

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

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MAN OVERBOARD

by ALEX KIRS

*Were they dreams—the memories
of places he'd never been in
and people he'd never known?
Or was "reality" a dream?*

Illustrated by John Martinez

TERRIFIED, he ran through the evil, fog-thick, echoing night. He raced breathless down twisting, tortuous streets, through stinking alleys where shapeless masses sprawled, acrawl with scuttling, watchful bugs. He slipped, feet juddering on the rain-slick cobblestones. His frantic eyes strained through the black and diffused gray of the night, avoiding with a shudder the yellow cones of light spilling from the street lamps to reflect from the wet, slimy pavement.

Those he fled from were hot behind him but still holding back; he could sense their confidence in their other thousands who waited for him at every place in which he might seek sanctuary. There was nothing to do but run; run and hope that somewhere, somehow, there might be an opening in the remorseless net closing surely around him.

He burst from a side street, heavy shoes clattering an insane rhythm as he slewed and skidded to a stop, jerking his head from side to side, fran-



tically seeking another route. The avenue in front of him was much too bright; he dared not run the additional risk of being too clearly visible. With a whimper, he dashed headlong into the nearest alley.

Feline shapes with feral eyes crouched and arched and loped silently along the top of the alley's fence, to snarl, spit and reach out for his eyes with septic claws. He stumbled heedlessly over something soft and wetly yielding, and the hand he extended to break his fall brushed something bristly and electrical that swiped at him, faster than thought.

Bleeding, he staggered from the alley's end into the street.

It stretched before him, dark and dim, and he was running down it in full flight before he noticed that the walls on either side were absolutely featureless, unmarked by doorways or windows. The clattering crescendo of his footsteps trailed off, dribbled into silence. With his heart a dreadful, aching drum in his chest, he stood motionless.

The blank walls went up, up, and disappeared into the fog. Ahead, they continued along the street for half a block, then they and the street were cut off by a vertical blackness that was not a wall.

Suddenly, there were eyes at his back, like hairy hands scrabbling for a grip, and he whirled to face them. Shadows loomed out of the pressing fog, curiously low and strangely squat, just too far away to be clearly seen. He whined inaudibly and backed away from them towards the black nothingness where the street ended.

Then, just like that, he knew what was happening and what would happen. *I've seen all this before*, he thought. *It's a copy of an ancient film taken in the days when there was a London and an Earth, and I saw it back in civilization somewhere, in a reconstruction of a pre-atomic theatre.* Only the shadows and the blank walls and the empty blackness were different, but he knew about them, too.

I'm dreaming, he said to himself, feeling a maniac impulse to giggle because everything was so simple. He was supposed to back away from the advancing shadows, back and back until he came to the black nothingness, where he would suddenly stumble and fall, screaming and retching, backwards into Eternity or Outer Space or Death—but certainly into his bed on Henderson's Planet, where he would wipe the cold sweat

from his face, smoke a cigarette, and wonder about the dream.

The squat, inhuman shadows were closing in. Abruptly, he turned his back on them and ran, confident now, towards the black End. *Might as well get it over with*, he thought. In the split instant before he reached the blackness, he said aloud, in a ludicrous parody of old-time Cockney, "Cor, but they won't scrag me now, not 'arf. Ta-ta, dear boompng beasties; you'll never catch old Dom Hagar, now!"

That was when he screamed, a thin threadlike thing of terror and revulsion and utter rejection that sat him up in his bed, wide awake, to bury his face in his hands. After a long, shuddering silence, he forced his voice out through a throat still raw and dry from the scream.

"My name is Anton Cord," he said, trying for calmness but achieving nothing but flat hysteria. "My name is Anton Cord, please, it is, my name is Anton Cord."

It took him a long time to fall asleep again. And when he did, the dream was waiting.

slouched forward against the bar, midway down the fully occupied line of stools. He lit a cigarette and with difficulty placed it on the rim of the ashtray in front of him; it seemed perversely determined to slip either to the smooth wood of the counter, or else among the crumpled butts in the tray. Cord was very drunk.

The Cold Spoor Club was studiously old-fashioned, but not to the point of ostentation. Modeled on the lines of bars of the early twentieth century, it retained character yet was still smooth and functional. Chromed furniture complemented the many mounted trophies; great heads shaggy or slick with simulated mucus, reptilianly scaled or dusted with fine powder against a predator's grasping tentacles. The atmosphere was exciting and at the same time comfortable; the club took its personality from the patrons, who for the most part were colonists and adventurers—people who did not insist on strict respectability, and yet who were intelligent enough not to need an atmosphere of artificial depravity or hectic vice, both common on the more "civilized" planets.

Behind the long wood-and-chrome bar there was a darkly tinted mirror, punctuated by

"I'LL HAVE another drink, Harry. The same." Cord

intermittent shelves of liquor bottles. Along the opposite wall stood a line of booths, broken in the middle by a door leading to the other rooms, a dining room with scattered tables, a dance-floor, and a small stage. Later in the evening a half-breed, not-quite-human girl would sing, bathed in a spotlight that pulsed in time to her slow deep voice, dark ballads the listeners always recognized, somewhere inside them, even though they'd never heard them before.

Harry, the bartender, filled Cord's glass and watched disapprovingly as it was drained. He looked up and down the bar, and seeing no customers calling him, leaned closer to Cord.

"Cord, can I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead," Cord said disinterestedly. The liquor no longer had much effect other than to burn pleasantly going down; he fancied that it vaporized within him and seeped through his skin. He could smell the warm, heady fumes plainly.

"Look, Cord; why don't you see a psycher?" The bartender was prompted by genuine concern, but the fact didn't penetrate to Cord. Instant revulsion swept through him, a

blind nausea like that of an acrophobe who suddenly finds himself looking down from a great height. Cord glared at Harry with a mixture of anger and self-pity at being betrayed by someone in whom he had placed trust.

"Harry," he said slowly, thickly, "Harry, I thought you were my friend."

"Cord, I *am* your friend." The bartender had known far too many drunks; he did not follow the impulse to raise his eyes exasperatedly heavenwards. "Look. I've been your friend ever since you landed on this planet a year ago. Steered you to that job at the gunsmith's. I introduced you around, got you in with the guys. We've gone hunting together quite a few times, and had fun. Right?" He looked at Cord until the other grudgingly assented.

"So all right; we're friends. And now you suddenly start drinking like a fish, and when I ask you what's wrong, you give with a mixed-up mess about how you have bad dreams, and how you saw a girl who reminded you of a girl you never knew, and how you keep remembering a lot of things about people you say you've never even met." Harry was a tall, muscular man with a thick head of mousy hair,

and now he ran a hand back through it in a gesture of puzzlement.

"If you weren't my friend, I wouldn't give a damn. But the way it is, you got something wrong with you, and all I can do is tell you to see a psycher. I have to tell you that, if only because I'm your friend."

Cord shook his head in drunken stubbornness. "You are wrong, Harry. If you were my friend, you wouldn't tell me to see a psycher."

"For God's sake, Cord, what's so bad about going to a psycher? Everybody does it at one time or another. I just don't get it!"

"I can't stand them, that's all. I just can't stand them." Drunk, Cord could find no better verbalization of his revulsion, of the horrified disgust the word "psycher" evoked in him. His thoughts churned with loathing at the idea of being probed, questioned, analyzed, even *hypnotized*. The last was the most horrible; to lie there helpless and responsive and ductile, completely obedient to the slightest whim of a "doctor" who might at any moment choose to play God—to order Cord to do this or think that or feel something else. . . . Cord mentally twisted and

writhed at the thought of being hypnotized, writhed and shuddered and shouted a cerebral "No!" the way some people do at the thought of death.

"I just can't stand them," he repeated for the third time.

"What kind of talk is that? Look . . ." Someone down the bar was tapping a glass against the wood, calling for the bartender. Harry nodded his willingness to serve, raised a hand that meant, "just a minute," and turned back to Cord.

"Cord, listen; things are going to be jumping tonight, and we probably won't get another chance to talk. So get this now; if you're going to get drunk, get drunk here. Stick around until closing and I'll take you home and see that you're okay. Hell, I want to talk to you; you've got some pretty wrong ideas. If you pass out before closing, or feel like you're going to, use the cot in the office.

"You understand me? Get drunk if you must, but stay here."

"All right, Harry." A glow of warmth spread through Cord's being; he had a friend, someone who would take care of him, see that he came to no harm. "All right, Harry," he said again, and offered the man his hand.

"You nut, Cord," Harry said with rueful affection. He squeezed Cord's hand and hurried off down the bar. Cord watched him go with mixed feelings; part of him wanted to get away, to run, to leave the place because Harry was suspect, had suggested Cord embrace horror and see a psycher. Over-riding this was the knowledge that Harry was a nice guy, who had only said what just about anyone would have, under the circumstances.

But what would he do—Cord wondered—if he knew what was happening?

I'm not crazy, Cord thought, but I will be, pretty soon.

FIRST the dreams, and then the girl. He'd been walking to work one morning, and at an intersection of two thronged, busy streets, the girl had walked past. Cord had noticed her—as had every man within half a block—first because of her walk, a woman's answer to a strong man's swagger. Then the eye traveled up the precise, incredibly graceful curves of her legs, up to the nipped-in slimness of her waist, and finally—expecting all the time to be disappointed because so much beauty just couldn't possibly continue

without some fault—up past her breasts to the chiseled, confident calm of a perfect face topped by jet-black hair.

Beautiful, self-assured women were no rarity on the frontier planets, of course. Anyone with a personality of any strength at all made every effort to get away from the sickly stasis of the "civilized" worlds. And beauty and talent were two eminently saleable articles; the possession of either was flat assurance of a space-ticket to any place you cared to go. And this girl was not only beautiful, but intelligent; the triple-cross insignia on her brooch marked her as a multilingual comptroller—a job calling for an I.Q. in excess of 150.

Hell, Cord had thought delightedly, as he turned his head to follow the girl's progress—becoming as he did so a unit in a sea of men's heads swaying toward the girl—hell, wait until I tell Tabatha I've found her dead-ringer!

It had been only later, in the store, that he'd realized sickeningly he'd never in all his life known anyone even remotely resembling the girl, and had furthermore never known a girl named "Tabatha."

But ever since that day, the dream had changed slightly, in that one of the advancing shadows always became visible. A great white cat as sleek and smoothly deadly as any panther, wearing a red silk bow on which was embroidered—and by some trick of the dream easily read—“Tabby.”

Cord shook his head groggily to dispel the memory. His full glass caught his attention, and he drained it with a smooth, practiced motion, the one physical task his drunkenness never affected. Trying to sense whether the drink had any effect, he became suddenly aware that the other drinks had caught up with him. His lips and extremities felt tingling and numb, and there was a persistent buzzing in his ears. In a little while, he knew, the buzzing would become louder, would acquire form and rhythm. A hollow nasal roaring, *wangada, wangada, wangada, wangada*, that would grow louder and ever louder until he passed out.

He shook his head again, his brain feeling like a lump of ice in a glass of water; rotate the glass and the ice floating within it remains stationary. *First the dream, he thought, and then the girl, and then . . .*

And then the memories that aren't mine.

The first—in the order in which they'd come to him—was by far the nicest. In it he lay on a soft, low bed, in a room illuminated by a faint reddish light that spilled from a wide window. Because of the light's color, he thought it might be evening or early morning, but he was not sure which. In the memory, he lay quietly watching Tabatha as she stood nude at the window, one slim languid hand holding a gray curtain out of the way. With the soft glowing light on her, she was so beautiful, so perfect, that tears welled up in his eyes. He couldn't say anything, couldn't trust himself to speak. After a long while, and without taking her eyes from whatever she was watching outside, she said quietly, like slow faint bells, “There are never any clouds here.” He answered with something indistinguishable, something that made her chuckle lightly and walk catlike and beautiful to the bed.

I have never been on a cloudless planet, Cord thought.

The second memory was as brief as the first. He stood on a slightly raised platform in front of a level expanse of lawn, an automatic scattergun—toylike and ineffectual—in the ready in his hands.

"Pull!" he said, and instantly, several white things were hurled into the air—was it fifty yards away? Then the gun kicked against his shoulder, his trigger-finger working so incredibly fast that the recoils became nothing but a burst of vibration, and, impossibly, there was nothing left in the air where the targets had been but a drifting cloud of fine white dust. Then Saul clapped him on the shoulder and said, "Wonderful shooting, boy!" That was the end of the episode, except that in it he knew, somehow, that Saul was his best friend—when he'd never had a friend called Saul—and when he tried to remember Saul's face, to concentrate on the details, there was nothing but an indistinct blur.

Cord looked down at his empty glass; it seemed to tremble in time to the roaring in his ears. Somehow, the enigma of *who* Tabatha and Saul were was not as important as *why*. Why did he have memories that were patently false, remembrance of incidents that couldn't have occurred? And why did the first two memories—detailed and complete as they were—appear so innocuous and un frightening, compared to the third and most tenuous one?

The third—and last—memory was without location; there was nothing but unformed chaos and the feeling of being enclosed in a too-small room. Quite abruptly, as if his words had been chopped off from a preceding conversation—and a terrible, revelatory one, at that—Saul spoke.

"Can't compete with you, Dom. There's . . ."

Every time since the memory had first appeared, Cord did the identical thing after that sentence. Simultaneous with the sound of the name "Dom," Cord's mind flinched violently while his lips curled in the expression that precedes a spasm of vomiting. Shame, disgust and fear drowned out the hated name, pushing it under, concealing it while Cord trembled and fought an urge to scream.

Cord stood up suddenly, beckoning to the bartender. Harry's face seemed to swim over to him, suspended in colorless mist, while the nasal, insane roaring in his ears gained more and more volume, threatened to become his entire world. As if underwater, Cord heavily indicated his empty glass, unable to speak. Harry almost objected, took one look at Cord's face, and filled the glass without a word. Cord reached out and

lifted the glass, seeing nothing but it, so that it rose to his lips as if teleported, the solitary bright living spot in an enormous black cavern that echoed and re-echoed with the roaring that precedes death and anesthesia. Cord opened his mouth to drink, not hearing or feeling the click of his lower teeth meeting the rim of the glass. Opened his mouth to drink, and . . .

A few feet away, Dom Hagar looked at Cord, holding a glass that seemed to invite Cord to join him in a toast.

Cord screamed and hurled his glass and, still screaming and with his teeth bared crazily in a snarl, was halfway across the bar before his glass had shattered in the mirror, shattered and obliterated with a cobwebbed star his reflection as it advanced to meet him.

And then Harry expertly and compassionately chopped at the back of Cord's neck with the edge of his hand, and—for Cord—the universe became an immense emptiness where not even the roaring lingered.

AFTER an effortless time, which might have lasted for seconds or millennia, there was feeling and with it awareness

—of a sort. Once, as a child, he had seen a picture of a device used by pre-atomic scientists to handle "hot" materials, in those incredible days when the mass-to-energy reaction had been allowed to create and radiate non-beneficial byproducts.

The picture had been of a pair of massive gloves, gloves that contained relays that activated—at the end of long, gleaming steel robotic arms—a pair of clumsy and inefficient but remarkably mobile graspers. Between the operator and his work was a concrete-and-lead wall, and he viewed what he was doing through an ingenious system of mirrors.

Now—how he knew it he could not understand; it was enough to know it—he was the graspers and somewhere someone was operating him, peering into his brain and through his eyes, making experimental moves that had no significance until someone said (*said?*), "Now, try it."

The sensation was that of a gentle and reassuring push.

Abruptly, he had identity—though a strange and contradictory one—but before he could say "I am I" there was a door in front of him, and before he could ask "Where am I?" he said clearly and aloud,

"Man overboard!" because the door-lock was set to open only to that combination of sounds.

"Good midnight, Dom," said Saul, as the door opened.

Instantly he wanted to vanish, to disintegrate, or if that were impossible, then to scrape the name and voice from his mind like a slime and fling them away. But that was impossible, too, and he couldn't die because of the soothing hands holding him down on a bed while calm voices assured him that everything was all right. There wasn't anything to do but go on with it, and once he accepted that along with the realization that nothing had hurt him, he felt better; though it was a bit of a shock to find he had already walked across the small, book-filled room to where Saul had risen from his chair, and was shaking hands.

"Good midnight, Saul," he said.

That was when he learned that not only could nothing hurt him, but it also didn't matter what he felt or thought. He felt like asking what was going on, but, exactly as in an all-sense movie, the action continued without his volition. By the time he realized it, he'd taken off his tunic and was sitting in a chair, facing Saul, who was obviously waiting for

him to get comfortable before starting conversation.

There was a pause like a throat-clearing, and then Saul said, "I called you over, Dom, because there's something I have to tell you."

This time, he didn't even flinch at the name, and as Dom, he had nothing to say, and so nodded to show his attention. As Dom, he knew before Saul said anything that it would be a bomb; they'd known each other too long, too well, for surprises.

"Dom," Saul said heavily, but rushing through the words, "I'm in love with Tabatha."

As a shock, it was considerable. He was genuinely perplexed, and made more so by the fact that, as Dom, the emotion he felt, after the initial adrenalic surge, was . . . pity.

"So am I," he said.

"I know. My God, I know. Cigarette?" Content now to sit back and watch the play, he remarked the trembling of Saul's hand offering the box, noticed that his own was surprisingly steady as it accepted a cigarette. He lit it and waited for Saul to do the same before speaking.

"And Tabatha loves me," he said. And then, groping for words, "Saul, look. Tabatha and I are . . . cohabiting."

There was a pause. "I see," Saul said. "That makes it harder."

"I don't understand."

As a spectator, he noticed something that the original Dom had not. That he'd taken three drags on the cigarette, and that Saul had been counting them. At that instant, Saul's voice changed, changed and acquired menace.

"Dom, I love Tabatha; I want her. I *will* have her." There was a very short, calculated hesitation, then. "One thing I know; I can't compete with you, Dom. There's nothing for it, then, but this. You've got to go."

"You're crazy!" Dom said it, and he thought it; and someplace far away—wherever his controller was—someone said, "A paranoid!" The accents held utter stupefaction, and the voice followed with, "How the hell did we ever miss him?"

"No, Dom," said Saul. "Only very clever. And I mean what I say."

"If I thought you were joking, I'd . . . don't you realize that you can't . . ." But he never finished the sentence; Saul's menacing, level voice cut in.

"No, Dom . . . you can't. You can't get up from that chair, for one thing. For another,

you can't hear anything but my voice. . . ."

And it was true; he might as well have been glued to the chair, might as well have been wearing closed-system radio earphones with Saul on the other end. Before the smooth voice told him he couldn't speak, he had time to say, numbly, "It was the cigarette!" and hear Saul answer, "It was the cigarette." Then everything was whirling and submerged and he was shooting upwards toward consciousness faster and faster and then there was a splintering inward crash like an enormous kaleidoscope and suddenly he was sitting upright in a hospital bed, surrounded by three psychers, the youngest of whom repeated,

"It was the cigarette!"

And Dom Hagar, who had thought himself—who had actually been—Anton Cord, nodded his head slowly and tiredly and then said, addressing them all,

"It's all right now; I remember everything. Everything."

ONCE YOU KNEW what Saul was, it became perfectly easy to understand why he had not bothered to move, had not changed planets, had not even changed his personal living-

quarters. Dom, who had been Cord, stood before the door once again, and behind him the two calm men, one from Psych-Bur and the other from Social Protection, waited silently and emotionlessly for whatever would come.

"Man overboard," said Dom, and the door opened.

An ordinary person—"normal" is not the word; it reeks too much of statistical generality—whether he knows it or not, bases his life on the premise, "I am I, and more important to myself than to other men." A paranoid of Saul's type, driven into any cul-de-sac, placed under any strain unresolvable by superficial "normal" actions, reacts as if his life's keystone is, "I am I, and most important; there are no other men." From this, it is an effortless, warped small step to, "I am infallible."

Saul had been a brilliant psycher, excellent at his trade. His natural intelligence and his rich family had conspired to give him a world in which he was never blocked, never frustrated. As long as that world held up, he was "normal," was a "nice guy," was—among other things—Dom's best friend. So, Saul loved Tabatha and Tabatha loved Dom. Ergo: Dom was an obstacle, and as such, something to get

rid of and to forget. Having been disposed of, Dom became to Saul so unimportant as to be non-existent.

The door opened, interrupting a scene that could not have been a pleasant one. Tabatha stood at the end of the room, facing the door over Saul's shoulder. Alone with him, her face had been expressing bewildered humiliation; now, as Dom stepped through the doorway, it changed, became a beacon of incredulous wonder.

Saul, his back to the door, was resting one hip on the arm of a chair, a relaxed, dominating pose. Without looking behind him, he said, in the tone one uses to someone interrupting a family quarrel, "Get out of here."

"Saul—" said Dom. Saul's body went rigid, and his head snapped around.

His face was not pretty. In it, sanity was as tight and vulnerable as an inflated rubber balloon approached by a needle. The needle was Dom, Dom who should have been gone, who was gone; who should not have come back, who *could not* come back. For a flicker of an instant Saul's face was totally blank with the realization that not even he could make something non-existent by wishing it so. But that was as sane as he was; if

he could not wish Dom out of existence, he could at least try to do something, invalidate him, cancel him out. Accordingly, Saul's expression changed again—all so quickly that this last face might have been the one he turned around with—changed again and became scornful, contemptuous. The strong, righteous man facing the weak, indecisive coward.

"So, you've come back—dared to come back, after the way you left. Do you realize what we've gone through?" But it was no use, was less than no use. Something in the atmosphere refused to lend support to the lie, so that the lightning-fast, psychologically perfect accusation snapped out of the air without an echo, leaving them all with the impression that he'd babbled incoherently.

"It's no use, Saul," said Dom, and his words held pity.

But Saul didn't appear to hear Dom; instead looked past or through him, spoke to the man beyond as if Dom didn't exist.

"You there—I can see your brooch; you're from Psych-Bur, right? Then you've noticed this man is a schizoid; take him away and put him under therapy at once." Then, when the man made no move, "What's the matter with you?

Get him down to the hospital and I'll phone in an okay. There won't be any trouble; I've got First Class general expert status."

"I am an executive troubleshooter," said the man from Psych-Bur, in the disinterested voice of a scientist describing an uninteresting compound having an unspectacular reaction.

Dom said, "I told you, Saul. It's no use—"

Howling, Saul sprang at Dom's throat.

The small, gray man from Social Protection stepped quickly between them. He seemed to accept Saul into an embrace, seemed to be carried back by Saul's weight with one foot reaching behind him in an action as inhuman and mechanical as the balancing of a tight-rope walker, seemed to stagger a little and bend a little more, and then they were on the floor with Saul underneath, pinned and powerless, unable to move but able to shriek curses and obscenities until the man from Psych-Bur bent over him and pressed something like a pocket flashlight to Saul's upper arm.

There was the sharp *thump!* of a subcutaneous injection administered by a needle-less compressed-air hypo, and Saul was silent.

AND THEN—after the man from Psych-Bur had spoken into a pocket-radio, calling an ambulance crew who quickly arrived and removed Saul's unconscious body; after the gray little man from Social Protection had mumbled a few words into a mini-recorder and left—the man from Psych-Bur had looked at them, at Dom and Tabatha, with eyes that had seemed to give them everything from a pulse-count to an electroencephalogram to a Rorschach test, and said, "You'll be all right, I believe." He left, and they were alone.

For a long moment they stood tentatively motionless, letting their mutual presence re-engage the separated gears of their two personalities. Without appearing to have crossed the room, Tabatha was suddenly in Dom's arms, the contact so urgent as to be almost violent; her arms about him pulling her face hard against his chest.

"He said . . . he said you thought I was trying to trap you into marrying me. That you only pretended to love me so I'd cohabit with you. He said you went away. . . ." Tabatha wept like a child; noisily, her shoulders heaving.

"It wasn't true," said Dom. "He drugged and hypnotized

me, pushed my personality under and slammed the lid on it; built me a new personality . . . a man named Anton Cord. He told me to go away, to forget."

"You came back."

"I came back. He tried too hard, you see. He knew his work couldn't possibly stand up to a psyching, so he made me fear and hate psychers, avoid them at all costs. He must have known I'd begin to remember things, sooner or later. He made my true name a thing of horror and disgust to me, too, so that if I began to remember it, I wouldn't want to."

Tabatha was quite still in his arms, holding him tightly, listening.

"It was too much; the false personality broke down . . . painfully. Too many commands, too many fears. Anton Cord threw a screaming fit in a bar on Henderson's Planet . . . where he'd gone in obedience to Saul's commands, out near the galaxy's unexplored End.

"The bartender was an intelligent man. He knocked Cord—me—out, and called the psychers. And that was that."

She clung to him, not speaking, looking blankly at and through a wall, for a long time.

"What will we do now?" she said.

He understood. It was her way of saying, *I have been with Saul because I thought you left me; if you had not left me, I would not have done it. Now you are back and I want you still, as I have always wanted you.* And leaving him free; leaving it all to him to decide.

He thought of saying, *I never left you; the time I spent away from you was not my time; Anton Cord was not me.* But that would not do; it

was not basic enough. He thought of saying, *I love you.* But he knew she would know that without its being said.

She was motionless against him, and he knew she was waiting.

And suddenly he remembered the last words of the man from Psych-Bur, the voice level, emotionlessly calm, eternally and unshakably sure of itself.

"Don't worry," Dom said, his lips against her hair. "Don't worry; everything's going to be all right."

