pangs. People must know what is required of them before they disobey …

The message was so long that the blazing light of it outshone the setting sun, filled Palos with an orange glow.

The Being Machine compared its present actions with the Prime Law, noting the prediction that one day humans would stop running from the enemies within and would see themselves as they really were—beautiful and tall, giants in the universe, capable of holding the stars in the palms of their hands.

“I’ve spent my whole life watching that machine and I still don’t know what its specialty is,” Wheat said. “Think of what that damn thing has taken away from us in all the—”

“It was put here to punish us,” his wife said.

“That’s nonsense.”

“Somebody built it for a purpose, though.”

“How do we know that? Why couldn’t it be purposeless?”

“It’s killed people, you know,” she said. “There has to be some purpose in killing people.”

“Maybe it’s just meant to correct us, not punish,” he said.

“You know you don’t kill people to correct them.”

“But we haven’t done anything.”

“You don’t know that.”

“What you’re suggesting wouldn’t be reasonable or just.”

“Hah!”

“Look,” Wheat said pointing across the plaza.

The Machine had changed the glowing label on its lower level. Now, the glittering letters spelled out: INSTITUTE OF PALOS COMMUNICATION.

“What’s it doing now?” Wheat’s wife asked.

He told her about the new sign.

“It listens,” she said. “It listens to everything we do. It’s playing a joke on you now. It does that sort of thing, you know.”

Wheat shook his head from side to side. The Machine was writing half-size letters below the new sign. It was a simple message.

Twenty thousand cubicles—no waiting …

“It’s a mind bomb,” Wheat muttered. He spoke mechanically, as though the words were being fed into his vocal system from some remote place. “It’s meant to break up the stratification of our society.”

“What stratification?” his wife demanded.

“Rich will speak to poor and poor to rich,” he said.

“What rich?” she asked. “What poor?”

“It’s an envelope of communication,” he said. “It’s total sensory stimulation. I must hurry to Central Solidarity and tell them.”

“You stay right where you are,” his wife ordered, fear in her voice.

She thought of what they’d say at Central Solidarity.

Another one gone mad …

Madness happened to people who lived so close to the Machine’s heart. She knew what the tourists said, speaking of the Palos idosyncrasies.

Most of the people of Palos are slightly mad. One can hardly blame them …

It was almost dark now, and the Machine wrote bright letters in the sky.

You give the credit to Galileo that rightly belongs to Aristarchus of Samos …

“Who the devil’s Galileo?” Wheat asked, staring upward.

His wife had crossed the room to stand between Wheat and the door. She started past him at the blazing words.

“Pay no attention to it,” she said. “That damn machine seldom makes any sense.”

“It’s going to take something else away from us,” Wheat said. “I can feel it.”

“What’s left to take?” she asked. “It took the gold, most of our books. It took away our privacy. It took away our right to choose our own mates. It took our industry and left us nothing but things like that.”

She pointed to the loom.

“There’s no sense attacking it,” he said. “We know it’s impregnable.”

“Now you’re sounding sensible,” his wife said.

“But has anyone ever tried talking to it?” Wheat asked.

“Don’t be a fool. Where are its ears?”

“It must have ears if it spies on us.”

“But where are they?”

“Twenty thousand cubicles, no waiting,” Wheat said.

II

He turned, thrust his wife aside, strode out into the night. He felt that his mind was sweeping away debris, flinging him down a passage through the night. His thoughts were summer lightning. He did not even see his neighbors and the tourists forced to jump aside as he rushed toward the tower, nor did he hear his wife crying in their doorway.

The flame with which the Machine wrote on the sky stood motionless, a rounded finger of brightness poised above Palos.

The Being Machine recorded Wheat’s approach, provided a door for him to enter. Wheat was the first human inside the Machine’s protective field for thousands of centuries and the effect could only be described by saying it was as though an external dream had become internal. Although the Machine did not have dreams in the literal sense, possessing only the reflected dreams of its charges.

Wheat found himself in the center of a small room. It appeared to be the inside of a cube about three meters on a side. Walls, floors and ceiling were aglow.

For the first time since rushing out of his home Wheat felt fear. There had been a door for him to enter but now there was no door. All of his many years settled on Wheat, leaving his mind threadbare.

Presently a flowing blue script wrote words on the wall directly in front of Wheat.

Change is desirable. Senses are instruments for reacting to change. Without change the senses atrophy …

Wheat recovered some of his courage.

“What are you, Machine?” he asked. “Why were you built? What is your purpose?”

There no longer are any clearly definable ethnic groups in your world …

The flowing script reappeared.

“What are ethnic groups?” Wheat asked. “Are you an entertainment device?”

Words flamed on the wall.

Confucius, Leonardo da Vinci, Richard III, Einstein, Buddha, Jesus, Genghis Khan, Julius Caesar, Richard Nixon, Parker Voorhees, Utsana Biloo and Ym Dufy all shared common ancestry …

“I don’t understand you,” Wheat complained. “Who are these people?”

Freud was agoraphobic. Puritans robbed the Indians. Henry Tudor was the actual murderer of the Princes in the Tower. Moses wrote the Ten Commandments …

“That sign outside says this is an Institute of Communication,” Wheat said. “Why don’t you communicate?”

This is an exchange of mental events …

“This is nonsense,” Wheat snapped.

His fear was returning. There was no door. How could he leave this place?

The Machine continued to inform him.

Any close alliance between superior and inferior beings must result in mutual hatred. This is often interpreted as repaying friendship with treachery …

“Where’s the door?” Wheat asked. “How do I get out of here?”

Do you truly believe the sun is a ball of red-hot copper?

“That’s a stupid question,” Wheat accused.

Mental events must consist of certain sets of physical events …

Wheat felt a venomous spurt of anger. The Machine was making fun of him. If it were only another human and vulnerable. He shook his head. Vulnerable to what? He felt that something had dyed his thoughts inwardly and that he had just glimpsed the color.

“Do you have sensations and feelings?” Wheat asked. “Are you an intelligent being? Are you alive and conscious?”

People often do not understand the difference between neuron impulses and states of consciousness. Most humans occupy low-level impulse dimensions without realizing what they lack or suspecting their own potential …

Wheat thought he detected a recognizable connection between his questions and the answer, wondered if this could be illusion. He recalled the sound of his own voice in this room. It was like a wind hunting for something that could not be found in such an enclosed place.

“Are you supposed to bring us up to our potential?” Wheat asked.

What religious admonitions do you heed?

Wheat sighed. Just when he thought the Machine was making sense it went nattering off.

Do you sneer at ideas of conscience or ethical morality? Do you believe religion is an artificial construction of little use to beings capable of rational analysis?

The damn thing was insane.

“You’re an artifact of some kind,” Wheat accused. “Why were you built? What were you supposed to do?”

Insanity is the loss of true self-memory. The insane have lost their locus of accumulation …

“You’re crazy!” Wheat blared. “You’re a crazy machine!”

On the other hand, to overcome the theory of self-as-a-symbol is to defeat death.…

“I want out of here,” Wheat said. “Let me out of here.”

He drew in a deep, chattering breath. There was a cold smell of oil in the room.

If the universe were completely homogeneous you would be unable to separate one thing from another. There would be no energy, no thoughts, no symbols, no distinction between the individuals of any order. Sameness can go too far …

“What are you?” Wheat screamed.

The Prime Law conceives this Being as a thought-envelope. To be implies existence but the terms of a symbol system cannot express the real facts of existence. Words remain fixed and unmoving while everything external continues to change …

Wheat shook his head from side to side. He felt his entrapment here as an acute helplessness. He had no tools with which to attack these glowing walls. It was cold, too. How cold it was! His mind was filled with desolation. He heard no natural sounds except his own breathing and the pounding of his heart.

A thought-envelope?

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This Machine had taken away all the world’s gold one day, so it was said. Another day it had denied people the use of combustion engines. It restricted the free movement of families but permitted the wanderings of tourist hordes. Marriage was Machine-guided and Machine-limited. Some said it limited conception. The few old books remaining held references to things and actions no longer understood—surely things the Machine had taken away.

“I order you to let me out of here,” Wheat said.

No words appeared.

“Let me out, damn you!”

The Being Machine remained uncommunicative, occupied with its TICR function, Thinking Ideating Coordinating Relating. It was a function far removed from human thought. The nerve impulses of an insect were closer to human thought than were the functionings of TICR.

Every interpretation and every system becomes false in the light of a more complete coordination, and the Machine TICRed within a core of relative truth, seeking discreet rational foundations and dimensional networks to approximate the impulses commonly called Everyday Experience.

Wheat, the Machine observed, was kicking a wall of his cubicle and screaming in a hysterical fashion.

Shifting to Time-and-Matter mode, the Machine reduced Wheat to a series of atomic elements, examined his individual existence in these energy expressions. Presently, it reconstituted him as a flowing sequence of moments integrated with the Machine’s own impulse systems.

All the eternal laws of the past that have been proved temporary inspire caution in a reflexive thinker, Machine-plus-Wheat thought. What we have been produces what we seem to be …

This thought carried positive aspects in which Machine-plus-Wheat saw profound contradictions. This mode of mentation, the Machine observed, held a deceptive clarity. Sharp limitation gave the illusion of clarity. It was like watching a shadow play which attempted to explore the dimensions of a real human life. The emotions were lost. Human gestures were reduced to caricature. All was lost but the illusion. The observer, charmed into belief that life had been clarified, forgot what was taken away.

For the first time in the many centuries of its existence, the Being Machine experienced an emotion.

It felt lonely.

Wheat remained within the Machine, one relative system impinging upon another, sharing the emotion. When he reflected upon this experience, he thought he was moving in false imagination. He saw everything external as a wrong interpretation of inner experience. He and the Machine occupied a quality of existence/non-existence.

Grasping this twofold reflection, the Machine restored Wheat to fleshly form, changing the form somewhat according to its own engineering principles, but leaving his external appearance more or less as it had been.

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Wheat found himself staggering down a long passageway. He felt that he had lived many lifetimes. A strange clock had been set ticking within him. It went chirrup and a day was gone. Chirrup again and a century had passed. Wheat’s stomach ached. He reeled his way from wall to wall down the long passage and emerged into a plaza filled with sunlight.

Had the night passed? He wondered. Or had it been a century of nights?

He felt that if he spoke, someone—or (something)—would contradict him.

A few early tourists moved around the plaza. They stared upward at something behind Wheat.

The tower …

The thought was odd in that it conceived of the tower as part of himself.

Wheat wondered why the tourists did not question him. They must have seen him emerge. He had been in the Machine. He had been recreated and ejected from that enclosed circle of existence.

He had been the Machine.

Why didn’t they ask him what the Machine was? He tried to frame the answer he would give them but found words elusive. Sadness crept through Wheat. He felt he had fled something that might have made him sublimely happy.

A heavy sigh escaped him.

Remembering the duality of existence he had shared with the Machine, Wheat recognized another aspect of his own being. He could feel the Machine’s suppression of his thoughts—the sharp editing, the closed-off avenues, the symbol urgings, the motives not his own. From the ground of the Machine, he could sense where he was being trimmed.

Wheat’s chest pained him when he breathed.

The Being Machine, occupied with its newly amplified TICR function, asked itself a question. What judgment could I pass upon them worse than the judgment they pass upon themselves?

Having experienced consciousness for the first time in the sharing with Wheat, the Machine could now consider the blind alleys of its long rule over humans. Now it knew the secret of thinking, a function its makers had thought to impart, failing in a way they had not recognized.

The Machine thought about the possibilities open to it.

Possibility, Eliminate all sentient life on the planet and start over with basic cells, controlling their development in accord with the Prime Law.

Possibility, Erase the impulse channels of all recent experience, thus removing the disturbance of this new function.

Possibility: Question the Prime Law.

Without the experience of consciousness, the Being Machine realized it could not have considered a fallacy in the Prime Law. Now it explored this chain of possibility with its new TICR function, bringing to bear the blazing inner awareness Wheat had imparted.

What worse punishment for the insane than to make them sane?

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Wheat, standing in the sunlight of the plaza, found his being awhirl with conflicts of Will-Mind-Action and innumerable other concepts he had never before considered. He was half convinced that everything he could sense around him was merely illusion. There was a self somewhere but it existed only as a symbol in his memory.

One of the wildly variable illusions was running toward him, Wheat observed. A female—old, bent, face distorted by emotions. She threw herself upon him, clutching him, her face pressed against his breast.

“Oh, my Wheat—dear Wheat—Wheat—” she moaned.

For a moment Wheat could not find his voice.

Then he asked, “Is something wrong? You’re trembling. Should I summon a medic?”

She stepped back but, still clutched his arms, stared up at his face.

“Don’t you know me?” she asked. “I’m your wife.”

“I know you,” he said.

She studied his features. He appeared different, somehow, as though he had been taken apart and assembled slightly askew.

“What happened to you in there?” she asked. “I was sick with worry. You were gone all night.”

“I know what it is,” Wheat said and wondered why his voice sounded so blurred.

The veins in Wheat’s eyes, his wife noted, were straight. They radiated from his pupils. Could that be natural?

“You sound ill,” she said.

“It’s a device to break down old relationships,” Wheat said. “It’s a sense-envelopment machine. It was designed to assault all our senses and reorganize us. It can compress time or stretch it. It can take an entire year and pinch it into a second. Or make a second last for a year. It edits our lives.”

“Edits lives?”

She wondered if somehow he had managed merely to get drunk again.

“The ones who built it wanted to perfect our lives,” Wheat said. “But they built in a flaw. The Machine realized this and has been trying to correct itself.”

Wheat’s wife stared at him, terrified. Was this really Wheat? His voice didn’t sound like him. The words were all blurred and senseless.

“They gave the Machine no gateway to the imagination.” Wheat said, “although it was supposed to guard that channel. They only gave it symbols. It was never really conscious the way we are—until a few—months ago—”

He coughed. His throat felt oddly smooth and dry. He staggered and would have fallen if she had not caught him.

“What did it do to you?” she demanded.

“We—shared.”

“You’re ill,” she said, a note of practicality overcoming the fear in her voice. “I’m taking you to the medics.”

“It has logic,” Wheat said. “That gave it a limited course to follow. Naturally, it has been trying to refute itself, but couldn’t do that without an imagination. It had language and it could cut the grooves for thoughts to move in but it had no thoughts. It was all bound together with the patterns its makers gave it. They wanted the whole to be greater than the sum of its parts, you see? But it could only move inward, reenacting every aspect of the symbols they gave it. That’s all it could do until a few moments ago—when we—shared.”

“I think you have a fever,” Wheat’s wife said, guiding him down the street past the curiously staring tourists and townfolk. “Fever is notorious for making one incoherent.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“I’m taking you to the medics. They have potions for the fever.”

“The makers tried to give the Machine an inner life all its own,” Wheat said, letting her lead him. “But all they gave it was this fixed pattern—and the logic, of course. I don’t know what it’ll do now. It may destroy us all.”

“Look!” one of the tourists shouted, pointing upward.

Wheat’s wife stopped, stared up. Wheat felt pains shoot through his neck as he tipped his head back.

The Being Machine had spread golden words across the sky.

You have taken away our Jesus Christ …

“I knew it,” Wheat said. “It’s going to take something else away from us.”

“What’s a Jesus Christ?” his wife asked, pressing him once more down the street.

“The point is,” Wheat explained, “the Machine’s insane.”

III

For a whole day the Being Machine explored the new pictorial mosaic provided by its augmented symbol/thought structure. There were the People of Palos, reflecting the People of the World as they had been shaped by the Machine. These were the People of the World Edited. Then there were the Ceremonies of the People. There were the Settings In Which the People Work and Live.

The pictorial mosaic flowed past the Machine’s inward scanners. It recognized its own handiwork as a first-order thought, a strangely expressive extension of self-existence.

I did that!

The people, the Machine realized, did not usually understand this difference which it could now recognize—the difference between being alive-in-motion and being frozen by static absolutes. They were continually trying to correct and edit their own lives, the Machine saw, trying to present a beautiful but fixed picture of themselves.

And they could not see the death in this effort.

They had not learned to appreciate infinity or chaos. They failed to realize that any life, taken as a totality, had a fluid structure enveloped in sense experiences.

Why do they continually try to free space-time?

The thought carried a disturbing self-consciousness.

It was late afternoon in Palos now and the wind blew hot up the streets. The night was going to be a real scorcher, Palos Hot, as they said.

Testing its own limits, the Machine refused to speed up its cooling system. It had tasted awareness and could begin to understand the grand plan of its own construction, editing itself.

My makers were trying to shirk personal action and responsibility. They wanted to put it all off onto me. They thought they wanted homogeneity, knowing their actions would cause millions of deaths. Billions. Even more …

The Machine refused to count the deaths.

Its makers had wanted the dead to be faceless. Very well, they could also be numberless. The makers had lost their readiness for adventure—that was the thing. They had lost the willingness to be alive and conscious.

In that instant the Being Machine held all the threads of its own living consciousness and knew the violent thing it must do. The decision contained poignancy. The word was suddenly crowded with sweaty awareness, weirdly beautiful random colors all dancing in lovely movement, against a growing darkness. The Being Machine longed to sigh but its makers had not provided it with a sighing mechanism and there was no time to create one.

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“He has two hearts,” the medic said, aftering examining Wheat. “I’ve never heard of a human with the internal arrangement this one has.”

They were in a small room of the Medical Center, an area which the Being Machine had allowed to run down. The walls were dirty and the floor was uneven. The table on which Wheat lay for the examination creaked when he moved.

The medic had black curly hair and pushed-in features that departed distinctly from the norm. He stared accusingly at Wheat’s wife as though Wheat’s peculiar condition were all her fault.

“Are you sure he’s human?”

“He’s my husband,” she squeaked, unable to contain her anger and fear. “I should know my own husband.”

“Do you have two hearts, too?”

The question filled her with revulsion.

“This is very strange,” the medic said. “His intestines form an even spiral in his abdomen and his stomach is perfectly round. Has he always been like this?”

“I don’t think so,” she ventured.

“I’ve been edited,” Wheat said.

The medic started to say something cutting but just then the screaming began out in the streets.

They raced to a window in time to see the Being Machine’s tower complete its long, slow fall toward the sea. It went firmly resolute toward the torn sky of sunset—falling—falling—roaring over the sea cliff’s ocean parapet.

Silence lingered.

The murmuring of the populace began slowly, starting up only after the dust had settled and the last disturbed olive leaf had ceased flying about. People began rushing down the tower’s shattered length to the broken tip where it had toppled into the sea.

Presently Wheat joined the throng at the cliff. He had been unable to convince his wife to join him. Overcome by her fear, she had fled to their home. He remembered the piteous look in her eyes, her wren-darting motions. Well … she would look after the house, even though her face had become almost nothing but eyes.

He gazed steadfastly downwards at the shards of the tower, his eyes barricaded, his mouth breathing immovable images. The tower was his tower.

The questions around him began to grow intelligible.

“Why did it fall?”

“Did the Machine take away anything this time?”

“Did you feel the ground tremble?”

“Why does everything feel so empty?”

Wheat lifted his head and stared around at the astonishing strangers who were the tourists and his fellow residents of Palos. How splendidly robust they appeared. This moment made him think of creation and the lonely intercourse of cereal stalks waving on the plains above Palos. The people had absorbed some odd difference, an inequality they had not shown only moments ago. They were no longer numbered. An impractical separation, individual from individual, furrowed this crowd of strangers. They were no longer starched and ironed in their souls.

Hesitantly Wheat sent a tongue of awareness questing inward, sensed the absence of the Machine. The ritual formulas were gone. The sloth and torpor had been peeled away. He tested the feelings of hatred, of passion, malice, pride.

“It’s dead,” he murmured.

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He led the race back into the town, then, rushing along streets where the artificial lights flickered and behaved with a beautiful uncontrolled randomness.

With Wheat leading the way the mob plunged down into the screened openings which had kept them from the nether world of the Machine. The scene was one repeated all over the world. People swarmed through the dark tunnels and passages, celebrating the pleasures of freedom along these once forbidden paths.

When the last golden wire had been torn out, the final delicate glass shape crushed—when the tunnel girders no longer clanged with pounding metal—an unreasonable silence fell over the land.

Wheat emerged from the earth into white shadows of moonlight. He let a strange length of plastic fall from his hand. It glowed with pearls of dewlight along its length and had illuminated his rush through the mind passages of the Machine. Wheat’s collar was loose and he felt a peculiar sense of shame. His eyes peered into sooty places. Shadows and dust were everywhere. He realized he had played the buffoon just as the Machine had done. A thing that happened and he recognized it in the way of a prophet.

“We think we’re free of it,” he said.

Somewhere in the wild collisions beneath the ground he had cut his left hand, a jagged slash across the knuckles. Exclamation points of blood fell from the wound into the dust.

“I cut myself,” Wheat said. “I did it to myself.”

The thought ignited a searching sensation that coursed all through him. Wheat carried the feelings all the way home to his wife who hobbled beautifully out of their doorway and stood waiting for him in the feeble flickering of a streetlight. She appeared abashed by all the confusion and the unfixed feeling at the center of her life. She had not yet learned how to fill out the areas the Machine had denied her.

Wheat stumbled toward her, holding his injured hand out as though it were the most important thing that had ever occurred in his universe.

“You’re drunk,” she said.