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(*illustrating "Baby"*)

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Charles L. Fontenay usually writes sober, detailed science fiction; but "occasionally," he says, "I get a fantasy idea." As a man fond of sleep, I should hate to get many ideas as nightmarish as this one.

A Summer Afternoon

by CHARLES L. FONTENAY

WHEN UNCLE THEO CAME HOME with a bullet in him, Peter thought he was a greater man than ever.

Peter's father put an arm around Uncle Theo's shoulders to help him to the bedroom, while Peter's mother ran to the kitchen to heat some water. Uncle Theo was a big man, and Peter's father had difficulty holding him up when he staggered.

"I'll go for the doctor, Theo," said Peter's father.

"No!" gasped Uncle Theo and there was a trace of his usual bull-like roar even in his weak voice. "That damn doctor's an old woman, Jim. Bring him here and the whole county'd know all about it by morning."

A drop of bright blood from his side splashed on the door sill and spread, darkening as it soaked into the wood. The two men disappeared into the bedroom.

Peter approached the hall table slowly, with awe, as a savage ap-

proaches the shrine of a powerful god. On it lay the pistol, where Uncle Theo had tossed it with a clatter when he stumbled in the front door.

Carefully, Peter picked up the weapon. It had been fired. He could smell the acrid aroma of burned powder. He laid it down, softly.

"Stay away from that gun, Peter," said his father sharply, emerging from the bedroom. "And help your mother. I'm going for the doctor."

"Uncle Theo said he didn't want a doctor," Peter reminded him.

"Theo's in no condition to make a decision," said his father, and started for the stairs. Peter waited until he heard his father's footsteps clump all the way upstairs and down the upstairs hall. Then he went to the door of Uncle Theo's bedroom and pushed it open.

His father had helped Uncle Theo lie down on the bed and

had taken his shirt off, but Uncle Theo wasn't going to stay on the bed. He was sitting on the edge of it, his shoulders drooping, a wet, red stain on his undershirt just above his belt.

"Help me to the chair, Peter," said Uncle Theo.

Peter went to him, and Uncle Theo put a big hand on the boy's shoulder. Peter's knees nearly buckled as Uncle Theo tried three times to get up. But at last he made it and, leaning heavily on Peter, half fell across the intervening space to the platform rocker. He collapsed into it and sat there, breathing heavily, propping himself erect by his elbows, gazing out the window into the summer afternoon.

Peter was ten. He wanted to be like Uncle Theo. And he knew, with that boy's instinct, that his parents didn't want him to be like Uncle Theo but didn't know how to tell him they didn't.

There was that conversation he had overheard one night, when his father and Uncle Theo had been sitting on the front porch and Peter had climbed out of his bedroom window and perched in the concealing foliage of the nearby maple tree.

"Theo, you know you ought not to come here," Jim had said that night. "Think of the boy."

"Nonsense, the boy's too young to know about such things," Uncle Theo had answered heartily. "This

farm's a perfect place for me to stay. Nobody would suspect Jim Britton's brother of anything."

"What if I make them suspect?" suggested Jim. "Blood carries only so far, and I have my family to think of."

"I don't think you will, Jim." Uncle Theo laughed, and there was a hard note to his laugh. "I wouldn't stay caught, you know."

So Uncle Theo stayed around the farm, and smoked his big calabash pipe, and told Peter stories about the Old West, and sometimes helped Jim with the planting and harvesting. Then he would go away and be gone for a few days, and Peter's father and mother would look worried and depressed until Uncle Theo strode briskly through the front door again, laughing and joking. He would always bring back something for Peter—a knife, a watch, perhaps a new-minted silver dollar.

Peter thought Uncle Theo was a great man, and he wanted to be just like him.

He hoped now that Uncle Theo wasn't hurt badly. Surely he wasn't. Uncle Theo was so big and strong.

He looked at Uncle Theo, and his heart jumped in fright.

Uncle Theo was sitting very still in the platform rocker, his elbows propping him up straight, looking out the window. But there was no movement to him. His eyes didn't even blink, and Peter could not

see the rise and fall of his chest.

Peter ran from the bedroom, wanting to cry, "Father, I think Uncle Theo's dead!" But, though he opened his mouth, no words came. He could not speak.

In the hall, he stopped suddenly. His father was halfway downstairs, one foot poised to take the next step. But, like Uncle Theo, he was frozen. His eyes stared ahead, unblinkingly, his hand reached for the stair rail without ever quite touching it.

Peter turned. His mother was emerging from the kitchen, with the kettle in her hand. She, too, stood there in mid-stride, her eyes staring straight ahead, not moving.

All of them—his father, his mother, Uncle Theo—were like wax statues.

The most horrible thing about it to Peter was that, in that rigid tableau of non-movement, the steam rose slowly from the spout of the teakettle, wavering and dissipating. Its faint hiss reverberated in the quiet hall, loudly.

Through the windows that looked out on the side porch, there was a strange quality to the afternoon sunlight.

Frightened, Peter ran through the dining room and out the kitchen door.

Outdoors, the peculiar cast of the light was even more pronounced. The sun shone in a clear sky over the sweetgum trees of the

woodlot, but there was something about the atmosphere . . . as though a slightly saffron veil had been cast between earth and heaven.

And in the midst of this strangeness was silence. There was no song of birds, no chirp of insects. Peter never had realized before how many little noises there were, just at the fringe of consciousness. Now there were no noises.

The white chickens pecked at the grass in the back yard, but they pecked silently. No hen clucked. They raised their curving necks to look at him with bright eyes as he passed them and climbed the fence to the barnyard.

Peter walked across the rough dirt of the barnyard on bare feet. The cows chewed their cuds without noise, they switched their tails slowly, they watched him. Their eyes were sentient, they were aware of him as they never had been before. They knew now, as they did not usually, that he was Peter.

He reached the big door to the hall of the barn, when a movement at the corner of the barn caught his eye. He stopped.

A little figure edged around the corner of the barn. It was small, small as a child. But it was stooped and dry and incredibly wrinkled. Like a mummy.

Peter saw it with a horrible clarity, a thing that should not be seen. It was gray-brown against the whitewashed barn.

It stopped there and looked straight at him with bright, vicious eyes that had no lids and no brows. Its lipless mouth opened, and its teeth were sharp and white, like rat's teeth.

Peter turned and fled around the barn. He did not run to the house, but ducked behind the woodpile at the edge of the barnyard.

After a moment, he peered over the edge of the pile of short logs. The wizened creature was moving across the barnyard toward the house in a shuffling lope. Behind it, from the other side of the barn, came another, and another, and another. Four of them.

The cows did not move as the things passed, but stood chewing their cuds. One of the cows seemed to be looking toward the woodpile with wise eyes.

The creatures swarmed through and over the board fence, and scuttled across the grass-patched backyard. They disappeared into the kitchen.

Peter thought helplessly of his mother and father, standing frozen in the house. But the strength seemed to have left him. He could not move from his place of safety behind the woodpile.

The sky seemed to have darkened even more, yet there were no clouds. The sun seemed dimmed.

In a moment, the four creatures emerged, all in a bunch, from the kitchen. Two of them were carry-

ing something between them now.

It was a wispy, immaterial something, white, with great wings . . . like a giant moth. It beat its wings frantically, trying to escape from its captors, but they held it tight as they scurried across the kitchen yard and over the fence into the barnyard.

In the great silence that gripped the world, there was a terrible thin keening that Peter knew came from the mothlike thing. In a shriek that was a whisper at the very top of audibility, it cried, "No . . . no . . . no . . ."

There was a dreadful familiarity about it.

The four withered creatures and their captive vanished around the barn. Peter's paralysis was broken suddenly, and he ran across the barnyard. He climbed the fence and crossed the back yard, past the white chickens.

He ran into the kitchen, through the dining room, into the hall.

For just an instant he saw his father and mother frozen there as he had left them. Then the strange quality was gone from the atmosphere all at once, and his father came stomping down the stairs, pulling on his jacket, and his mother moved down the hall toward Uncle Theo's bedroom, carrying the steaming teakettle.

His father took his hat from the halltree. His mother went into the bedroom. A moment later she reappeared, without the kettle.

"No use going, Jim," she said quietly. "Theo's dead."

And Peter remembered the high keening of the mothlike creature as it was carried away behind the barn.

Suddenly he flung himself at

his mother, sobbing. He grasped her around the waist, tightly, hugging her close, his head on her breast.

"I won't be like Uncle Theo!" he cried hysterically. "I won't! I won't!"

