

STARTLING *stories*

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It was only two more blocks to the park

SEDIMENT

By

KENNETH O'HARA

•

*It came from under the city—
an evil, flowing scourge that
devoured all in its path. . . .*

BARTON edged along the narrow catwalk, flashing his light over the dank sewer walls. Evans was overdue, and he wasn't the kind to be late for his salami sandwich.

"Hey, Evans, it's lunchtime."

But Evans didn't answer.

The only sound was the whisper of sewage flowing along the stinking flume. A sewer pipe had broken somewhere and the foul stuff was gurgling along at Barton's feet.

It might be enough to make even an old timer like Evans lose his appetite.

"Hey, Evans!"

It wasn't logical. Evans was supposed

to be down here only a few minutes to check on that fouled-up power line. Evans didn't mind working in sewers, which had put up a kind of barrier to close friendship between him and Barton. Barton hated sewers. He hated New York too. He had put in his resignation and he was going back to his old man's farm in Missouri. Evans was the kind of guy who would never understand that. The only fresh clean farm-land Evans had ever seen had been in a newsreel.

On the other hand Evans wasn't so damn much in love with sewers he'd stay down here during his lunch hour.

Barton listened, flashing his light both ways. He was a big muscular man with blond hair and a tanned ruddy face formed by a lifetime in the sunlight and open air. He felt even more out of place down in the dark sewer than he looked. And all at once an uneasy flutter moved in his stomach and he realized how much he wanted to get out.

Then he heard the harsh strained cry. It filtered to him through some indefinable length of sewer. He jumped into the muck and splashed toward the sound. He knew the cry had come from Evans. But it hadn't sounded human at all.

About a hundred feet farther on, another tunnel crossed. It was smaller, so that a man had to stoop to walk in it, and it contained a thin river of escaped sewage dolling through the green-scummed flume like oil.

Barton's flash caught a glimpse of Evans floating, sinking. Barton made a wild lunge and then yelled with agony as he touched Evans' arm. His flashlight fell into the muck and disappeared.

Dazed in the blackness, his hand burning with pain, Barton floundered around. He couldn't find Evans. He could still see the burning image of his face though. A dead face, half eaten away. And both face and body covered with some kind of greenish-gray slime that shimmered and moved, rippled like fur on a beaver's back.

He floundered around looking for Evans until the sound stopped him. The scraping sound. He pressed against the wall listening. It was a sort of clawing and then a thick rustling noise, getting louder all the time. Then he heard the squealing and

saw the small red eyes getting bigger.

Rats!

It seemed to him in the darkness that there were thousands of rats, when only one rat would have been enough. Barton would rather have been caged with a lion than be caught anywhere with one solitary rat.

ANYWAY, there was something crazed, desperate, in the sounds they were making and the way they were moving, filling up the flume. Barton knew that if they overtook him they would finish him. The bite of one rat strategically placed, could kill a man, and here there were hundreds of rats.

Barton ran. He had run some distance, stumbling, falling, and almost knocking himself out on rusted iron pipe before he realized he was lost in the sewers.

But wherever he was the rats were still behind him, and getting closer all the time.

Barton kept on running.

Later he was hanging on an iron bracket, both arms hooked through it, hanging there gasping while the rats streamed past below him. Above him he could see the dim light of a manhole cover, a slight line of light.

He clung there, inhaling deeply, waiting for the strength that would allow him to lunge upward, throw off the manhole cover, and get out before the rats overran him. As soon as they saw that opening up there they would swarm up his body to get out. He knew that. The rats wanted out. They wanted out in the worst way. Barton also wanted out in the worst way. And he knew that he and the rats weren't alone in wanting out.

There were the bugs; more than he cared to think about. Cockroaches, water-bugs, crickets and even lizards. And some of them were white and eyeless.

The latter must have come from way down below the sewers somewhere, Barton thought. He had seen those white crickets in caves back in Southern Missouri. Things born of generations of darkness so that they had no pigmentation, no need for eyes.

Everything was coming up. Everything living, even below the level of the sewers, was coming up. And something was *driving* them up.

Barton took a deep breath and lunged upward. He writhed desperately, and then flung himself forward on the pavement as the rats came out and ran past him down the deserted street.

Barton sat on the curbstones, breathing heavily, nauseous with fatigue. He stared at the hand that had touched Evans—there was a raw red streak across it as though it had been splashed with acid.

There were rats running down the street; a lot more of them than anyone would think could have been living right under New York City. And moving in the same direction as the rats were the crawling insects. All moving in the same direction in a steady line; all moving East.

Barton managed to stand up, but his legs quivered with the weakness of fear, shock and fatigue. He knew he had come out somewhere inside the big slum-clearance project on the lower East Side. Around him were blocks of deserted streets littered with rubble, rusted tin cans, broken bottles, broken bricks. The sides of the street were lined with dead tenements, blankfaced, boarded up, and for the most part empty.

Barton started walking through the evening dusk that was the color of mercury over the dead tenements. Mist was rising up out of the sewers. And the gray light moved over the brickwork muddy with grime, over the broken windows and the glass hanging in shards from window frames.

He heard the high-pitched laughter and turned toward where the old man lay with his head on the bottom step. A derelict scarecrow with stick-like arms and dough-white skin. He was waving a wine bottle and laughing at the rats streaming past him.

As Barton ran toward the old man he heard, far off beyond the slum clearance project, the screaming of sirens, fire trucks, voices—a muted roar of massed human sound.

He pulled the old man up onto his feet. "Those are rats, pop."

"They don't scare me. I've seen too many of them already."

"This isn't delirium, pop. These babies are genuine. Their teeth aren't healthy either."

"They're always genuine until they go away."

The old man tilted the empty bottle. "All out of sneaky pete," he groaned. "Could you maybe lend me two-bits so's I can get some more sneaky pete?"

A huge black rat crawled out of the decayed doorway of the tenement. It did a kind of pirouette, then fell dead. The old man wiped at his lips. "They never did die before," he whispered. "Maybe they are real."

Barton dragged the old man up the steps.

HE STARED out into the gray light of the street. Something in his stomach seemed to turn completely over. It was as though the whole area under the city was being purged, thrusting to the surface the abscesses and clots that had formed in its deepest entrails.

There was a heavy drift over the city now, the leaden-hue of massive heat rising from what Barton figured must be huge fires. Sirens screamed louder.

"It's the Last Judgement," the old man said. "I seen it comin'."

When Barton heard the shout from inside the tenement, he grabbed hold of the old man's arm.

"Nobody *lives* here, do they, pop?"

"Maybe. Some folks don't like to get shoved out with no place to go."

Barton listened at the door. For a long time the Housing Authority had been moving people out of this area, cleaning it up, condemning it, getting it ready for demolition. Nobody could possibly be—

When he heard the sound again, he went inside. The interior had a rank odor. A dim light filtered through broken windows and down through a sagging stairway from a shattered skylight three floors up.

Carefully, he started up the stairs, and the entire structure canted sickeningly.

He hesitated. There was no one except his mother back in Missouri to worry about him, and she had almost given him up as a guy who didn't have enough brains to stay around home.

Cautiously, he went on up the stairs. The railing ripped and he nearly went with it, back down to the first floor. As the old man yelled out a warning, rotten boards

crumbled and dust exploded from the cracks.

A rat run down the stairs. Roaches, waterbugs—swarms of them—were coming out from under the wallpaper, out of doorways, dropping from the ceiling, all heading one way—all getting out.

Barton ran down the third floor hallway to an open door and looked inside.

The room was worse than a sewer because people weren't supposed to live in sewers. A man in dirty slacks, no shoes or socks and no shirt, was dragging a three or four-year-old kid across the room toward the kitchen doorway. He was waving a butcher knife.

The man was dark and there was a scar on the side of his face. Over by the window a Puerto Rican woman, big breasted and barefoot, wearing only a thin dirty cotton dress, made a move toward the boy. The man moved the butcher knife toward the boy's throat.

In the opposite corner facing the man was a prim young woman wearing a light green summer dress, high-heeled pumps and clutching a briefcase with both hands in front of her. She was stiff with fear and her face was white.

"All right, Mr. Sandoz," she said, her voice so carefully controlled that Barton felt she was going to scream with hysteria at any minute. "I said you don't have to move out. Stay and rot here. You and your wife and your poor little boy—just stay here until they tear the buildings all down."

"I no get out ever," Mr. Sandoz said softly. He moved the knife around.

"You're absolutely right, Mr. Sandoz. Don't get out. Just let *me* get out, that's all I ask. Believe me, you won't hear or see me again, Mr. Sandoz. No one in this filthy city will ever see me again for that matter. I've learned the hard way, but I've learned. Now if you'll just let me—"

"No tear my building down!" yelled Mr. Sandoz. "I kill everybody!"

Mr. Sandoz was nuts; Barton could see that right off. It wasn't that Barton blamed him for being nuts in a place like this, but the kid didn't deserve the pay-off. The room was pure filth. Dust and stench and filth so awful it made nothing of the dust. In the corner he saw something hardly to be called a bed. More like a nest. A dirty, lumpy,

matted pile of torn mattress, felt, excelsior, shredded newspapers, and rags. And the bugs moving out of it.

The little boy didn't flinch though. He looked wide-eyed toward his mother.

Barton dove toward Mr. Sandoz's knees, but his foot slipped and Mr. Sandoz's knee caught him under the chin. It wasn't a very hard impact, but it didn't take much to sprawl Barton out on the floor. The sewers had taken a lot out of him and there hadn't been much time to put more than a little of it back.

MR. SANDOZ had the kid through the door and into the kitchen. Barton heard the door slam, and the lock click.

Barton stood up. The woman walked toward him, and in spite of the filth of the room there was a stoical pride, a strength, about her.

"I go now," she said. "I always want to go. But not without my son."

"*Now* she wants to go," the woman with the briefcase said.

She spoke stiffly as though making formal introductions. Any minute, Barton figured, she would either faint or start screaming. Which wouldn't help the kid in there at all. Maybe she was disillusioned by the dirty mess people had made out of life. Maybe Barton was too. But the kid wasn't. At least not yet.

Barton moved toward the kitchen door, and as he moved he kneaded the damp flesh viciously at the back of his neck. Something horrible had happened out there in the city, all over out there. He knew that. He couldn't see anything and he couldn't even say he heard anything conclusive at all, just a kind of throbbing, a whispering all over the city. But just the same he knew something awful had happened. Something maybe not even explainable.

And it was funny, but here was this kid he didn't even know and the kid mattered to Barton.

Nothing else mattered much to Barton. The Korean war, and then his old man dying, and his mother crying because Barton wouldn't stay on the farm and because Barton didn't seem to know where he was going and cared even less. And then a sordid marriage on the rocks, and after that this constant feeling of no place to go, and

no reason to go. Working haphazardly at anything that came along and not even caring much about ending up in a sewer. His tendering his resignation at Con-Edison was no sudden healthy rebellion or protest. He always quit after a while and drifted on.

And here was this kid, and Barton going toward the kitchen door, probably to get a butcher knife stuck right in his belly. Chance sure was a funny thing, all right.

And poor old Evans, always playing it safe, working like a dog in the sewers most

radio. But then if we were anyplace else, we wouldn't be here, and then there wouldn't be anybody to help the kid.

As he passed a corner, moving toward the kitchen door, he looked into a dimly lighted toilet. First he saw the yellowed sink, the cracked scaled tub and the flush-basin, and he caught a whiff of acrid smell so strong it brought tears to his eyes. And then he saw the stuff bubbling out of the sink.

Barton stared, unable to move, and looked at the stuff, and it was the stuff that

of his life, and all at once—

“Too late,” the old wino whispered in through the hall door. “I read about things like this once. Rats, bugs, everything running out of cities. It's the Plague. The rats feel it first and they run out.” The old man scratched himself. “I read about the Plague once. Black Death, Red Death, and all. Whole cities dead. Charnel-houses deserted even by the birds. I seen pictures of it. Carloads of bodies going through the streets of Judgement Day.”

We would really know what happened if we were anyplace else but in this slum-clearance project, Barton thought. Even if we were someplace where there was a

had covered Evans, and it was shimmering and awful looking, and it was moving all the time.

It filled up the sink. It oozed over, dripped to the floor. Grayish-green slime with pieces of gray and black crud floating in it like hunks of mould. He remembered where he had seen it before—when the plumber had cleaned out that pipe under the kitchen sink when he was a kid visiting his Aunt Darlene in St. Joseph. He remembered then that he had been sickened by it, and that he had never forgotten it, and that he had been glad they didn't have modern plumbing on the farm.

It was a kind of concentrated and unnat-

ural slime. Unnatural, he'd thought later after leaving his Aunt Darlene's, because people shouldn't live so bunched up, the way they were in cities, but out where the clean, absorbent, purifying earth sterilized.

This accumulated bile of grease, dirt, rot and decay, piling up, fermenting and yeasting into something else came from the unnatural concentration, he thought.

It was all over the floor in there under the sink, collecting into puddles, running like quicksilver-puddle toward quicksilver-puddle, forming a solid bubbling mass over the floor and radiating vapor like dry ice.

A rat ran out and was almost instantly absorbed by the stuff. Insects caught up in it were eaten by its acid. It filled up the bathtub and came pouring up out of the flushbasin.

It darted toward Barton. He slammed the bathroom door.

He yelled at the others to get down to the first floor, to go down one at a time because the stairs might not carry their total weight. Then he hit the kitchen door running. Rotten wood flew apart. He fell to his knees on the worn linoleum to keep from leaping squarely into a pool of the stuff that was spreading all over the floor, spouting out of the kitchen sink.

Mr. Sandoz screamed once. Barton saw him enveloped in a sudden rippling blanket of slime, and under it the mound of his body began to deflate like a leaking balloon.

Barton knew the stuff was deadly. It allowed no degree of casualty, but was either all or nothing. Just the same, Barton was getting ready to jump across the stuff, thinking of landing on top of the kitchen table because that was where the kid was standing. Mr. Sandoz had put him up there before dying.

The kid was just standing there, not making a sound even though tears were running down his brown cheeks.

BEFORE Barton could jump, Mrs. Sandoz walked past him, walked right into the stuff, and kept on walking. A moan came through her clenched teeth as the stuff flung itself around her feet and shot tendrils up her legs.

She made it to the table, picked up the boy, turned, and was half way back before she fell. By then the stuff had enveloped

her body clear to the breasts, and tendrils of it were shooting up toward her eyes and nostrils.

Barton caught the boy and backed out into the other room. It occurred to him dimly as he ran into the hall that he had never had any idea of human courage before; not even a dim idea. He knew the awful agony of the touch of that stuff, the searing burn from just getting his hand close to Evans—

Most of Mrs. Sandoz had been dead before she even got to the kid, but she had almost made it back to the doorway!

Barton ran into the third floor hallway. The social worker and the old wino were still there.

The old man's voice trembled.

"It's out in the street," he whispered. "We can't go out there. I seen the stuff. It's coming out of the sewers. It's running back and forth across the sidewalks and across the streets. There's some sort of vapor coming off it. It's so thick you can't hardly see half a block down the street. It's like a thick fog coming in!"

"God, what is it?" the woman asked. She was staring at the floor, and when Barton looked he saw that some of the stuff was beginning to ooze out from under another apartment's door and strings of it were sliding toward them across the hall.

"The fireescape," Barton said.

"But we can't go down to the street!" the old man yelled.

"We'll try the roof," Barton said. "We sure as hell can't stay in here. . . ."

A nightmare never really begins. You're just in it and running through it, wanting to get out. Running over rooftops with the hissing sound all over below, and the fog, that stinking vapor, drifting up around thicker and thicker until it begins to hang even above the rooftops.

And you're running over the tarpaper and the gravel. Running and jumping, then crawling down, finding your way through the hungry streams of the stuff, running down back alleys to get away from it, running across back lots where, oddly enough, the stuff doesn't seem to be. You're climbing fences, and crawling up another fire escape. You're running and running over more rooftops and climbing down again.

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After a while you learn something—the stuff is a lot thicker some places than others. Not so much of it in the back alleys. And inside, between the squares of buildings where there is earth, grass and sometimes trees, the stuff isn't there at all.

But you have to keep on going, getting out, because you're sure the stuff will penetrate everywhere before very long.

That's the way a nightmare is, Barton thought. In a nightmare you're either frozen and can't run at all, or you run crazily—run and run until you drop dead from running because you know that when you stop you're a gonner. You're like Evans then, or like Mr. and Mrs. Sandoz.

After a while, there has to be some really good reason for running. After a while, you don't give a damn about yourself because you're finished and you're not worth it. There has to be some other reason. There's the kid you're carrying, and pretty soon the three of you know that if it wasn't for the kid you would have quit a long time ago.

You handle the kid like a million-dollar antique you can't afford to drop. You pass him back and forth, risking your own necks when the stuff is hissing close, handing him up the fire escapes, passing him across from roof to roof. Why? Well, he's a kid, a child, the future.

And all the time you're trying to get out of that slum clearance project, about ten square blocks of it.

But it's twelve hours later before you get out. It's impossible to see where you're going by then. The nauseous vapor covers everything. Once in a while you see people emerge and dissolve again, running and yelling. Spectors in the mist, just more figures that fill up nightmares, Barton thought.

Trapped for hours in that lot where the grass was green and the stuff was all around; but having to get out, not able to find any way out. Over the rooftops in one direction. Trapped. Over the rooftops in every other direction. Trapped. Tied up on every side. The stuff oozing everywhere over the streets and sidewalks.

Then the fire hydrant pouring out a river of clean water, and the stuff retreating from it hissing and boiling with what looked like the blackest kind of rage.

They would have stayed there, stayed there and never even tried to find a way out if it hadn't been for the kid.

But Barton had learned something. The stuff didn't like earth, or green grass, or trees. And it fled from clean water the way water runs from a hot griddle.

THEY never mentioned the stuff that had come up out of the sewers. There was something thoroughly unmentionable about it. It wasn't definable. It was senseless, meaningless. It was just deadly, and they had to get the kid out of it.

That was the way Barton finally felt, and that was all he could feel. He moved without any other feeling. Numbed and nerveless, he kept going and that was the reason. After a while he realized that the old man and the social worker, whose name was Anna, were going now for the same reason.

The old man moved like a somnambulist. Anna was streaked with dirt and her skirt was torn half off and her blouse was ripped and pinned up again. She had lost her high-heeled shoes and her feet were bleeding.

Barton had kept them moving North and West, not toward the river where everything else seemed to have been moving. But the other way, uptown and across town, heading West. And then they found the old garden truck.

They made it up as far as 60th and 1st Avenue in the shaky quarter-ton. The stuff had inundated all the stalled and wrecked automobiles, except for the garden truck. Without that truck they would never have gotten a block out of the slum clearance area. It was loaded down with pots of flowers and water dripped from the pots into the street and for a radius of a hundred feet around the truck there was not a sign of the stuff.

From that point to 60th and 1st Avenue, they drove through the obnoxious mist, through wrecked cars, and what seemed to be an endless graveyard of a city. A ghost town. New York City turned into a ghost town in a matter of hours.

Not a living thing. Not a dead thing either. There was no sound except the hissing and bubbling of the stuff as it continued to boil up out of the sewers and subway gratings, out of the bowels of city, thickening all the time, forming a tightening net-

work of widening veins all over the streets and sidewalks, and oozing down the sides of buildings like masses of mouldy syrup.

There was a radio in the garden truck, and they got a little of the over-all picture. But it didn't seem to matter much to Barton.

Whether or not it mattered much to Anna or the old man, he didn't know. He didn't care, either.

All the time he had been moving by instinct, by hunch, fortified in part by what he had learned about the stuff—that it hated earth, grass, green growing things, and clean water.

It recalled to Barton's mind the time when he was six or seven years old and had wandered away from the farm into the woods and gotten lost. But he hadn't really been lost; that was the thing. He had found his way home again, instinctively, at night, with not even stars to guide him. He had found his way home, and that was the way he felt now and had felt for the last twelve hours.

He knew where he had been heading all the time. Central Park.

And now, thanks to the garden truck, they were almost there. He was heading across town and starting across Park Avenue and the truck ran out of gas.

He managed to ram the truck into the concrete-guard which fenced off the strip of green grass and shrubbery that split Park Avenue down the middle; then the engine stalled completely.

It was only two more blocks to Central Park. But the stuff covered the sidewalks and the street, and the sickening vapor was so thick Barton could hardly see the kid who lay in his arms, or Anna, or the old man three feet away.

The stuff stayed away from the green grass in the middle of Park Avenue. But when Barton went near the edge and peered down, he could see it bubbling and moving along with a kind of terrifying assurance.

Having conquered everything there was to conquer, its only concern seemed to be to move over the battlefield and feed on the dead.

Feed on the dead?

Barton thought about that. He longed to sink down and sleep on the green grass;

sleep for a week. But he knew that if he ever did allow himself to sink down there and close his eyes, he was through.

"Now what?" Anna asked.

"I don't know."

"It's taken over the world," the old man said. "It's Judgement Day."

"So what have you been running so hard for, pop?"

"I don't know," the old man said. He stared into the vapor. "I just don't know. I had a family once and then I had a reason, but at that time I just couldn't run hard enough. That was always my trouble. I never did run hard enough. I never could even come in second or third. That was my trouble ever since the day I was born. I always ate dust at the tail end of the race. Inherited a little money and when I got married I had this business, but it didn't last. I couldn't cut the mustard, that was always the trouble with me. And now—it's a funny thing that I'm running now, ain't it?" He looked at the kid.

"We'll get out won't we, Mr. Barton?" Anna said. She took the Sandoz kid out of Barton's arms and kissed him. He was sound asleep, and he didn't wake up.

"Maybe," Barton said. "But I don't know how the hell we're going to do it. If we could get into the Park, we'd have a chance. It's big and clean, and the stuff can't get in. We could live there a long time if we had to."

"Sure," the old man said, and giggled. "We could trap squirrels and even birds and cook them over an open fire. Come to think of it, I was pretty good at that when I was a kid. Trapping things like that. I'd go out when I was a kid, all by myself, and trap muskrat. Mushrats we called them. I had a string of traps and in the winter I'd go out and set them under the ice, and every evening after school I'd go out all by myself, sometimes in snow so thick you couldn't see your own hand in front of your face, and I'd go along and lift up the traps—"

His voice trailed off and he sat down and put his hands over his face. "God, that was a long time back when I used to go out trapping that way."

"We could live all right if we could get into Central Park," Barton said. "But I don't know how we can get over there."

ACCORDING to the truck radio, only about a third of the population of Manhattan had gotten off the island alive. They were still jammed on the Triborough, 59th Street and George Washington Bridges. The Holland and Lincoln Tunnels had been blocked by the stuff. The vapor stopped helicopters from trying to rescue survivors, though it was doubted if there were any.

The stuff hadn't moved off Manhattan Island, and it was doubted if it would because of the water barrier. As soon as it was determined whether or not there were any survivors, attempts were going to be made to attack the stuff. But so far no one seemed to know what it was, or how to attack it. The stuff was mysterious mainly because it was *alive*. Was it alive the way a gigantic amoeba was alive, or the way mobile algae might be considered a form of life?

A preacher said the stuff was Man's filth and evil and corruption coming back up out of hell to plague him. The preacher said this was only the beginning.

A Senator claimed the stuff had been planted by Russian agents. But then an INS correspondent reported that the rats were beginning to run out of Moscow too.

Barton didn't care about any of that. He sat on the green grass in the middle of Park Avenue and listened to the stuff bubbling in the mist. It was born of garbage, filth and excrement; all the dirt of millions of humans seeping down into the rocks under the city year after year. And that was what it fed on too. It fed on dirt, garbage and slime. When it ran out of those things it would die.

But it might take a long time to die.

And then he heard Anna shouting at him. "The truck! The sanitation truck!"

"The what?" Barton asked.

"The street sprinkler. We passed it. Just up there, just as we started across Park Avenue. I saw it there! I remember now! I saw it!"

The old man was standing up, close to Barton. His eyes were shining. "That's right, I seen it too," he said. "I seen it too. I remember now."

"Drink water," the kid said. He was sitting beside Anna on the grass rubbing his eyes. "Drink water."

The old man was walking away, and before Barton could say anything he had disappeared in the mist. Barton ran after him.

He caught up with the old man who was standing on the curb, just across the street from where they had passed the sanitation truck. He made a grab for the old man just as the old man jumped out into the street, and disappeared in the vapor.

Barton yelled. Dimly, he heard the old man's scream of pain. "I'll turn on the water," the old man yelled. "I'll turn it on. Save the kid. *Save the kid—*"

A little while after that Barton heard the water, and then the angry hissing of the stuff as the water burned into it. Bending forward, he could see the stuff retreating as the water, spraying from across the street, attacked it. It retreated, and Barton could cross over to the big water wagon.

Barton staggered and had to lean against the truck to keep from falling. The sprays on either side of the big truck could be operated from the cab, or operated manually from the side by a spigot just above the heavy nozzles.

The old man's body had been eaten away by the stuff. But his arm, severed just below the elbow, still gripped the spigot and clean water ran down the length of the arm and dripped onto the pavement.

Barton stood there with his eyes clenched shut while the water swished around his shoes. Then he got up into the cab. He studied the gauges and dials and levers and then started up the diesel engine. The air pressure that forced water out of the tank was high. And the tank appeared to be almost full.

He headed the truck back toward where Anna and the Sandoz boy waited. He swung the truck back and forth so that the spray nozzles on the sides could clear the way ahead. . . .

THERE was no trace of the stuff anywhere in Central Park. They found a refreshment stand and ate hot dogs and peanuts. They drank soda pop. They ate ice cream. It was right by the carousel and the boy sat looking at the wooden horses until he dropped off to sleep in Anna's arms.

They sat there a while under the dense
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SEDIMENT

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vapor that moved through the trees and over the grass. Barton put his arm around Anna's shoulders and pulled her down beside him.

"You'd better sleep now," he said.

She looked at him. She seemed a lot older, but softer too, and her eyes were wide and receptive. "All right," she said. She closed her eyes.

"What's-your name?" she asked after a while.

"Fred," he said. "Fred Barton."

"What do you do? I mean, what's your job?"

"I'm a farmer," he said, without hesitation. "Would you like to be a farmer's wife?"

"I was a farmer's daughter," she said.

"The kid will make a good farmer's son. Don't you think so?"

"I have no doubt of it."

A little later, she said, "How about you? You'd better sleep too. It's safe for you to sleep too, isn't it?"

"Sure it's safe," Barton said. He looked up into the thick leaves.

He turned his head slightly and smelled the earth under him and the tangy odor of clean grass.

The last thing he saw before he closed his eyes was the sign painted on the back of the sanitation truck a few feet away:

DON'T BE A LITTERBUG
Help Keep NYC Clean