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A Complete Novel

THE MULTILLIONTH CHANCE

By JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

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Read Our Companion Science Fiction Magazine—STARTLING STORIES



"I'll fight," Dave promised. "I'll stop all this."

THE LITTLE THINGS

By HENRY KUTTNER

Dave Tenning, a born rebel, felt that he did not really belong in this Futureworld which was tired of rebellion!

THE first thing he did when he felt free from pursuit was to head for a newsstand. He wanted to know the date. He didn't know how long he'd been in the Chateau D'If, because after the first year or so there wasn't much point in keeping track.

There simply wasn't any way of escaping. Edmond Dantes had got out of the original D'If, but such a trick wouldn't work twice. When the—guests—died in this particular guest house there was a quick cremation in the basement somewhere.

That was one of the distressing sparse scraps of information he had managed to pick up during his period of imprisonment. Not once, in that long time, had he left the windowless single room with its nearly luxurious furnishings and completely luxurious Siamese cat, Shan, who had kept him from utter loneliness.

It had been a wrench to leave Shan, but her devotion was given to things, not people, and it had been no imprisonment for her. The miracle that had enabled him to escape

was not one that could be extended indefinitely. He took the chance when it came, and got out while the after-rumbles of the explosion were still sounding from below.

He didn't know what it was but the science of the big boys who ran the place was slightly super.

He got out in a sack that was piled with a dozen others on an elevator platform, and after that, for a while, he depended on his senses of touch and hearing for orientation. He didn't learn much. But he had an idea that the sacks were dealt with by automatic machinery.

The helicopter had automatic controls, anyway—as he discovered after getting out of the sack. He had a bad moment or two mastering the enormously simplified gadgets. Copters had been mighty complicated in 1945, and he was inclined to make too difficult a job of it.

The panel exploded into lights and yelps before he grounded. So that must have been the tip-off. They'd be after him now, the big boys who'd kept him in D'If for years. Oh, very comfortably. He was in perfect physical condition. Special lamps and treatments took care of him physically and mentally. A television gave him education and entertainment. There were books.

But he never saw or read anything released later than June, 1945. Maybe that was why worry hadn't eaten into his brain and nerves. He didn't feel quite so much left out of things. He knew, of course, that the world was moving on, but he didn't see it move. That helped.

The copter grounded in a ploughed field. It was night, but there was a full moon. Silhouettes against a dim glow told him that there was a city not too far away. The airship shot up and went away. It had no lights, and was swiftly lost as it kept going up, apparently heading for the stratosphere.

He took several deep breaths. Then he felt nonexistent eyes on him; the skin of his back contracted—and he knew that he was fugitive.

It was different, but it wasn't so different. The basics were still there. There were people, and the styles in clothing hadn't changed too much. He wore a duplicate of the same suit he'd had on in 1945, that June day when they'd come for him, the big boys. The big boys who'd sat outside and waited, their faces hidden, while their strong-arm men—appropriated—Tenning.

'I am Dave Tenning,' he thought, and there was a little shock of novelty. He had got out of the habit of thinking of himself in any personal sense. In fact, the calm, confident realization of personal identity had gradually vanished during the term of his imprisonment. Like a baby, he had become almost

unconscious of ego. There had been no need for its assertion.

'I am Dave Tenning, but there is another Dave Tenning.'

That was where reality left off and the terror began. It had never seemed quite real till now, the knowledge that an *alter ego* was walking in the outside world. Because there hadn't been any outside world, really, after a while—it moved away from him in time, and the people in it, even those he had known intimately, were less real than the sensuous detachment of Siamese Shan.

HIS clothes were all right. Nobody stared at him. He hadn't any money, of course, and that was a handicap, but not an insurmountable one. The boys at the *Star* would stake him. But he must be careful not to encounter the pseudo Dave Tenning, until he was ready. Maybe he'd need a gun. These doppelgangers could be killed. They always died when their originals did.

That was why the originals were kept alive, and in good physical and mental shape. There was some vital bond, something psychic, a dynamo of life-force in the Original that kept the Carbon Copy going by induction. He'd theorized in that direction, anyhow, and it checked pretty well.

But he felt funny, because this wasn't his world any more. He kept thinking that the men and women who passed him would stop and glance and then there'd be an outcry—just what he didn't know, except that he didn't belong here. In 1945 he'd belonged, all right.

He knew why they'd snatched him, too. A gossip columnist has potentialities of power. They wanted men—doppelgangers—in key places. They had a lot of them, undoubtedly. 1945 had been a crucial year. It was one of the few times when Pandora's box had been opened, when *too much* was available to a wide-eyed civilization.

Germany was on her knees, Japan going down, and the post-war world had been a bogey. Not because there was so much to do, but because there were so very many ways of doing it. It wasn't Pandora's box—it was a grab-bag.

The social problems were far tougher than technological ones, because the human basics remained unaltered, and people don't change as fast as things. You could have planned on a dehydrated chicken in every pot, but the change-over, the conversion of the social set-up was another matter.

It didn't look as though much had changed—*not really*.

He even recognized places. There were some new buildings, though not many. The automobiles had a different design, without streamlining, were more pleasing to the eye.

Buses without drivers moved close to the curb and stopped at intervals. The lamp-posts gave a different sort of light. Shop-windows showed clothes, sporting goods, liquors, toys, nothing radically different.

But it was the small changes that made the city alien to Tenning. He didn't belong. Also, he knew that somewhere was another Dave Tenning, who had supplanted him, and that realization partially erased his consciousness of ego.

He had a momentary, unlikely sense of guilt—as though he had interfered with the rightness of the plan by escaping from D'If. You're a stranger, the people said as they went by without looking at him. You're a stranger.

'Stranger, hardly. I lived eight years in this town. I came here from a New York rag, and people read my column. So it wasn't Winchell or Pyle or Dan Walker. I never pretended to be anything more than a second-string columnist. I was read at breakfast, over the coffee, and people got a bang out of the muck I raked.

I'm Dave Tenning, and for years or centuries I've been locked up in a comfortable little prison with a Shangri-La library and a cat named Shan who didn't give a hoot about anything except a cat named Shan. The ghost walks. Just where he's bound I don't know, but he's looking for some threads to pick up. The date, for example.'

The newsstand had regular papers and it also had small, thick disks of plastic or glazed cardboard. Tenning stopped to stare. The date—

Fish *decem 7*. And so what?

"Paper, mister?" the man in the booth said. "Sheet or roto?"

"Look," Tenning said. "What's the date?" "Decem."

He wanted to ask another question, but he didn't. He turned and went on, wondering about *Seven*. Year *Seven*? Not *Anno Domini*. So?

The little things, like this, would be the hardest to pick up. People don't change, they just grow older. But fads and gadgets and trivia alter fast, even to the point of becoming unrecognizable. And he still didn't know what year it was.

The heck with it. This was Gardner Street, and he knew where the *Star* building was. He hopped one of the robot buses when it stopped and wanted a cigarette. He was inactive for the first time since his escape, but his nerves weren't.

Nobody in the bus was smoking. He hadn't seen anybody smoking.

The *Star* building was still there, big, old and, surprisingly, dark. The electric banner on the roof was gone. Tenning walked up the steps and rattled the ancient doors. They

were locked. He stood, hesitating.

This time he was really scared. A chased fox goes to earth, but if he finds his burrow blocked up, that's bad. Tenning automatically reached into his pockets, one after another. They were all empty.

A HEAVY-SET man strolling along the street paused to look up at him. Diamond-points of light showed under overhanging brows.

"That place closes at tilth," the man said.

Tenning glanced back at the locked doors.

"When?"

"Tilth."

"It—does?"

"Government offices," the man said, shrugging. "They run by schedule. No use trying to get in. Not till fen in the morning, anyway."

Tenning came down the steps.

"I thought this was the *Star* building."

"No," the assured, quiet voice said. "Not any more. We thought you'd come here, though."

Tenning's poised, singing nerves went *wham*. His fist made a similar sound as it hit the man's jaw, and Tenning followed up that one good blow with several others. He struck with panic and hysteria. The sound of alarmed voices made him realize that his opponent was down, and that figures were closing in.

He knew the streets and alleys and got away easily. That relieved him a bit. His pursuers were simply casuals. If they'd been men from D'If, he wouldn't have escaped without a lot more trouble.

So they knew, and they were on his track. Fine. He wanted a gun. He wanted a big bludgeon with spikes in it. He wanted poison gas and block-busters and flame-throwers. Most of all he wanted a hideout.

It was the familiarity of the city that was dangerous. The little things were different, and they were the ones that could betray him. He might find himself taking too much for granted, because this alley he was in looked just like the Poplar Way he used to know, and as he walked along, a paving-stone might suddenly fly away with him and take him back to D'If and the cat.

He went down to Skid Row, and that hadn't changed. The people had. He didn't know any of them. Maybe, in a different social set-up, different people would be hanging on the ropes. But was this another set-up?

There was a cheery sort of beer-garden in back, and he went there and wondered about things. Customers were paying for their drinks with tokens of some sort. Under a bedraggled potted tree a girl was sitting alone at a table, nursing a highball.

They looked at each other. The waiter ap-

peared, and Tenning hastily got up and went to the telephone booth. But it held gadgets and no directory, so he came out again and stood helplessly hesitating.

He went over to the girl. She looked lost, too.

"Look," Tenning said, "can I sit down?"

"Never . . . works out," she said. "I can't keep up with it. You're not the man, you know."

She was drunk, plenty drunk. But she held it well and managed to look pretty.

"Sit down," she said after a while. "Are you lost too?"

"Yeah. Lost and broke. I want a nickel to make a phone call."

Her blue eyes went wide. She laughed, not pleasantly. And she called the waiter.

"Two highballs."

Tenning waited. The drink tasted good, but it lacked schmaltz. Non-intoxicating alcohol, he theorized.

"What about it?" he asked. "Thanks for the drink. But what I really want—"

"You can't make a phone call that far back," she said, and Tenning's spine jammed itself together and felt cold. His fingers tightened on the glass. He said gently,

"What do you mean?"

"I miss it too. I grew up in the wrong time. Some people just can't adjust. We're a couple of them. I'm Mary. You?"

"Dave," he said, waiting for a reaction. But there was none.

She didn't know, then. How could she? The whole world wasn't spying on him. The whole world wasn't in league with D'If. That cat strolling across the bricks wasn't really in telepathic touch with Shan, reporting the whereabouts of the escaped prisoner.

"Why can't you make a phone call?" he asked.

"It wouldn't be worth it. Building phones just for people like us. We'll die, Dave. We can't propagate. They don't try to harm us, because we're not in the way. If you don't fit in—okay. Get drunk and think about Andy. You don't know Andy."

"Who—"

She laughed.

"He died, and I didn't. Or vice versa. I've never seen you around here before."

"I've been—out of town. For a long time."

"I never bothered to go."

"The telephone—"

"You know how they work nowadays," she said, "and what they call 'em."

Tenning was looking at a clock, high on the wall. He couldn't make much of the numerals. They weren't numerals. They were arbitrary signs.

"Sela plus," Mary said, "so we've plenty of time. Andy won't come. I told you he was dead."

THE little things are important. They made up their own dates, their own hour-names. Why? So people would be just a bit unsure, perhaps. Or, maybe, because time-names were a common denominator, and by changing those, the people were gradually turned into a different path.

There would be no sudden, tremendous metamorphosis. Tall cities would not spring skyward overnight. Ships would not fly to the planets. Because people change more slowly than things. Chaos and revolution follow renaissance. If the people have power.

In 1945 there had been power to waste. There had been a hundred plans for rebuilding a new world. And each had its own backers, many of them fanatical.

Harding was elected because he promised *normalcy*. After war, men were tired. They wanted to crawl back into a 1912 womb. They didn't want experiments that might upset their lives further.

Even before Japan went down, the road to the future was clear—a hundred plans, and a hundred fanatics. And weapons of power. If one plan had been chosen, there would have been opposition, and deadly danger to civilization. Because, by 1945, technology had developed weapons that were too perilous to be used—except by fanatics.

On one point everyone agreed—the Harding platform. Pre-war security. The good old way of life. It was easy to turn propaganda in that direction. Men wanted to rest.

So they rested, and Utopia did not come. But there were signs.

Streamlining was not functional for surface vehicles. It wasn't used.

Alcoholic drinks were, after a while, intoxicating, but without toxic effects.

Fish decem 7.

Sela plus.

But in the open—nothing. People were contented and secure. They had their old, safe way of life. Perhaps subconsciously they were being conditioned otherwise. They took it for granted now that this was *Fish decem 7*.

A few misfits, who couldn't get used to the psych-phones—

He'd been a reporter, so he picked the scoop out of Mary after a while. It took quite a few drinks. And he had to keep turning the subject away from Andy, who was dead, but who used to do a lot of things in the old days, when telephones were still used.

"People are different," Mary said. "It's like . . . I don't know. They've got something on their minds. But I don't know what it is. I remember in school everybody was tremendously excited one time about beating Tech High in the big game.

"I didn't care. But everybody else did. There was a sort of undercurrent. They were all working for that, deep inside of them, and

I couldn't see it. Suppose we didn't win? What about it?"

"Antisocial," Tenning said.

"There's something in the air now. Everybody's working to beat Tech High. Except me, and—" She made a gesture. "People like us aren't even in the way."

"I used to work on the *Star*," he said. "It moved, didn't it?"

"All the papers moved, of course. They're published from somewhere. Only nobody knows where."

"Do you—read the *Star*?"

"I don't want to read anything."

"I was thinking about a columnist . . . Tenning."

She shrugged.

"I know about him. He isn't with the *Star* now. He spotcasts."

"That's . . . a radio—"

"Not any more. Tenning's a hot shot now, Dave. Everybody listens to him."

"What does he talk about?"

"Gossip. And politics. People listen—"

YEAH, people listen to that dirty ringer, and he moulds public opinion. He moulds it the way the big boys want. That's why they grabbed me in nineteen forty-five. I wasn't at the top then, but I had the public ear. I was getting good audience reactions. *Spotting key men to work out their plan for them—*

Ringers, doppelgangers, in the right places. Painless psychology, sugar-coated propaganda. And a world moving, leaving Dave Tenning behind, a simply immense sphere beginning to turn from its course, gathering momentum as a thousand doppelgangers shoved it along.

Okay. Maybe the plan itself was good. But Dave Tenning had been the prisoner of Chillon for a long time.

"I've got friends—or I used to have 'em," he said. "Mary, how can I get in touch with a guy named Pelham?"

"I don't know."

"Royce Pelham. He used to publish the *Star*."

"Have another drink."

"This is important."

She stood up.

"Okay, Dave. I'll fix it."

And she went to the psych-phone booth. Tenning sat and waited.

It was a warm night. His glass, cooled by induction, felt pleasant in his palm. A Skid Row beer-garden, smelly, not too clean, with moribund potted trees looking dissipated in the moonlight.

Welcome home, Dave Tenning. Welcome back to life. No brass band, but so what? The brass band is out serenading Dave Tenning II. The pseudo-man who made good.

Offbeat music swung crazy, boogie rhythms somewhere, hitting the blue chord hard.

Mary reappeared, looking pale.

"I kept thinking of Andy," she said, "before he died. He got to liking those psychophones. I never can get to."

After 1945, did people really want the old-style life? Or was the social growth, the evolutionary trend, still stirring? The specialities came back. But people seemed to like new things—if they weren't too new, if they didn't seem to point the way to Change. Before a baby can run, it must be taught to walk, its fears overcome.

"Pelham?" Tenning said.

"Wela tee Carib Street."

"How—how do I get there?"

She told him. He still looked baffled. Mary finished her drink.

"Oh, I'll show you. It's something to do. But we'll come back here later."

They caught a bus—no fares were collected—and finally got to a comfortable, old-fashioned house in the suburbs. Mary said she'd wait in the corner drug-store and drink a chang. Tenning was wondering about the color of a chang as he rang the bell.

Old Pelham himself opened the door. He was smaller, a trifle shrunken, and completely bald now. His heavy face, seamed in folds, was inquiring.

"So?"

"Royce. You know me, don't you?"

"No," Royce Pelham said. "Should I?"

"I don't know how long it's been, but . . . Tenning. Dave Tenning. *The Star*. Nineteen forty-five."

"A friend of Tenning?" Pelham asked.

"I've got to talk to you. If I can explain—"

"All right. Come in. I'm alone tonight, the kids are out. Now."

So they sat in a comfortable room with furniture that was mostly old, but had a few new and disquieting things, like the shining, moving, singing crystal on its pedestal in a corner. Pelham was courteous. He sat and listened. Tenning told it all, what he'd experienced, what he'd doped out, the whole works.

"But you're not Tenning," Pelham said.

"I told you he's a double."

"You don't look like Tenning."

"I'm older."

"You never were Tenning," Pelham said, and gestured. Part of the wall turned into a mirror. Tenning turned and looked at a man who wasn't Tenning, and who had never been Tenning.

THEY'D done that in D'If. There'd been no mirrors there. Only Shan could have told the truth, and Shan couldn't be bothered. Five years, ten, twenty couldn't have made this difference. The bone structure was

different. He was older, but he wasn't an older Dave Tenning. Somebody else had grown older in D'If.

"Fingerprints," Tenning said quite a while later. He said it twice more before his voice was right. "Prints, Royce. They couldn't have changed those."

But then he looked at his hands. He knew what his finger-tips should look like. The whorls and spirals had been somewhat unusual.

"I think—" Pelham began.

"Never mind. They didn't forget anything. But my mind's still mine. I can remember the days on the old *Star*."

He paused. The doppelganger would remember, too. The doppelganger was a perfect double of the 1945 Dave Tenning, complete with memories and everything else. *Enoch Arden. A stranger, and afraid, in a world I never made.*

"There must be some way of proving—"

"I'm an open-minded man," Pelham said, "but Lord, I've known Tenning for years. I had lunch with him last Questen in Washington. You simply can't expect to get away with—whatever it is you're trying to get away with."

"Maybe not," Tenning said. "So they'll catch up with me eventually, and take me back to my cozy little apartment in wherever-it-is."

Pelham spread his hands.

"All right," Tenning said. "Thanks for something, anyway. I'll let myself out."

He did.

Mary was drinking her orange-colored chag at the counter when Tenning entered the drug-store. He perched on the stool beside her.

"Okay?" she asked.

"Just fine," he said bitterly.

"Got any plans?"

"Not yet. But I will have."

"Come along with me," she ordered. "It's my turn now. There's something I want to see."

He went with her, downtown, to a central plaza he remembered. They stood near the sidewalk, opposite the marquee of a hotel, and in the warm, prescient night the pulse of new life beat dimly in off-beat rhythm.

People were different, Tenning saw. It was nothing tangible. They had just grown older, but not as he had grown. Not as even Mary had grown. They were conditioned to . . . offbeat.

But every face held a latent consciousness of security. There would be no revolutions. The roots were firm in old things. And the new things were coming, gradually, inevitably.

"Blast!" Tenning said.

"What?"

It was all wrong. He could have adjusted easily to a completely new world. A civilization a thousand years hence would have been all new. That would have been acceptable. But by Fish decem 7 only the little things had changed. The little things, and the minds of men.

A man came out of the hotel and got into a car that pulled up. He was quite an ordinary man, but Mary's fingers clenched on Tenning's arm as the vehicle swung out and disappeared along the street.

"Eh?"

"That was Andy," she said.

He didn't get it for a moment.

Then he thought, 'So it wasn't Andy who died. It was Mary. Or, rather, she stopped living. She stuck to the telephones when Andy started to get used to the psych-phones.'

She was a casualty, too.

"Let's go back to the beer-garden," Tenning said.

"Gladly. Come on."

It didn't take long. But there was somebody waiting at their table, the heavy-browed man Tenning had encountered on the steps of the *Star* building. He had a purple welt on his jaw.

Tenning's insides coalesced coldly. He poised, hesitating, and then glanced around quickly.

"I'm all alone," the man said. "Look, don't start anything. I forgot to give you this." He slapped a leatheroid folder on the table.

"You're not taking me back," Tenning said. Unconsciously he had gone into a crouch, Mary behind him, instinct flooding his bloodstream with violence.

"No. You left a week or so too soon, but it doesn't matter. Good luck." The man smiled, got up, and went out, leaving Tenning helplessly shaken.

Mary opened the folder.

"A friend of yours?"

"N-no."

"He must be. To leave you this?"

"What is it?" Tenning still looked after the heavy-browed man.

"Token-currency," she said. "And plenty of it. You can buy me a drink now."

He snatched the folder.

"Money? That's what—heck! I can fight them now! I can splash the truth all over the country! See if I don't—"

SHAN purred on the lap of the red-haired man.

"Tenning is the only one who's escaped so far, Jerry," the man said, gently tickling the cat's jaw. "And that wouldn't have happened if we hadn't been reconverting. Doesn't matter, anyhow, of course. He was due for a discharge in a week or so. You might look over

his records some day when you have time. Tenning's an interesting nonentity of the more troublesome sort."

"There's a lot I'm still vague about," the other man said. "My background's geopolitical. I'm not a physicist. The doppelgangers—"

"That's a matter for the technicians. You're specially qualified for administrative work, with psychological angles. Right now you're getting a bird's-eye view of the whole works—a sort of apprenticeship."

"The doppelgangers, though—well, the double concept's interesting. Not terribly important, but interesting. When the Double first goes out, the psychic cord between the two is very strong. That's why we have to keep the Original in custody—among other reasons."

"After a certain period the Double seems to acquire enough personality of his own to go on alone, and the Original's released. He's harmless by then, anyhow."

"He wouldn't have been, at first?"

"Oh, no. Not Tenning's type. He's one of the dangerous group. Not creative, but influential. You see, the creators and the technicians were with us from the start. They saw this was the only possible safe solution."

"But the Tennings, the fellows with a little talent and a lot of aggressiveness—imagine what damage he might have done in nineteen forty-five, yawping his emotional reactions over the air. Undisciplined, immature emotions, veering in all directions."

"It's normal, of course—everybody was veering in nineteen forty-five. That was what we had to put a stop to, before chaos set in. Tenning was one of the unfortunate in-betweens, guys with too much influence to run around free, and too little intelligence to come in constructively with us."

"We couldn't reason with his kind. We couldn't even tell him the truth. Tenning Duplicate has done a lot of good—under control. All our key men have. We need guys like Tenning to steer people in the right direction."

"Under control," Jerry said.

THE red-haired man laughed. "We're not the bosses. Don't start out with that idea even in the back of your mind, Jerry. People with dictator impulses are reconditioned—fast. Here's the answer—we could never be bosses in this set-up, even if we wanted to be. The change is taking place too slowly."

"That was our whole concept, of course, and the very slowness of the thing is the check and balance system that works on us. The minute any of us got dictatorship impulses, we'd have to change the social set-up."

"And the people won't accept quick change. They've had enough of that. There'd be

chaos, and one lone dictator wouldn't stand a chance. He'd have too many opponents. All we're working for—and don't you forget it, Jerry—is to focus the veering. That's job enough for any organization right now."

"What about Tenning? Now that he's free, he's harmless?"

"Perfectly harmless. Mellhorn gave him token-money enough to cover the transition period, and he'll adjust like everyone else—if he can."

"Pretty hard on him, isn't it, tossed out into a strange world?"

"It's not that strange. He'll learn. That is, he'll learn now if he ever would have. I'm not so sure. Some just don't adjust. It takes a certain flexibility and self-confidence to be able to make changes as your environment changes."

"People like Tenning—I don't know. It's a funny thing, Jerry, there's a whole new class sinking to the bottom of the social set-up now. People who can't or won't adapt to the new things. It happens after every major social upheaval, of course, but this time we're getting a new group of misfits."

"In the long run, a much higher percentage benefits, of course. It's too bad about the maladjusted group, but there isn't much we can do. I don't know about Tenning. We'll keep an eye on him, help if we can."

"But these men with half a talent and a taste for public adulation have got a bad weak spot to begin with. I hope he makes out all right. I hope he does."

* * * * *

"I don't get it, Dave," Mary said. "Whom do you want to fight?"

He gripped the leatheroid folder savagely. "The big boys, the ones who built the psych-phones and started this screwy system of Fish decem seventh. All this—this stuff. You ought to know."

"But what do you want?" she asked. "What do you think you're fighting for?"

He looked at her. And, in the warm dimness of the air, the wave of the future stirred as an alien quickening that he sensed very dimly, and hated.

"I'll fight," he promised. "I'll—stop all this."

He swung around and went out. The waiter paused at Mary's table.

"Highball," she said.

He sent a questioning glance after Tenning. "One?"

"Just one."

"He isn't coming back?"

She didn't answer for a moment as she listened to the off-beat rhythm of the music that had gone on beyond her.

"Not tonight," she said. "But he'll be back. There's nothing out there for him. Not any more. Sure, he'll be back—some day."