

3 GREAT SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINES IN ONE

STARTLING STORIES

SPRING 25c

COMBINED WITH **THRILLING WONDER** AND **FANTASTIC STORY**



EMSH

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

TOO LATE FOR ETERNITY
by Bryce Walton

ALSO:
RICHARD MATHESON
PHILIP K. DICK
WILLIAM MORRISON



STARTLING *stories*

Combined with THRILLING WONDER STORIES and FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

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SPRING, 1955

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A Science Fiction Department Featuring Letters From Readers

OUR cover this month has told you that *Startling Stories* is now combined with *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and *Fantastic Story Magazine*. By putting all three magazines in one, we hope to give you the best elements of each—in fine writing, exciting stories, and fresh ideas.

This issue contains a story or two originally planned for *Thrilling Wonder*, plus other stories distinctly written for *Startling*. As for *FSM*, we don't have any reprints in the current issue. But if there's sufficient demand, we may revive the *Hall of Fame* feature which ran for many years in *Startling* before *FSM* was created.

By concentrating our forces on a single magazine, we expect to give you a superior selection of stories—in addition to the readers' column and other features we've always had. It's an experiment, of course, and we'll be on the lookout for your reactions.

The Weaker Sex?

The featured story in this issue, *TOO LATE FOR ETERNITY*, is based on facts available to anyone. The statistics are as near at hand as the daily newspaper or the public library.

Women outnumber men by a noticeable margin, a margin getting wider all the time. A woman's life expectancy is now seven years longer than that of men in her own age group. It's evidence of a change, a big change which is taking place right in front of our eyes.

And there's more. A newspaper item quotes Sir Adolphe Abrahams, president of the British Association of Medicine, as saying: "Women's biological superiority is

unquestioned . . . She is less susceptible to malignant growth, and the incidence of other diseases and disabilities, in women, is remarkably lower than in men. Her moral courage is generally superior.

"Women rarely get delirium tremens, and males predominate as deaf mutes, idiots, and cranks. Nearly all malformations except cleft palate are more common in men, who also have twenty times as much color blindness as women. When it comes to mass murder, the male sex cannot hold a pinch of arsenic to such poisoners as the Marquise de Brinvilliers who slew hundreds, or Mary Ann Cotton of Britain who poisoned her mother, her lodgers, three husbands, and fifteen children."

And where does all this take us? For one answer, you can read Bryce Walton's *Too Late For Eternity* beginning on p. 10. The author harbors no hard feelings, of course. He's merely looking Mother Nature in the face.

TOO LATE

Illustrations
by E.M.S.H.



FOR ETERNITY

A Novel by **BRYCE WALTON**

I

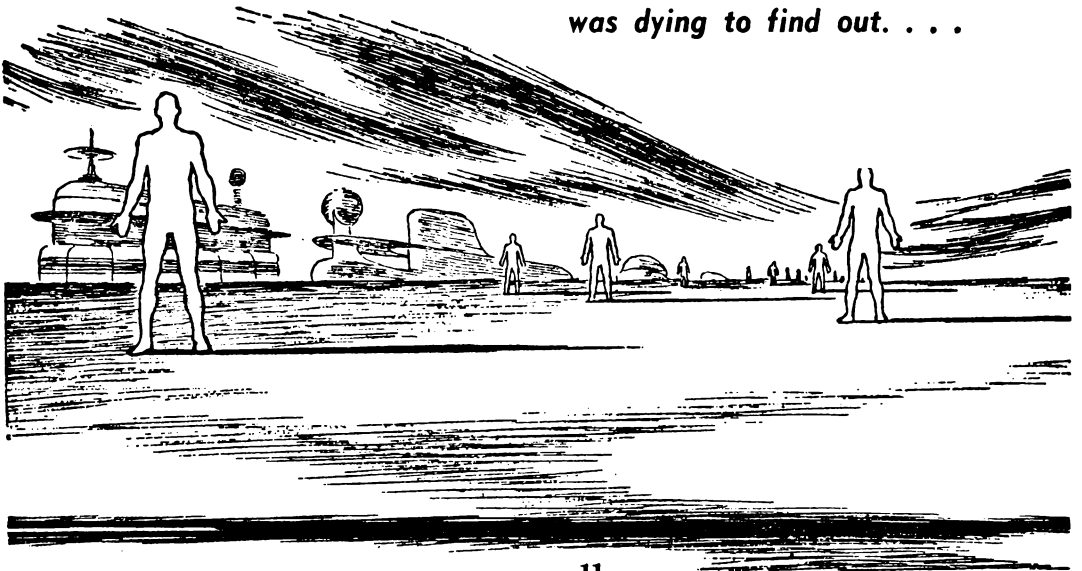
The Old Man

THAT night, a little after ten, Henry Joad went out for a walk. Fall's brisk wind buffeted his head. It pulled at his feet and the dry leaves fingered his shoes. It was a brave man, he thought, who would walk in such a wind, wearing a toupee without a hat.

The light from the front porch of his country house fled back into the dark. Henry stood for a long time there in the moonlight. The ground slanted down into the darkness of a gully. He could hear water sighing over stones as though running from the ice of winter. Denuded trees and Henry's stooped figure made similar silhouettes against the autumn sky above the hill.

The walk had brought color to his face, driving away the

*How long did women live? Old Joad
was dying to find out. . . .*



He wanted his young wife to have the best of

former waxy look of complete fatigue. But the fear; he hadn't left that behind.

Fear always came to him this time of year. Through winter he forgot it completely. And then the apprehension began with Spring. By late summer he could hear the death rattle of October.

He kept on standing there as though afraid to move, aware of the shallowness of his breath and the loneliness of the night among the skeletal trees, feeling the dryness of his bones.

Jeanette. Suddenly he needed his wife. He thought of her warm body, soft and waiting in the Snug-L cover. She had everything he needed now, health, youth, energy. He had never felt such a violent need for her before.

He imagined Jeanette's breasts pressed against his cheek. He remembered the living smell of her skin.

He ran. He forgot his heart which had acted up again rather badly last week. He ran, slipping and sliding. He blundered into a tree. He ran faster.

He was gasping and the cold bit viciously at his lungs as he reached the rock wall of the patio. He went through and leaned against the icy rock to catch his breath.

Joy, anticipation was a warmth in him then as he saw the soft candle light in Jeanette's bedroom, shining its gentle fingers to him through the French windows.

That was the candle she always burned when she wanted him.

She wanted him tonight. Oh God, Jeanette, wanting him. It had been a long time since she had burned the candle in the window.

He was walking almost stealthily, carefully, as though afraid the candle light would go out. The empty swimming pool blinked, and dry leaves swirled at the bottom of it.

He slipped along the wall until he was almost to the window. And then he heard Jeanette's whispering laughter.

And then a man's voice said: "But why did you pick me?"

"Oh, don't be silly, Larry. Don't pretend—"

"I mean it. Why me? I never really thought—"

"You know you're young and handsome and sure for a quick advancement, and anyway, Joady recommended you. I've learned to take old Joady Bear's advice. He said that when the time came, you would be my best bet."

Henry heard the long pause, and then a long sigh.

"—and you are, Larry. Oh, you are!"
The candle went out.

HENRY could hear the dry leaves swirling round and round in the concrete grave of the empty pool, the feeble stirrings and beatings of the dead refuse of eager spring and dead summer.

Boneless and nerveless, Henry sank against the side of the house. Then he moved, carefully at first so as not to make any noise, sliding along the wall, shivering and feeling the cold blowing empty spaces through him, and then he ran around the house and in through the front door, stumbling blindly through the darkness and a numbing cloud of sickness.

He felt without body as he lay down on his bed. He seemed only a mass of cloudy feeling.

He lay there shivering like something raw and bleeding. He wanted to cry. He wanted to scream. But they would hear him and they would know. He had some dignity left, somewhere surely, inside of him. Some self-respect.

He lay there a long time trying to think about it, clarify it, calm himself, be realistic. But he could only feel about it.

His pride came fierce and hard, stiffening his limbs. Then the wave of fear and loneliness, the sudden awareness that he was alone and old. Put aside at last. Finally replaced.

It was true, he had recommended Larry Johnson.

It was true, a man got old and had to

everything . . . including a good new husband

be replaced by a younger and more vigorous mate.

True, all true. But until tonight somehow it had been something that would never happen to him, something he never dared to think about much. Something he had pushed down, rationalized, tried to ignore. Like death.

When he got up and shuffled into the bathroom to get a sedative, he seemed boneless, his body shambling like an old man's. *Like an old man's*, he thought. Oh, he had thought about it plenty of times before. Sometimes he had even got-



ten very mad thinking about himself having to get old and finally die, and be replaced by a young man, and his wife and the other women all staying young and beautiful and full of eager life. Several times he had wanted to protest against what had seemed a rank injustice. But each time there was this fear, a visit to the Psychotherapist soothed things and made him calm again.

Grateful for his young beautiful wife. Proud of her. Dependant on her. She had made him feel younger, and through her he had staved off the inevitable image of old age and death. A man will put up with injustice, the most terrible kind of injustice, if he's afraid to change it, afraid that things could be even worse. Tradition was a hard thing to question.

But now, facing it, against the wall, looking the bitter end directly in its grinning face, he was shaken. Frightened by his own sudden, unleashed hatred for the way things were.

He couldn't sleep.

He got up and stood near the window. God, where was he now? Where could he live now? The fear flooded in all around, covering him with sweat. He was afraid of his own inability, his uselessness, loneliness. Afraid of himself, of Jeanette, of her opinion of him. And Larry—his best friend, one of the younger executives at the office—afraid of Larry too because of his young handsomeness.

Jeanette and Larry in there in the dark, whispering together—

He sank down onto the floor by the window. In memory he touched the slender casement of her breast. The skin with its warmth and softness, his hands gliding over the curvature of her hips, gripping the narrow waist, feeling her intensely wanting breath against his hands.

He began to sob, holding his hand over his lips, choking on his own defeat.

A YOUNG smiling man with blond hair, moving lithely, eagerly, danced across the room. It wasn't Larry. It was a ghost. It was Henry Joad, a long, long time ago. Sure, he remembered. He'd remembered many times when he had been young. But it was getting harder to remember because it was so long ago.

Henry lay there and tried to think about it, tried to get things clear, calm himself with the kind of resignation that would enable him to stand the shock of replacement.

Henry was now 125 years old, going on 126. The retirement age, meaning he had maybe another five years to go—if he were lucky. Retirement wasn't a lengthy loneliness any more as he understood it had once been centuries before. You could work now almost right up to the door of the crematorium. You were, in fact, expected to do so.

The women expected it.

With his bad ticker, Henry didn't feel lucky.

He had married at twenty.

He rubbed his eyes as though he were sleepy. He'd been married to Jeanette 105 years! Foggily, his brain probed through layers of dust, cobwebs, old walls and dead gardens. And vaguely, almost like a faceless shadow, he could dimly remember the old man he had replaced in Jeanette's life. The shadow had never been very real, but it was real now. Horribly real.

Longevity. Since the nineteenth century, life expectancy had steadily increased. And from the start, women's life expectancy had been greater than men's.

A long time back, Henry had been very curious about why women should live so much longer than men, so much longer that a man could grow old and die in the service of a woman, and be replaced by a younger man, and the woman still looking and acting as young as ever.

He had looked into it, filled with a timid but persistent protest.

Back sometime, he couldn't remember what year, but sometime in the twentieth century a woman's life expectancy was seven years greater, on the average, than a man's. The discrepancy had increased with alarming steadiness after that. It had been a cause for much alarm, particularly on the part of men. They had studied it, tried to figure out the reason for it.

Heart trouble. High blood pressure. It increased among men, declined among women. Extreme forms of damaging psychosis increased for men, dwindled among women.

It had all boiled down to what seemed to have been a simple evolutionary fact. Women were just more rugged, more enduring, tougher than men.

But why?

And then the third World War. Records, statistics destroyed. A lot of men destroyed too. And after that, three women for every man.

Matriarchy. The women had taken over. And a lot of those women hated men and hated science. Some of them formed anti-male cults. Who needs men?

They took over everything, Joad

thought, lying there with his face pressed against the floor. Everything. They got everything. The women inherited all the money, all the property and power.

And that last war—maybe that had done something incalculably bad and final to men, to their souls as well as their hearts.

LONELINESS, that was the hardest thing to take now, now at the end of the road. If only he had his kids here, he thought vaguely, and the unorthodoxy of his thought frightened him even more.

That was the way things were. The women had taken over. The kids too. Practically everything. He remembered being raised in a Child Care Clinic somewhere out in Vermont. Not very well, but he remembered it now. Raised by women, processed, indoctrinated in all the ways to be a good husband and provider and lover. Taught how to take care of women, and make them even happier than they already seemed to be.

And when he was eager and young and virile being sent out so the women could look him over. And he remembered now the old man he had replaced in Jeanette's scheme of things 105 years ago. An old man bowing out and dying slowly away in the corner, in the shadows. But then, Henry had been too young and eager and well-conditioned to care.

But he cared now. Now that it seemed somehow too late even to care, he cared.

When a man grew old, way back in a different time, he had had his children. His flesh and blood, going on. A kind of immortality of the species and the spirit that made one's own death easier.

But he didn't even have that now. His own kids had been born somewhere and raised in a Processing School somewhere. He had never seen them, and Jeanette had never mentioned them.

That was the women's world.

His children taken away. Youth, love taken away. His life taken away. It had been that way a long time, but suddenly now he hated it with a frightening intensity. He hated *them*. He hated the

way things were. He hated his own impotence and the need for resignation.

He had never dared really think about it much before, and when he had questioned it, or even tried to protest, the Psychemothers had placated him, made him realize that this was the way things were. Made him realize the uselessness of fighting against the inevitable. Made him again grateful for what he had.

But he had nothing left now. Maybe a few more years, if he were lucky. He wanted to rise up, scream out, fight back at whatever it was.

And then the fatigue flowed over him. And the October moonlight lay white and cold over Henry Joad's face. He went to sleep thinking, I woke up too late.

II

Smile and Look Alive

HE LAY looking out the window into early dawn. He watched the dead leaves dancing unashamedly away on the drift of the season. They knew when it was time to go. They didn't care. He cared. That was his misfortune. He cared too much now.

He groped, found his dentures, sucked them against his gums. The molars snapped together. He felt a little better, a bit more substantial. He had had very bad dreams last night. They had left some kind of raw strangeness in him that was frightening. Last night had ripped something, torn him out of place. Something was spilling loose inside him. He was afraid of it.

There was real danger in questioning the way things were. You learned that when you were a kid in the Processing Schools. That was why you didn't remember much about the past, even when you tried to remember. There was pain connected with it. Moments of rebellion, then the pain of punishment from the matriarchy. Pretty soon you just didn't think anything at all but what you were supposed to think. Conditioned reflex that ended up being hardly any reflex at all.

But now he was replaced. Now he had very little to lose, nothing really except a few dusty years of humiliating dependency on Jeanette and the handsome young Larry.

The hell with them. The hell with them all.

He flinched at his own rebellion. He wanted to laugh at himself. By his own logic it was too late. If he had nothing to lose, by the same token he had nothing to gain.

He had to be realistic about it. This was the way things were. He had known how they were and how they were going to be. Now he had to live with them—a few more meaningless years.

Through the window he could see the bubble of Larry's heliocar just on the other side of the wall. He tried to ignore the closed door of his wife's bedroom as he shuffled toward the bath.

Careful, careful, Henry. Love can turn into hate. When something like this happened then the real test of love began. That was what they had taught him in the Processing Schools. He had been prepared psychologically for this. He had to see it clear. A man could go on thinking something was love, and not know he had a knife in his hand waiting to caress love's throat.

He stopped, listened. His heart was ticking away inside him with a precarious tenseness. His stomach hurt too. He had forgotten to take his vagaspill last night. He had forgotten a lot of things last night. And remembered a lot of things too. Things he had been conditioned to ignore, suppress.

He hurried. Not against time or long-established ritual. Being late at the office wasn't so important anymore. Jeanette had appointments all day, of course, starting at nine a.m. But Henry hurried against a suddenly sharp awareness of internal machinery wearing down.

Funny how a man pushed down some distasteful certainty out of sight and mind, just because all his life he had been taught, conditioned, processed to do it, and then all at once it hit him squarely in the face, in the heart, in the stomach.

In the heart first of all.

There was something in a man, evidently, that never burned out, no matter what they did to him.

HE LOOKED at the sunken tub in the bathroom, then he dropped into it, clung to its side, then paddled in the therapeutic bubble-bath that fizzed and popped about him. He gazed up into the mirrored ceiling to see himself bobbing his too-prominent, white-skinned belly like a squeezed-up melon above the surface. The water contained a so-called Rejuvo-Salts. Supposed to 'pep the old man up after ninety', but nothing could make any difference now.

He had been replaced.

The mirrors reaffirmed the shock of last night. There were reflections of the reflections shining atrociously from his wet skin. There was even a particularly ludicrous angle of him reflected in the ceiling now. A kind of buffoon treatment of Henry Joad standing on his bald pate.

Mirrors lining the walls, the ceilings, the floors. Jeanette's idea of a work of art. Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest one of all?

He was conscious only of the sagging grayness now. The entire fleshly castle sagging under the bombardment of time's invisible particles. He climbed out of the tub and postured. He grimaced. He examined various angles of himself in a little private orgy of self-imposed humiliation. A kind of ironic defiance of the inevitable.

And then he leaned forward to the mirror. He touched his face. He watched the brown loose skin stretching without tension and moving back slowly to its place.

"Joady honey!"

Jeanette.

"Hey, Joady. Surprise, huh?"

Larry.

Frantically, Henry grabbed, slapped the toupee on his head. He was adjusting the hair with one hand and draping a towel around his middle with the other, when Jeanette's and then Larry's reflec-

tions were abruptly there, all over, everywhere, beside his own.

EASY. Easy does it. This is the way things are.

He spread beard-eradicator over his jaws. Without turning, he said, "Good morning, Snuggle-Bunny. And how are you, Larry? How's the young exec?"

"Great," Larry said. "I feel great this morning!"

"I'll bet you're surprised, aren't you, Joady Bear," Jeanette said. "Finding Larry all moved in."

"Well, I figured it was about time for it," Henry said. "I'm glad to see it's you, Larry. I was pulling for you."

"Guess I should have told you," Jeanette said. "But after you went out for the walk, I thought of Larry. I—I knew then I needed him." She finished softly, "I knew I needed him last night for sure."

Larry's voice was loud with enthusiasm. "I guess I'll get that advancement any day now."

"Sure you will," Henry said. "In another ten years you'll be Junior Exec. I've been plugging for you in there."

He could see Jeanette leaning against Larry, her hands caressing him as she smiled in the mirrored walls.

Henry's hand was shaking a little as Jeanette's and Larry's firm naked young figures danced with splendid vitality beside his own reflections, around the four walls and over the ceiling, and then into the sunken tub.

He should be grateful. After all, Larry was the best bet for Jeanette. She had been a devoted and loving wife to Henry all these years. He should be grateful. She had been the challenge, the symbol, the pusher that had kept him going, been his incentive.

Smile, old Joady boy.

Smile and look alive.

JEANETTE went to prepare breakfast for the three of them. Larry was doing push-ups on the bathroom floor. His lean tanned body moved fluidly. He was breathing easily.

"She's a wonderful woman, Joady."
"You like her."

"She's wonderful. I wanted her to pick me out, but I never really thought she would!" He jumped to his feet and put his arm over Henry's shoulder. It was sore from running into that tree last night. "Thanks for putting that plug in for me, Joady. She respects you. If it hadn't been for you—"

"Sure," Henry cut in quickly. "Don't mention it any more. Forget it. You're

Jeanette in the style you've accustomed her to!"

"It'll take time. Don't expect too much at first. You've got a long, long time, Larry."

Henry's toupee was on straight as he hurried to get the nylex work suit out of the closet. It covered a lot. It took ten years from his age. But ten years wasn't much, not any more.

"See you!" Larry yelled out of the shower strap.

~~~~~It Must Be a Trend~~~~~

Reuben, Reuben, I've been thinking what a strange world this would be, If all the women were transported far beyond the Northern Sea.

THE answer, of course, is that the world would be unpleasant, if not intolerable. We need women. But do the women really need us? For the time being, yes. Or rather, Nature needs both men and women for its own strictly functional purpose.

When I was a Combat Correspondent during World War II, I saw young men murdered by the thousands, and only luck prevented me from being one of them. From Nature's viewpoint, perhaps, the fate of these men showed that they were merely expendable, transitory parts of an experiment. But it seems that women are here to stay.

Women have watched and waited while men fought duels, died by the untold millions in wars, tore themselves to pieces in strenuous sports, poisoned and killed themselves in laboratory experiments—reaping an ever-mounting toll of ulcers, failing hearts, rotting livers, caved-in kidneys, punctured lungs, life-shortening neuroses, ad infinitum.

Man's desire for self-destruction has reached its ultimate in the various forms of atomic, hydrogen, and cobalt bombs. But the final blowup won't come until we've figured a way to keep a good percentage of our women-folk safe during total warfare.

It's clear—*isn't it?*—that women have nothing to do with all this. They merely watch and wait. Healthier. Living longer. Increasing in numbers. It must be a trend. . . .

—Bryce Walton

in. I've always tried to get the best for Snuggle-Bunny."

"Snuggle-Bunny!" Larry laughed. "That's a good one. I'll have to go some to equal that one."

"I checked your processing chart, Larry. And then I've known you for years. I knew how healthy you were, and how dependable. I knew how much you loved Jeanette. I knew what a live-wire you are around the office."

"God, I'm lucky, Joady! I only hope I can keep things going halfway as good as you have. I hope I can provide for

"Hurry, or you'll be late for breakfast," Henry said.

And as Henry walked toward the kitchen, he remembered part of the dream he had had last night. In this dream he had hit Jeanette over the head with a rock and kicked her out of a cave. In the dream, however, the woman had hardly resembled Jeanette. She had been sagging and hairy in the dream. And giving off a markedly unpleasant odor from having been chewing on animal hides. Ugly worn teeth too, worn down to little yellow nubbins. It had been

some other year. Some other time. He couldn't even imagine what year because there weren't any calendars hanging on the cave walls. Just dried skins all curled up and stiff and clattering in a flapping wind.

But it had been a man's little world, hidden away somewhere in a cave a million years ago.

And the woman had crawled and whined on her knees to him like a dog.

He had struck her violently with a rock and flung her from the cave. And she had rolled yelling and kicking into an anonymity for which Henry had been grateful.

He tried to laugh. That had been a million years ago when might made right. That was a dead dead time to remember.

He was afraid of the deeper part of him that had dreamed such a thing.

He would have to discuss that dream with his Psychemother during his regular appointment between one and two p.m.

This is the way things are, Joady Bear. This is the way things have to be.

Men just got older and older. They moved on and gave their place to an eager, younger, more capable male.

That's the way it is, old Joady Bear. Sit as comfortable as you can on the shelf. Make the best of what little is left of the season.

Killing wouldn't change anything. Death wouldn't bring youth back to Henry Joad. Hate brought nothing back. Nothing could bring any of it back.

He had to see his Psychemother. She would make things easier.

JEANETTE was singing little songs. She seemed a new woman this morning. Younger and more alive than ever. In the kitchen, her little flowered apron on over her sunshorts, her tanned legs and bare shoulders and breasts brown and firm as she served Joady his egg-nog and his vitamin pills for breakfast, and prepared Larry his ham and eggs.

Sometimes Jeanette's thigh brushed against Henry as he tried to down the insipid foam of the egg-nog. He could

feel her warmth calling to him in his loneliness and hunger.

"Joady, honey! You're just going to be late as rain if you don't hurry!"

Hate won't bring love back.

Death won't bring youth back and the ardent nights.

"I'll be officially retired anyway," he mumbled, "in another year, maybe less. So it doesn't matter much."

"And then you can just loaf around here, Joady. And Larry and I can take care of you."

"I'm coasting now," Henry said, staring into his glass. "On many years of exemplary service. A pillar of *International Beauty Aids Unlimited*."

All the time conscious of her tight young-looking body with the firm breasts, small like a girl's, dancing everywhere through the looking glass walls of his mind. Now he kept thinking of that old man he had replaced 105 years ago. Had he felt the way Henry was feeling now? Maybe worse. But he had shambled back into the shadows like an old dog and died there without even a whimper that Henry could remember.

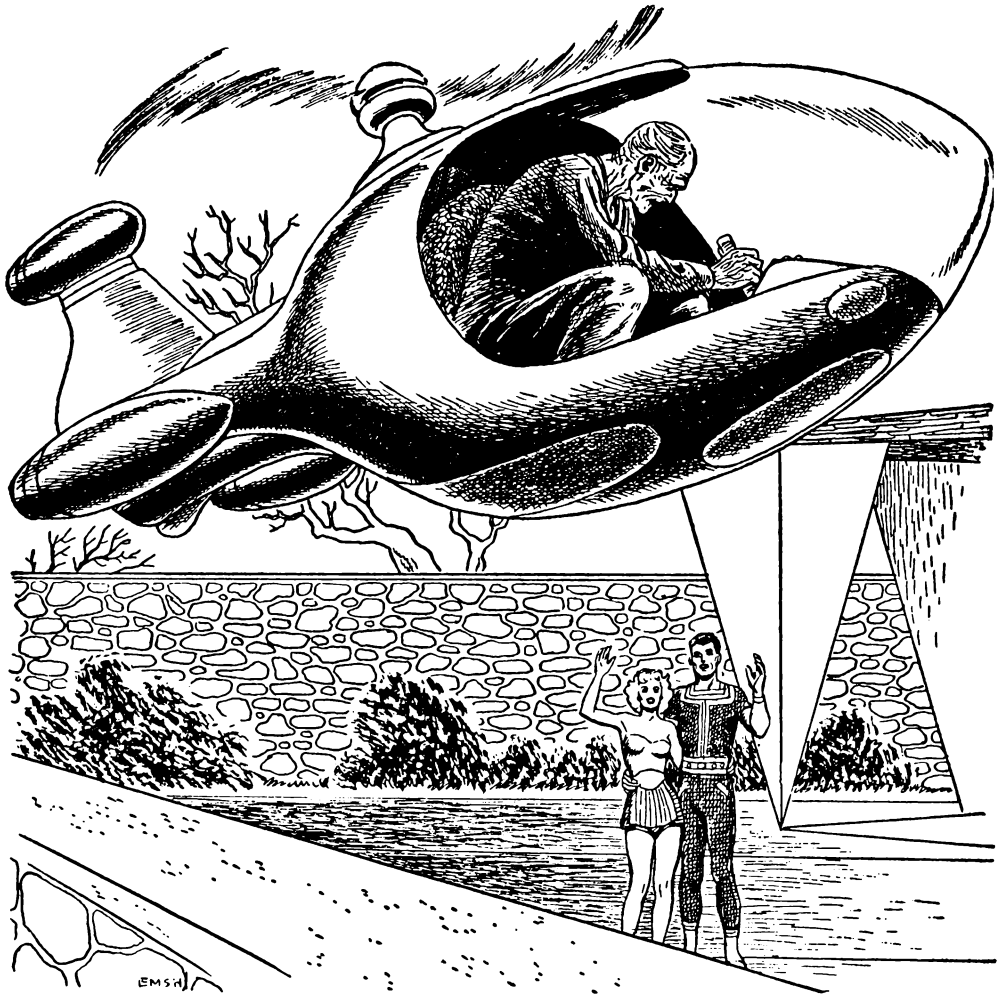
Hell, that was the thing that was wrong about it! Taking it that way. Crawling away without even a whine into the corner, lying down and dying like a dog without even a whimper of defiance!

"But Joady Bear! I've got simply hundreds of appointments today! And the one with the *Bright-Eyes Clinic* is at nine-thirty! You get a move on now!"

Slow old Joady Bear. Her images joined in the mirrored walls of the kitchen, joining and re-joining in a giggling ballet. And the little bit she was wearing made her seem more desirable now to Henry than she had ever seemed to have been before. Vital, alive. The girl I married.

Impulsively, he reached over, gripped her wrist, hard. "Bunny—"

She bent down and kissed him on the forehead. He felt the full shine of her hair breathing youth and life over his face. He heard Larry's footsteps on the kitchen floor. Jeanette started to move



When he flew away in his heliocar, Jeanette and Larry waved to him from the walled patio

toward Larry. Henry felt the raw trembling resentment exploding in his arm as he tightened his grip. His fingers dug in hard. Jeanette pulled away slowly, still smiling, a movement somehow a mixture of impatience disguised with a bright smile.

Uneasiness converted into a sophisticated giggle.

He jerked his hand back and stood up. He tried not to look at them as he went out and down the hall. He had to find the self-respect to meet this head on! When he flew away across the fall landscape in his heliocar, Jeanette and

Larry, their arms around one another, waved goodbye to him from the walled patio.

But where, how, could he find the self-respect, the strength? Did he really want to be calm, resigned to it? Was this growing desire to destroy something, this feeling of feverish hatred really Henry Joad? This crazy flame flaring up in him now when it was too late?

This light flickering up in a crumbling lamp.

For the first time in his life he felt a lack of confidence in his Psychemother.

III

It's Fun to Be Young

AL JENKINS, the Office Manager, asked it again around noon. "What's the matter, Joady boy?"

"Nothing."

"Ulcer acting up again?"

"My ulcer was cured. I told you that!"

"Why the belly pills then?"

"That's something else. Kidneys."

"How's the ticker?"

"It's still ticking, or obviously I'd have been cremated."

"Hey, Joady boy, you are upset today. Come on, fess up, fess up, boy! What's the trouble?"

Henry turned toward the window. He hadn't even looked at the ad-charts, they didn't seem important now that he would soon retire, or finish retiring.

"What's happened to the old gusto, Joady?"

Henry grinned automatically. A facility acquired after so many years in the business winning people and influencing the right friends. "Jeanette just retired me."

For one brief naked moment, fear looked out of Al's eyes.

"Well, Joady. Who's the lucky fellow? Larry?"

"Sure, I recommended him."

"Great guy. Coming up fast. Larry'll be Junior Exec of *Face Creams and Hormones* in another ten years."

"I know. Larry'll be a good replacement. But—Al—I don't know, it hit me pretty hard. Upset me a little."

Al cut in. "Don't let it bother you, boy." He slapped Henry on the back.

"I can't help it. Retirement from home. Retirement from work. Retirement from life. For some reason, I just thought I'd be retired from work first. I'd thought of having all that time at home with Jeanette."

"So that's it!" Al laughed. "You're too old to be bothered with that kind of thought. Sure, it's bound to upset you a little. But you'll get used to it fast

enough. You'll be retired soon. You'll have plenty of time for lots of other kinds of fun. You'll get a big kick out of just watching Jeanette and Larry make a go of it!"

"But it's being left alone, Al."

"Take up hobbies, stuff like that."

"I mean people. I even had this crazy thought last night about wanting to have kids around. My kids, like it was supposed to have been in the old days."

"Huh?" Al's mouth dropped open.

"Yeah, that's what I thought, Al. About my kids. Maybe that would help. A man could live on, through them—"

Al looked around quickly, and lowered his voice. "Joady—listen now. That's dangerous talk. You've sounded off like that a few times before, and I don't want to listen to it."

"But good Lord, they ought to leave us *something!*"

Al forced a laugh. He was good at that, Henry thought. Turning anything into a gag. "Better cut the reb talk, Joady. When we controlled the kids we made soldiers and atomic physicists out of them and damn near blew up the world! Let's face it, Joady. Like I said before, we didn't do so good when we ran things. We're lucky to be around at all after what happened. Don't forget that after the big war, a lot of those women decided they get along without us."

Al looked anxiously at the door as though he wanted to get back to his own office in a hurry. "You'd better go see your Psychemother," he said.

SURE, Henry thought, I'd better shut up, or I'll be retired sooner than I'm supposed to be, and that'll be another year of nothing to do. His job was all he had left. He shrugged. Al wanted to feel young. He didn't want to think about anything that would make him feel his age. That was the trouble with all of them, Henry thought. Al was ten years younger than Henry. But he was trying to hold on to youth. He worked hard at it too. It made him

look twenty years older than he really was. He kept his skin tightened up with lotions so that it resembled cheap bronzed armor threatening to flake away like plaster from a cast.

"You have to think the right thoughts, Joady boy! Take the old positive attitude!"

"Sure," Henry said.

He looked out of the window over the neat square metal blocks of Central City, the heart of distribution for Midwest.

How would it have been, he thought, to have seen kids out there, all ages, growing up, laughing, playing, giving life a sense of continuity and meaning? How would it have been to have seen them and known some of them were yours and gotten a feeling of deathlessness from knowing that. It would have been better, he thought. A lot better.

But the males only came out when they were ready to replace somebody. And the girls? He remembered that there had been no girls at all at his school. They were educated someplace else. The curricula would, of course, be vastly different.

Henry wanted to tell Al to get the hell out. But Al was Manager, and Henry was too used to being nice. Al was very important socio-businessly. Henry wasn't yet retired. There was another thing to consider too. If he was retired ahead of schedule, he would have that much more time to brood about what he considered an injustice.

Without turning, Henry asked. "Al, how old is your wife?"

"Old enough," Al said. He laughed. Henry smiled dutifully. Suddenly Al stopped laughing. "How old? How should I know? You know that's a delicate question with the gals? Why?"

"Just curious."

The wall behind Al Jenkins seemed to dissolve like a splintered mirror.

"You're too damn curious sometimes, Joady!"

Sure, they lived a lot longer than we do, Henry was thinking carefully. Year after year stretching the margin

wider and wider. That was the way nature had decided to work things out.

But how much longer, he thought? What's the margin now?

"Joady, I've never heard anybody else bring up subjects like this! You're getting morbid! I don't want to talk about it! I don't want to think about it any more!"

"I know," Henry said. "No one does."

"So you've been replaced!" Al sounded tired. He had never sounded tired to Henry before either. "This is the way things are, that's all!"

Henry's stomach jumped. He felt the raw explosive force again, threatening to burst free. That damned tone of resignation. Did it *have* to be the way it was? Why?

Or more important, he thought suddenly, *how was it?* Was it really the way it *seemed*?

"Well, I just got a helluva shock last night, Al. I've got a bad headache. It doesn't seem right, just bowing out like this. Sure, you can be told you've got to die tomorrow at noon, but you don't want to die then. You don't want to believe it. You try to get out of doing it, try to squeeze out. Maybe you even try to prove it's a lie!"

"You'd better run over to see your Psychemother, boy! Fast!"

Henry turned away from the window and forced a thin laugh. "What a funny trickster nature turned out to be, Al. Maybe one of these days the little ladies won't need us at all."

Al laughed too. It seemed high and almost shrill. "That's funny all right. I'd like to see the day when my little sugar bun won't need a guy around."

Henry blinked. The splintered mirror went away. He didn't say anything else about that. He wanted to change the subject. Al was beginning to sweat.

Al expanded his chest, and flexed his pects. "Anyway, snap out of it, you old vet. Think and grow young."

"Sure," Henry said. He sat down and squeezed his eyes shut hard. "I'll watch the old attitude, Al. I really will."

Al slapped Henry's shoulder. "Got to get the old gusto, Joady. When you retire from business there's all those years to just have fun in!"

Al left Henry's office. He seemed in a hurry. He seemed anxious to get out.

None of them want to think about it, Henry thought. That's the trouble. I didn't. Al doesn't. No one wants to think about it. And pretty soon you're too old and tired to care.

But maybe he wasn't too old. Or too tired. Anyway, Henry cared. He had always cared. Sometimes he had popped off, timidly of course, and in a minor key. But then he had been younger, grateful, glad to be alive and young, glad to have a beautiful vital wife who loved him and seemed to be staying young and beautiful just to make him happier.

That's one thing you could say for them. The women. The Matriarchs. They were damn nice about it.

On the surface.

But what was underneath the lovely cosmetic surface? That was one thing Henry Joad had never dared ask himself or any one else? Not consciously.

But what did he have to lose now except his lumbago, a worn-out heart, and a few more years of meaningless loneliness?

What *was* under the glittering surface?

AT TWELVE-THIRTY, Jeanette called. She was always good about that. Calling, relieving the monotony of a man's office day.

"Joady, honey. I'll be late getting home tonight. Behind on appointments again. I'll be over at the *Reducto Clinic* pretty late. I've already told Larry you two can play some gin rummy or something 'til Snuggle-Bunny gets home."

"Well, don't forget the Dthingo party at Jenkins' house tonight."

"I've not forgotten. Only thing is, Larry says he may have to go back to the office after dinner. You know how he's bucking for Junior Exec?"

Sure, Henry thought, but was that just a game too? A little game you let the boys play to keep them happily feeling that it's worth the time and trouble? Keep the boys alert and active while they're young so you'll have someone to come home to you at night?

"I know," Henry said. "Larry's a real up-and-comer. Well then, you and I'll go on over. And later, Larry can—"

"No," she cut in quickly. "Honey, you know how it is. Larry's just moved in. You remember how it was when you first moved in?" She giggled. "You remember how ardent you were, Joady Bear. I think I ought to be here, waiting for Larry when he comes in tonight."

He nodded several times. "Sure, I remember," he whispered. "Where are you now?"

"At the *Bust Works*. Then over to the *Reducto Gym*. My clinic advisor said I was getting a little too fatty around the you-know-whereie!"

"I hadn't noticed."

"But Larry did. Last night. Well, you might not notice that—*now*."

"No, I guess not."

"Honey, don't you brood now. I'll take care of you. Larry and I'll never stop thinking about you."

"Thanks, Snuggle-Bunny."

"We're going to take care of you every minute from now on."

He hung up fast on what he had almost blurted into the phone.

He sat there in a remarkable rigidity for some time after that. Like a rock precariously balanced on the side of a hill.

LATER when he dictated a letter to the *Jiffy-Latex Women's Body Conforming Company*, and another to the *Forever Slim Corporation*, he kept staring at the long firm legs of the secretary. He felt the stirrings of desire, but the pushing of his frightening curiosity was stronger.

He noticed a mischievously coy quality in her eyes. She thought he was making a pass. He dropped his eyes,

dictated more letters, hardly thinking about the *Ladies' Rejuvo-Cream Corporation*, the *Stay-Sexy Company*, *Smiles Unlimited*, and a number of others.

The secretary paused in an enticing pose at the door, turning the ritual into an unvoiced bit of irony. The word had already gotten around that he had been retired at home. Publically emasculated. A kind of old ghost.

"Will that be all, Mr. Joad?"

"How long have you worked here, Miss Deuse?"

"About forty-eight years, Mr. Joad. May I please ask why?"

"You came here from the *Dalsan Youth Eternal Cream Company*, didn't you?"

She nodded.

"How long did you work there?"

"About sixty years."

When she came from the *Dalsan Company* she had been an employee there with a long and distinguished service record.

The words came out all at once as though they had been hung up on the roof of his mouth. "Miss Deuse, how old are you?"

Her expression didn't seem to change. But somehow there was a subtle if intangible difference. Her lips stretched thinner over strong white teeth.

"That, Mr. Joad, is a woman's secret."

"Of course," Henry said. "It always has been."

He sat there a while longer looking at the door she had shut in his face. His tired enzymes gurgled. His heart seemed a mild thunder. She hadn't told him. Somehow, Henry was glad.

He was beginning to be really afraid of finding something out.

He kept thinking of that dream last night. Something exploding.

Sure, that's the way things were. And if they weren't really that way at all, it was too late now, Henry thought, for me to care.

Get out, get out old Joady Bear. It's your time. You've been retired. Replaced. Get on the shelf. Get on the

rocking chair. Get in the old hammock and they'll take care of you.

ON THE WAY from the heliostat landing to Doctor Marian's office, Henry found himself looking with a new, almost virginal intensity at the women.

Beauty. Beauty and fresh vital youthfulness and glowing aliveness shining everywhere and showering the afternoon.

He felt like a man waking up in the middle of a jewelry shop. He had accepted it all, blindly grateful for it, never questioning it. Like a pretty dream you don't want to question for fear it will run away.

Suddenly now it was all flashing on like a bright neon bleeding suddenly out of darkness. All this blinding intense beauty glittering like little nodes of sunlight in the autumnal haze.

Oh he'd seen it all before. But through a different pair of glasses. Last night he'd been given another pair of glasses and he'd seen death through them. And death cast a different light over all the other things. An autumnal haze. How beautiful and bright the sun looks when you'll never see it again.

He had always noted the fact that there were very few men compared with the number of women on the streets. But he hadn't dared think about what it really meant. He had been unconsciously aware of the inconsistency in the men's ages and appearance too. Young, middle-aged, the very old. All spotted here and there though now, like appendages, he thought for the first time, like appendages among the brightly glowing women. Like bubbling rivers of light flowing happily with some male refuse floating in it.

If the imminence of death brightens the sun, it also makes even more bitter the awful tragedy of death, that while one lives and hopes, he lives only to die, to grow creaky and old and spent and hurt and rotten.

You can hate the sun then. It will come up again and again, but not for you.

And the absence of old women. He had known that; all his life he had seen this absence of older women.

Then Henry Joad suddenly stopped walking.

He moved a little, swinging his head around like something on a string. There was a cold sensation trickling into his stomach, and a loud pounding in his head. He stared into the display window of the department store. His eyes dimmed as though reluctant to look. Everything he saw now was through these new hazed glasses of rejection and decay. He didn't want to look. But he had to look.

The window, devoted to women's merchandise. The newer styles, some partly clothed dummies, one section displaying a vast sea of beauty-aids. Surprisingly life-like heads suspended in an odd pattern in a surrealist design. And beside each head, rotating around it, numerous small jars, tubes, bottles, gadgets, all circling into view just as little spotlights of shifting color splashed. Creams, jellies, powders, lotions, astringents, syringes, sponges, gloves, pills, inhalers, masks, nets, varicolored fingernails, perfumes, shoes, jewels, eyelashes, fleshine lip-sheaths, fleshine breasts, various-sized earlobes. A lot of items Henry had never seen before.

A huge sign blinked off and on the length of the window, like trapped lightning beating and striking and sometimes merely flickering over tattered spangles:

IT'S FUN TO BE YOUNG

Henry closed his eyes a moment.

It was fun. He remembered. It was a helluva lot of fun to be young.

He ran. He ran straight and fast toward his Psychemother's office without looking back.

IV

Psychemother

MOTHER was waiting. Ever since Henry had gotten out of the Schools in which the Matri-

archs had taught him to be a gentleman, Mother had been waiting for him here in the quiet sanctum with the vines trailing the walls and the green carpet gentle as grass.

Once a week for a hundred and five years, Mother had been waiting for Henry.

"Lie down on the couch, Henry. Just relax now and let the tension go."

And forget too, huh, Mother? Just forget, and let time sooth the troubled spirit.

Hello, Mother. When he woke up and the morning seemed gray, and there was another day at the office, colorless and futile, Mother waited to assure him that things were better than they seemed.

When he felt that he was going to fly into a million pieces of frustration and confusion, Mother waited to stick him back together again.

When he had felt age creeping into his bones, Mother waited to make him glad for what he had, for what he had been.

If he was mad, Mother had made him glad.

If he was filled with hate, Mother turned it into love.

When he was ready to scream out against things because they didn't seem right, Mother made him grateful just to be alive at all.

If he went eagerly into his wife's bedroom at night and had to sneak out again, embarrassed, frightened by impotence, Mother explained how this had to happen sooner or later, that a man just had to get old and wear out. Mother made degeneration not only bearable, but gave it a kind of bitter-sweetness.

He was never too old to come back to Mother. In fact, the older he got the more he needed her soothing touch—or did he?

As Henry lay down on the couch and stretched out on his back, in that customary supine and malleable position, he thought, things would probably have been a lot different if it hadn't been for Mother.

But he had never felt this way before.

Nothing even remotely close to this feeling that the world was tumbling around him, that an emptiness was opening under him, that he was alone, squelched, helpless, useless, an old dancing creaky clown with laughter mocking in his ears. And this hatred, this suspicion and fear. Fear of her even. Even fear of his Psychemother!

He kept feeling as though some kind of alarm was about to go off in his chest.

He closed his eyes at the ceiling. He could still see Doctor Marian there the way she always was, her fleshy arms flabbing over the swollen mounds of her ballooning breasts. A big mound of warm flesh that seemed now never, never to have moved at all.

The questions. The answers. The vague stirrings. The fears.

“WELL, what’s happened now, Henry?”

“I’ve been replaced at home. Larry moved in last night!”

“You’re bound to be a little upset for a while, Henry. But that’s—”

He yelled suddenly. “—that’s just the way things are! I know! I know how things are! Even the things I know about—I hate them. But now I know there are plenty of things I don’t know about. And that’s worse. That’s a damn sight worse! I wanted to go in there and kill both of them! I dreamed about beating hell out Jeanette . . . only it was in a cave and she was just an ugly hairy female serving me like a slave, and whining when I hit her. She crawled and whined and licked my hand and begged like a dog. I liked that. I hate myself for it now, but still I like it too, thinking about it. I hate them all. *I hate you too, Mother!*”

“You don’t really, Henry. But then you know that too.”

Violently, he sat up. He couldn’t lie there that way any longer. He felt too vulnerable. He sat stiffly, sometimes looking fearfully at the Psychemother, sometimes staring at the ceiling, the floor, or the wall.

“You’re *their* doctor, the women’s doctor. Not mine,” he whispered.

“Henry! You’re over-reacting—”

“No,” he cut in with a yell. “You tell me. You know. You’re their doctor really. You tell me—*how long do women really live?*”

There was an almost imperceptible tightening of her soft mouth in the kind maternal mask of her face.

“You think less about them, Henry. And more about yourself. It’s your problem, and it’s very real. You’re old and you’ll die, and you’ve got to face up to reality.”

“Sure,” he said. “But what *is* reality? Really, I mean, what is it? I might have found out, but you and the rest of them never gave me a chance. First I was shuttled off to a damn processing school. Any time I wanted to figure things out, got curious, they worked on me. And then after that, I had to come in and see you every week, and you’ve kept everything held down, disguised, made me think one thing was something else. Even giving me a shock treatment now and then to shock any desire I might have had to find out how things really are!”

“Admit it,” he yelled louder. “Aren’t all of us men just a bunch of kids to you, Mother, to you and the rest of them? Just stooges, things to be used? I’m beginning to get some idea of how—”

She cut in quickly. “You’ll see things clearly soon. We’ll work it out.”

“You mean *you’ll* work it out! You’ll never give me a chance to do it. None of you will give me a chance. You never have, and now there isn’t much chance left—for me.”

“You’ve just got to face reality, Henry.”

“Why? Why should I have to grow old and be put aside and have to watch them—listen to them being together? Jeanette’s going to take care of me she says! She and Larry. All my life working and never thinking of anything but providing for Jeanette’s future security, and getting things all set up for Larry

to move in! But you tell me now. I've got to know! When did it really start? I was young once. I replaced someone else. I wasn't Jeanette's first. I'll bet I'm far from the last. Where, when did it start?"

"Henry! You know the answers. It started during the nineteenth century really, with general longevity and the Industrial Revolution. Maybe it started long before then even, when sheer survival stopped depending on brute strength, and depended instead on something deeper, more subtle, psychological factors. But this isn't your problem, Henry. Your problem is adjusting to what's happening—"

"The hell with adjusting to it. I've adjusted all my life. I'm sick of it!"

"Henry. If you really *loved* Jeanette, then you would be glad that she—"

"And does Jeanette really love me? What kind of a word is that any more? You've always made a big thing out of that word love, but what in hell does it mean to me—*now*? Used, thrown aside, blinded all my life by your damn machinations! Is pity and this putting me away on the shelf love? Is this Jeanette's *love* for me?"

"It's the only kind of love there is, Henry, for the way things have turned out."

"Sure," he whispered. He stood up stiffly. His knees ached. He slumped and pressed his hand over his eyes. "I don't mind so much, rocking away there on the shelf. It isn't that so much, though that's bad enough. It's—it's this feeling that something's been put over on me, and all men. Something horrible! I've got to find out something!"

"Henry, you'd better take the needle. Sleep for a while. You'll forget most of this. You'll feel so much better."

He could feel his skin crawling as he looked up. He saw the long hypodermic needle shining as the Psychemother leaned toward him.

He stumbled back toward the door, slowly, warily, watching the needle.

"Henry—"

"No thanks, Mother. Shove that hypo

into some other poor devil who *doesn't* care any more. I've had it. I don't want to forget. I want to remember. *I want to find out!*"

"Henry, stop being childish now. It's only a sedative!"

"Is that all it is?"

"What are you afraid of, Henry?"

He wanted to laugh at that one. "Why the needle, Mother? What's the matter with healthy curiosity? Why do you want to keep me from thinking about this thing?"

"I only want to relieve this tension."

"Sure. But why are all you tension-easers women? You tell me that? All head-shrinkers are women. All patients are men. Isn't that right? I've never heard of a woman getting her pretty head shrunk!"

"Henry, you lie back down there and take this sedative."

"Huh-uh, Mother. Not me. Not any more. Why should women need you? Happy, young, pretty all the time. They're taken care of. They get all the money, and we do all the work. They get the men they need when they're young and throw them away when they're old. The women take our youth, our strength, our seed, our earnings, our brains, everything and use them and when they're dried out, throw them away into the garbage dump! That's great—for them. The only thing women would need you for would be because of a guilty conscience. And I've decided something, Mother. None of you have any conscience!"

Mother was getting up. Mother was pressing a button on the intercom box on her desk. Mother didn't look very maternal all at once, Henry thought, as he ran for the door.

"Goodby, Mother!"

As he ran for the heliolot landing, he was aware of this shadow now. A shadow of fear over and behind him. He didn't know yet exactly why he was convinced that he had said too much, revealed too much to Mother. He didn't know what exactly he was so afraid of. But he knew it was there.

It stayed there. It followed him all the way back to his office. And somewhere it was waiting for him.

V

The Flame on the Heath

HENRY dismissed his secretary, watching her with suspicion, feeling now that she was really only a spy, a master pretending to some kind of sophisticated subservience. He gave orders that he didn't want to be disturbed, that he had very important work to do. But it wasn't company work. It was Henry Joad work. Something he had been deprived of working at all his life.

Two hours later scratchpads were covered with figures. He had called five insurance companies, three banks, a number of hospitals, doctors' offices, companies specializing in women's beauty aids claiming to preserve youth, lawyers and investment brokers. By receiving no direct information, he learned a lot. Mainly, that they were withholding information. There had to be a reason.

In every case he found himself talking with younger, eager men. When the questions approached the area of Henry's main interest, his call invariably was shunted over to a woman.

The information, he was told, would be made available to Henry soon as the statistics were gathered, fully checked as to accuracy, etc. Later he would get the information. Later. Everything later. How much later? And how long before it would be too late for Henry to care? So Henry started to figure a few things out for himself. He felt no fear now comparable to the fears of the past. He felt an intense relief, an exhilaration. For the first time that he could remember he felt really purposefully alive.

He started with himself. Being born, growing up hazily in the Matriarch's schools, learning how to be a good husband, a good provider, how to be con-

siderate, and healthy and strong, and a good virile lover.

Longevity. It hadn't made a man's mind any sharper, his memory any better. Henry just had a lot longer road to look back down, and it was so hard to do that that a man seldom thought about it or discussed the past at all. Nostalgia was a dead emotion for most men; reminiscence like groping painfully in a fog with the rewards too insignificant to bother with.

The Matriarchs had seen to it that recall was difficult, even painful. The Psychemothers had helped too, they had helped a lot. But Henry didn't care any more. The moving finger had about written him out. But he had a few lines left, and by God he would make them good!

Let's see now. He had been born 125 years ago. Then the life expectancy for men had been a bit shorter. So the old man Henry had replaced probably had been around 100 years old. Maybe 110.

If the old man had married Jeanette around 20, that meant that now Jeanette was at least 215 years old. Make it approximately 220.

She was still as healthy, young, firm and alive, eager and ardent, as she had been when Henry had replaced that old inadequate, drained-out lover in a dim past. And apparently she was fully capable of running through Larry in the same way as Henry. Larry's life expectancy was a little longer. Say Larry would be replaced by younger blood in 130 years!

20 years old when she had married Henry.

105 years married to Henry.

130 years married to Larry

140 years married to Larry's replacement.

395 years old!

But how was anyone to know how old Jeanette had been when Henry had replaced that old man 105 years ago? Surely more than 20! She had watched that fellow with the forgotten name grow old. Add another 90 years!

485 years! So women lived longer than men. That was an accepted fact. You could take that.

But how much longer?

Sometime, somewhere, there should be a limit. Unless—

Something in Henry's stomach seemed to turn completely over.

Henry had a daily 4 o'clock newsheet sent in. A telecast report didn't include obituary notices. The daily newsheet came out three times daily, mostly for last-minute checks on stock market and business trends. So forth. But Henry was running his finger shakily down the obituary column.

ANDERS, George. Suddenly on October 17 of Coronary thrombosis. Reposing at Sismo Crematorium, 662 Courtland Parkway, until Friday, 9 a.m.

HIRSCH, Clarence. On October 17. Reposing at Picasso Crematorium, 1727 Kenyon Avenue. Notice of funeral later.

KIRSCHENBAUM, Edmond. On October 17. Extreme senility. Reposing at the Chapel of A. Ribesto and Daughters, 683 Goldleaf Drive. Funeral Friday, 9:30 a.m. *Mass at Our Lady of Pity Church*, 10 a.m. Cremation St. Crown's Crematorium.

Henry went on down the list. A lot of old men dying. And then, almost at the bottom of the column, he found it.

A woman's name!

SCHEMMER, Anna. On October 16 of extreme senility and stroke. Beloved wife of Joseph, devoted Mother of Earl C., daughter of Beatrice Schemmer, sister of Charles Roget and Dehl Berti, Dorothy Schemmer, and Gabriel Schemmer. Member of the Central City Chapter, No. 134, D.O.E.M. Reposing at the Midway Chapel, 180 Country Lane. Religious and fraternal services yesterday at 8 p.m. Cremation today at *Flame on the Heath* Crematorium at 4:30 p.m.

Henry ran a circle round the name

of Anna Schemmer and jammed the newsheet into his pocket as he checked his watch.

Ten of four.

He had never read an obituary column before in his life. Somehow, if he had ever thought about it at all, it had been almost impossible to imagine a pretty young woman ever being old enough to die. Or being old. Or *looking* old.

He tried to recall seeing really old women on the streets, at social functions, at work, anywhere at all. He had never seen any. There were the well-preserved middle-agers, like his Psycho-mother. But they were so well preserved you could scarcely tell the difference.

Vaguely he remembered hearing something—maybe seventy years ago or so, about the retirement homes for the really aging women.

Pride!

So much emphasis placed on youth and beauty, a woman wouldn't be seen in public if she were really old. She didn't have to work, run the important industrial wheels of the world. She just had to stay young and pretty. When the job got to be too difficult, she went away into retirement. Into the woods somewhere to hide. Out of sight, out of mind.

That was the way it was presented anyway.

So they did get old and die. Naturally. Of course. But by this time, Jeanette should be showing her age. Just a little. Maybe life-expectancy for women was increasing that fast. That kind of ratio accumulation could fool you. Like that one about moving a penny from one square of a chess board to the next, doubling it each time. After a few squares it became a fantastic figure. . . .

But Henry felt awfully good about that woman dying.

And I'd like, he thought, to see one of those sanitariums for old women too. He relished the thought.

I sure would like to see an old ladies' home.

He wanted to see an old lady dead too.

Anna Schemmer.

THE Flame on the Heath resembled a small temple in the middle of a well-kept green lawn surrounded by winter trees ten miles out of Central City. The grass was continuing to be green because of warm pipes under the ground.

Henry dropped his heliocar on the small lot to the right of the temple. His

the search was dangerous. If it had been covered up so well, then it was important for it to remain covered up.

Or on the other hand, maybe he was just pushing everything, blowing things up, trying to rationalize being replaced and put on the shelf. Maybe he just couldn't take the indignity. Maybe the fact that he couldn't see it as much else but an indignity was his misfortune, and he had to justify it. Paranoia.

Assuming he was being maltreated and horribly put-upon, he could then

hands were shaking as he sat there, hesitating about getting out and going any farther. It was almost 4:30. He felt this cold space opening in his stomach. And all the way out to the Flame on the Heath, he had felt this eerie sensation of eyes on him. Now he felt that somehow he was being watched from the line of bleak trees near the temple.

Maybe it was only his imagination. But the fact was that he felt that what he was trying to find out was very dangerous for him to know. That even

go ahead and build up the justification for his own distortions.

His knees seemed dangerously insubstantial as he got out of the heliocar, walked across the grass, up the steps and into the Crematorium. A small flame burned from a taper in the wall.

An old man, a very old man, shuffled toward him and behind the old man, Henry could see the table with wheels on the legs, and the body lying on it under a silver lamé sheet.

Near the body was a door and beyond the door was the furnace.

The old man came up close and peered up into Henry's face. He was bent with some distortion of aging bones, and his eyes were watery. His white uniform was soiled at the knees and down the front of the jacket.

"You here to meditate maybe?" the old man asked.

"No."

"Some of the fellas come here to meditate."

"I came to look at Anna Schemmer. I missed the services yesterday. She was a dear friend of mine."

"Go on. Look," the old man said. "She goes in the fire in about three minutes. I like to keep things on schedule."

The old man slid his feet across the mosaic tile floor and pulled the silver lamé down to expose the face of Anna Schemmer. With his back to the old man so that his vision was cut off from the dead woman's face, Henry looked down at it.

It was old all right. Old enough to satisfy any kind of bitter and vindictive desire. It was like wax, with spots of artificial pinkness in the puckered cheeks, and a million wrinkles around the eyes and mouth. The hair was pure white and the hands folded over the chest were almost transparent.

Standing there, Henry felt the seconds expanding like swollen hours. The taper flame shivered. A wind seemed to whistle through him. Finally, quickly, he touched her face, then jerked his hand away.

The fear rolled up into nausea.

"What's the matter?" the old man asked.

Words dried like clay in Henry's mouth. He forced himself around as the old man shrugged and started wheeling the table toward the furnace room door. And he stumbled down the steps and toward the heliocar.

It was a good job. It looked real enough. Its looks would fool any one. Even the feel of it was good. But that wouldn't fool everybody. It would fool that old attendant of the Flame on the

Heath. It would fool most people. But Henry worked for the Company that manufactured that particular kind of fleshine. It didn't quite have the feel of real flesh, even dead flesh.

It wasn't Anna Schemmer's corpse. It wasn't anyone's corpse. It was fleshine, artificial flesh, that was now drifting up into the evening atmosphere in an almost invisible gas.

So Anna Schemmer wasn't really dead.

It was more than a possibility, Henry thought, that Anna Schemmer wasn't even old.

But the name would be dead now, he thought. Anna Schemmer is now someone else. He knew. He didn't have to inquire to check it. He knew that the Bureau of Vital Statistics handling birth certificates, deaths, and so forth would be staffed by naive young men who didn't question what seemed to be obvious. And women. Pretty, vital, ardent and alive young women.

If he did call to find out certain things he would be told that they would check and give him the information later.

As he headed the helio for home, fear jumbled his brain into numbed inefficiency. He felt full of dry and airless space. And his eyes stared into a dubious gray horizon. And he felt it all rushing toward him like an overwhelming cloud—the lost, overlapping boundaries of the years.

VI

The Diary

THE country house of Henry Joad was dark. Larry had not gotten home yet. Jeanette had said she would be late because of beauty appointments.

Henry had the house all to himself.

The numbing shadows that had hung over Henry's brain were lifting. There was this strange fearful excitement that kept driving him, pulling him. He had parked the helio a quarter of a mile from the house and took a roundabout way to the house, then watched it for fifteen minutes.

Certain now that there was no one else hiding around there, he still felt that he was being followed, watched, kept under strict observation.

He slipped down the hall toward Jeanette's bedroom. Once he thought he heard a whirring sound just outside. When he rushed to the hall window and looked out, he could see nothing but the moonlight on the empty swimming pool, the leafless brush, and the bare black limbs of trees.

The moonlight was in Jeanette's room too, slanting and frail. Outside the window it lay like soft carpeting.

Standing in the perfumed air in the moonlight of her room, Henry remembered many other things that, psychologically he knew now, it had been easier to forget.

A number of years back he and Jeanette had taken separate rooms. That had been the beginning. But like everything else, happening so gradually and with seeming naturalness that it hadn't seemed to have meant anything at the time. But now he remembered just when that decision had been made, with appropriate preliminary counseling from women marital harmony experts, and executed finally with a blasé air denoting maturity and sophistication. Since then, with a gentle gradualness, sex had degenerated into only a mild and ever less frequent routine.

Now the pain he had felt then and many times after that, but which he had been unable to admit to consciousness, surged up in him, gorging his throat.

Now he felt the embarrassment, the humiliation he had not allowed himself to feel before. Now he could feel. He had nothing to lose now. Now he was already discarded, a ghost that could remember the living times.

He stood surrounded by ghosts, suppressed moments of anguished indignity. Those times when, because of contrast, he had been vaguely conscious of his age, his general inadequacy in the presence of eager but condescending but always sympathetic youth.

The anguish cushioned and repressed

by little jokes and an attitude of buffoonery. Kind, understanding Jeanette never seemed to notice. Not caring really because someday he could be replaced.

Now, looking back, that hurt Henry the most. That pretended unawareness of his humiliation, the groveling buffoonery.

FEMININE shadows parted as he moved with breathless caution across the room. He switched on the pink-shaded lamp that softly laved the rows of varied-colored perfumes, the bottles and jars. Charts on the wall too. Beauty charts.

He moved toward her little ivory desk. She had needed a desk. Ledgers, office machines. Keeping beautiful and young was a business. A full-time job. Financed by the profits of men in other kinds of business. Every woman in business for herself.

Charts, reminders of appointments, everything scheduled and bracketed for beautifying routines. Something about the room now seemed as bitter and close as mint under glass. Full and inscrutable as the feminine idea.

He broke open the desk with a poker from the fireplace. He broke open several drawers. And then he found them. The diaries in the bottom drawer. Fumblingly he checked the dates first, the years.

The earliest diary notation was 814 years ago. September 5, 1956.

He picked one of the leather books up at random. It was 600 years old.

SATURDAY—Having a Dega Oil Treatment to keep scalp and hair in condition. Morgan knows how to massage the scalp. And with that new oil, the results are certain. I was really *scared!*

SUNDAY—Not going out tonight, so thought I'd give myself a thorough home manicure. I've a new polish that matches my lipstick.

MONDAY—I must decide how I'm going to wear my hair with the new hat. Morgan says my waves

will fall in place better if I plan hair style and have my hair cut in advance of the wave. Poor Everett. Poor old sweet Everett. He looked so tired last night. I must do everything I can to cheer him up. I found a wonderful *young man* at the banquet last night. I guess he'll be moving in one of these days soon. Everett's worked so hard all these years. I'll enjoy taking care of him in his declining years.

TUESDAY—The new posture guide came in today. Morgan urged me to go right to work on it, even though my posture is still nearly perfect. Ounce of prevention you know, Morgan said. Must give 15 minutes a day to exercise, then taper off after six months. Everett's so proud of me!

Henry sank deeper into the pink ruffled chair under the coral pink glow of the lamp.

He thumbed through the dead-alive monody of a woman's years. He skipped a couple of hundred of them and opened another diary. But the song remained the same. No ups or downs. No variations. Just a change of men, and there it was going on and on. A woman's world.

THURSDAY—Noticed my hands today. I got panicky. Will use more of the Alpha Lotion after my immersion in water. Bought a fragrant hand cream from The Dalsan Company. Highly recommended by my new beautician, Barton. Barton's not so good as Morgan was. But he's young and will improve. Morgan wasn't so efficient either during those last declining days of his. Poor dear.

FRIDAY—I took my beauty-angle treatment before the girls arrived for the D.O.E.M. meeting. The President, Therisa R., finally has gotten me to accept an office in the Daughters. I'm glad now. I know now that I'll always stay

young and lovely to look at and heaven to kiss! 15 minutes in bed with feet against the headboard. Rests face so much. And exercises teaches me to keep on sitting and standing without fatigue.

SATURDAY — Hiked to the woods with dear old Hal. So sweet. My feet in such good shape that I could hike all day. But Hal's showing his age, poor darling. A pedicure is a *must* for me from now on. No more foot aches to spoil Hal's outings. But one has to be careful not to make *them* hike too much. He looks so tired sometimes, but everything should be done so that he never thinks about it. I must make him forget. Therisa says the Psychemothers will take care of that pretty well. I was just made one of the Senior Secretaries of the D.O.E.M. They were thinking of changing the name of the Club, but decided not to. I think Daughters of Eternal Matriarchy is rather flowery. But they voted the name to stay.

SUNDAY—My pedicures are taking effect. My six daily appointments at the Clinics are getting more streamlined. Barton has everything balanced so one hardly realizes one spends so much time making oneself lovely to look at. But the men need it. It gives them the strength to go on.

Somewhere Henry seemed to hear the anxious winter calling down the night. The letters blurred slightly. A universe, an insular little world all one woman's own. He skipped many years. He was getting more up to date now. But the song remained the same. Only the names, the actors, were any different.

MONDAY—My new beautician, Pascal, gave us a wonderful new machineless method to fix the hair and scalp today. It takes much less time than any I've ever had, and no dull ache in the

head either. Joady Bear should be glad. But no use telling him what trouble *we* go through to be attractive and an asset to his social and business career. Why right after this new machineless method, I can be chipper and go right out to a party. Must pick up some new Preservolotion—

WEDNESDAY — O, dear! My back and legs hurt a little from stooping. Panicked me until I remembered Pascal's advice about the constant need for the Youtho-Bubble Injections. Lord, there's so much one must remember in order to stay lovely and young. What a job it is to remain worthy of their love!

Henry's eyes dug at the hazy moonlight beyond the glass walls. Probed beyond the patio and misty mirrors toward the distant hills of autumn. A sound filtered in. And something somewhere shifted with a clothly scratch.

FRIDAY—Found a new pinky-red shade of lipstick Pascal told me to try. Has harmonizing rouge and nail polish. I feel like a new girl since I tried out the new young *Man* last night. Larry's a wonderful lover, and he'll be a good provider too. I still think though, that of all of them, old Joady Bear was the best. So far anyway. I'll hate to see old Joady Bear go. He's been so sweet and thoughtful and plodding. I know he'll take replacement well.

SATURDAY—Off for a two-day vacation with Larry. Joady Bear has to work. I haven't told him I'm taking Larry in yet. I'll tell him in a few days.

SUNDAY — Pascal advised the new cosmetic kit when I told him Larry wanted to spend another weekend roughing it. Pascal pointed out how one mustn't miss a day! Sometimes I'd like to take a vacation, just forget how I look, feel, act! And if it weren't

for Joady Bear and Larry needing me, needing my youth and vitality—

TUESDAY—Gorgeous day at the Club Pool. Felt awfully smart in my new playclothes, and glad I took the Sunoilo, the new Preservoil Pascal told me about. Maybe it's the new year's beauty plan, but something has made me feel better and younger than I've ever felt before. Maybe it's Larry—he's so ardent and demanding—

Henry stood up. He put the diaries back and closed the desk drawers. Shut the drawers tight on the unending calender of self-beautification, and self-justification. The story of a woman's life. A wife's life. A lifetime of devotion, sacrificing old age and maybe whatever was supposed to lie beyond.

THE moon through the windows gave them a soft yet cynical mirror look of time. A golden haze drifted over the floor. The bed was a flat white ghost beyond the moonlight that seemed to assume the thick texture of tired gold melting.

He thought he could hear Jeanette's eager bright young laughter calling to him from a thousand different doorways of so many yesterdays, peering out at him with different expressions on her face, her body in different postures. But always the same.

He backed toward the door. The room was still again. Nothing there. Only shadows and dust dancing in the near dark.

As he went into his study and got the Protector gun from his desk, he felt the pain at the base of his skull grinding and hot. He felt the waves of hopelessness so giddy and incomprehensible that it was almost like exhilaration, and he heard a noise—half-chuckle, half-groan—escape from between his labored breaths.

It had been many years since he had even so much as thought of the Protector. But its deadly charge was still ef-

fective enough. Time didn't change that any either. Few laws to be broken, practically no motivation for breaking them.

Then Henry slipped cautiously out a side window and dropped into the dry and brittle brush. He crouched, listening, looking through the moonlight. Maybe he was wrong. But he felt that they were watching him, that they would get him now. They may not have found out how much he suspected and knew, but they knew he was looking. He guessed that that was enough. Stupidly, blindly, he had made it clear enough that he was overly curious.

He walked through the woods, looking back, stopping now and then to listen, startled at the cracking of a dry branch, or the rustling of dry leaves.

Blood knocked angrily at his temples and behind his eyes. His knees and thighs, unaccustomed to so much pounding, were stiff and fatigued. He walked cramped and aching, stooped and bent over, and then his kidneys were aching as if they had been pounded with a mallet and he walked along with his hands on his waist.

His mind slipped off into fevered chaos and vagrant jigsaw images.

He had checked the register to be sure and he managed to keep up a plodding stubborn straight line across the shadowed fields and woods toward Pascal's house.

VII

Too Late For Eternity

HE found the house pushed back into the hill, an intriguing note of organic architecture hardly distinguishable from nature. Dry leaves rustled as he walked nearer the pale light. When a gust of wind grabbed at his toupee and kicked it away among the drifting leaves, he never looked after it, nor ever thought about his toupee again.

The glass panel slid back. Henry peered into the comforting soft light of the living room. A shadow slipped over the floor. A table suspended from rafters

by three invisible wires held a goblet and two stained glasses.

"Come on in, Joad."

Henry stepped deeper into the room and half turned. "You're Pascal?" The thin pale old man who sat by the window sipping a drink nodded.

"Hello, Joad." He was the tight gaunt kind so that it would be hard to figure exactly how old Pascal was. But he was old. His head was hairless, and puffy eyes blinked at Henry as the man got up, poured some wine into a glass from the goblet and handed the glass to Henry. "A para-ice, Joad?"

Henry declined. "You expecting me, or maybe someone else?"

Pascal put the glass back down on the table. "You, Doctor Marian told me. She had an idea you would end up here sooner or later. She gave me a precautionary buzz. The Mothers do a good job too. We're all in it, in one way or another."

Henry lifted the Protector. In defeat he knew at last that he would not be despondent, that he would retain one violent shred of life which would sustain him to the end—his fury.

Pascal didn't seem concerned. "You going to kill me, Joad?"

Henry nodded.

"Why?"

"You're one of the beauticians. You help them stay young."

"Go ahead, burn me. You don't have much time left anyway. And maybe it'll make you die a little easier too. Go ahead, Joad."

"Why do you help them, Pascal? You're a man—or look like one anyway."

Pascal shrugged. "You know all the answers by now, or most of them. Why ask me?"

"Maybe there's some things I don't know."

"Lots of things, but they don't matter now. Listen, Joad. God knows when it really started. I don't. You don't. Maybe even the ladies don't know. It raised a big stink back in the 1950's. But they never really could isolate the

reason why women kept living longer and longer than men. And then the Third World War — kaput. There weren't enough men left to do anything about it even if they could isolate the cause. The woman took over. They handled the statistics, they did the psyching. But there's the psychological angle, that's the most important. The man's world failed. The women lost all dependency or respect for men. A lot

a marked minority and he was treated like one. You know all that. Why give me a sore throat repeating it?"

"Because I want to do something about it!"

"You're just one of the few rebels left. Once in a while there's one like you. But it's a dead end, Joad. Nothing you can do. No place you can go."

"There's more to it than that, Pascal. It's more now than the women just

of those women wouldn't have anything to do with men at all. They took it over, everything. You've got to get that into your head, hard! *They took over everything, Joad!*"

"Not me, not entirely."

"Maybe not, but that little difference makes no difference. After that war, men were so damn grateful for the women they couldn't question much of anything. People might have thought it would be the other way. Three women to every man. Women fighting over the men. Huh-uh, Joad. Man was

living longer. They live a lot longer. How much longer, Pascal?"

"How should I know?" Pascal tried to laugh. "They live a helluva long time. If it's five hundred years or forever, what's that to me? I'll be dead anyway."

"I can tell you, Pascal. Now I know. *They never die. They're immortal.*"

"Maybe. You sure of that?"

"They don't die or get old at all. That old lady—Anna Schemmer—I went to see at the Crematorium. It wasn't a real corpse. It was artificial."

"So—" Pascal said. "They never die. Women are immortal. So what? We get old. We die. Maybe they're lucky. Maybe not. I have my doubts. But after I go up in smoke, will I care?"

"What does it, Pascal? The beauty treatments? Cosmetics?"

"**M**AYBE that's part of it. Hormones, God knows what else in those cosmetics. But men never started using them soon enough maybe. And after a while it was too late. It got into the cellular process itself, maybe a kind of mutation. Maybe the atomic war pushed nature a little faster. But it was already going that way, Joad. Can't you see that? *Nature was already going that way.* Women living longer and longer. There was only one end to it, and this is it. Is nature really supposed to make sense in the long run?"

"They've been keeping immortality from us!"

"Look Joad. It's evolution. Men are just on the way out! There's a central core, a ruling body of women behind the scenes, and they really run the show. They've been helping push evolution a little too, helping it along. No—I don't know who they are or where they are and I don't give a damn either!"

"I want to know who they are, Pascal!"

"Who cares?"

"I care. We all ought to care!" Joad yelled. "They're killing us off, Pascal! They control the maternity wards. We never see our own kids. We never know who survives and who doesn't, how many are males and how many are females. They handle the bureaus of vital statistics, births and deaths! They've used us this far, they've needed us for a few things. But they're slowly getting rid of us!"

"That's right. But Joad, believe me, I don't care!"

Henry Joad jerked his head toward the window and the brittle October moonlight. "They've got the secret of immortality and they're keeping it from us. So that makes them the worst bitches

that have ever lived, and will never die."

"I'm not arguing with you, Joad. They've needed men for certain jobs, for sexual gymnastics, for breeding purposes. But they've been weaning themselves, or weaning us; one way or the other, they're getting rid of us. I agree. A little while longer and they won't need any of us, Joad. Maybe they'll keep a few of the young ones on hand as a kind of souvenir."

Pascal sat down heavily. "They keep the facts pretty much buried because they don't want to be annoyed by a few old boys stirring up some dust. Any time we old birds start getting wise, seeing through the false fronts, the Psychemothers go to work on us, cleansing the unconscious, putting the lids on dreams, giving us the hypo three times a week."

Pascal looked up, and shrugged. A ghastly kind of humorless grin slid over his face. "You're not the first rebel, but you may be one of the last. We're out of the swim now, Joad. All of us. The young who've been conditioned and processed and who don't know it. And some of us old horses who do know it, but who can't do anything about it."

"We ought to do something about it!" Henry yelled. He felt a kind of electric shock in his neck. His hands tingled.

"Maybe we helped too, Joad. Maybe we did most of it ourselves. We damn near wiped ourselves out with cobalt bombs. So maybe now it's just a question of admitting we're dead. Man and his machines, his bombs and spaceships, his hell-bomb rockets, his hammers and pistons pounding out death, his aggressiveness. He built them all up and maybe that's what's really done it, Joad. Part of evolution. Part of nature's process."

Pascal put his arm over Henry's shoulder. "Go ahead," he said softly. "But look at it this way, think about this. Remember that a long time back—thousands of years back—society was largely a matriarchy. Ruled by women. No science yet, no mutation, they needed

men for breeding and a little fun once in a while. But the women ran the temples of worship, they ran the home, the kids carried the mother's name, not the man's. Women were the Earth Goddesses, and men crawled and rooted around in the earth, planted his seed, and crawled on his way, grateful for a place to sleep on a rainy night.

"Men were just studs going from village to village. Finally they got old and died and no one gave a damn. Well, this is about the same thing. Only we haven't been traveling anywhere except through time, Joad. We were young and we serviced the women. We got older and we built up wealth and security for them, and kept on breeding until now maybe they don't even need that any more, so we get old and wander away into whatever death is. Now they've probably got a good method of artificial parthenogenesis, or they would be having more of the young men around. Look at evolution with a long-range telescope, Joad. And who then is to say what's right or wrong? But go ahead and hate them if it makes you feel any better. Go ahead and kill them. But remember, Joad, it's too late. For us, it's too late for eternity."

VIII

Henry Joad, Retired

HENRY JOAD walked carefully along the outside of the wall. Once in a while he stopped, listened, tried to make out whether or not anyone was home. He peered through the opened gate and then he saw the faint glow of light in Jeanette's bedroom window.

I'll kill them, he thought. I'd kill them all if I had the time.

He had that much coming to him anyway. A good healthy unimpeded hate. One good strong positive feeling and action before they set fire to him. He had worked like a damn horse all his life to provide a home and give Jeanette whatever it was she needed him for. He'd never done anything more exciting

for 125 years than play Dthingo on Saturday nights.

God how he hated them now, those young beautiful bitches!

Immortal. Not only young and beautiful and vital and vibrantly alive. But they would always be that way. There weren't really any old ladies' homes because there weren't any old ladies. All a damn lie! The death notices were phony because the women never died. He was sure that there weren't any little girls in those Schools either. And that there hadn't been for a long time. Just less and less men being conditioned and processed for a role becoming less important every hour.

He peered in through Jeanette's bedroom. He could see their bodies there in the shadows, locked and whispering together, moving like a slow fire.

He ducked back as though burned. The tension mounted. He felt the sweat burst out over his skin.

He stumbled back, back, and then the hate surged in him and he started to run toward the windows. He felt the flower box smash into his thigh, heard the ripping sound as he toppled over it and the flower box crashed into the swimming pool.

A panicky wash of blood came to his face as he blundered into the brush, and crouched there, his breath coming hard, a tormented beast in the cul-de-sac, a thing of baffled fury and grief, on the edge of defeat he could never admit.

Dimly he heard the windows opening, and Jeanette's eager voice, bright as sunlight, dancing over the moon-cooled chrome.

“YOOO—HOOO! That you, Joady Bear?”

He raised the Protector gun. She moved out and stood in the moonlight. He could see Larry moving up beside her, tall and lithe-moving, and his eager voice followed hers, probing about in the brush for Joady Bear.

“Hey, Joady. That you!”

Henry felt intolerably hot suddenly,

with a heat that he attributed to his burning hatred.

"Bunny," he whispered. "Snuggle-bunny—"

She came toward him, past the glass walls across the patio, past the empty pool, bouncing all full of health over the mosaic tile, slipping like a young and eager animal among the leaves turning brown and the crisping vines as though toward some elaborate lair.

She wore the peasant blouse, swirling in the moonlight, an off-the-shoulder blouse, very low. He saw the firm high swell of her breasts. She peered closer through the shadows where Henry crouched in the brush.

"That is you, isn't it, Joady Bear?"

He moved back a little more into the protective bushes. Larry came toward him too, his white teeth shining. "Hey, Joady. You okay?"

She came closer. She reached in and down and patted his head like she would an old and whimpering dog. His heart was going too loud, he thought, it would break. It was too old to sound so loud.

Her lips were caressing his face as she pulled him from the bushes. "Don't worry now, Joady. We'll take care of you. You won't be lonely."

"Sure," Larry said. "Come on in and let's play Dthingo!"

"Don't be blue, Joady Bear," Jeanette said. "Come inside where it's warm."

Sure. She had always thought of him, she had said, always kept herself up for him, including always looking her best no matter what the situation. She had always looked so bright, fresh, clean, cool, calm, prettier and prettier all the time. Smiling all through the years. And killing him. Killing all of them.

The pretty, pretty smiler with the knife.

He slipped deeper into the brush. He was afraid now of what he was going to have to do.

"Come on, Joady now," she said, tugging at his arm.

The moonlight shone on her smile. It flashed on and off like neon. It didn't look like a human face, he thought. Try-

ing to analyze it, measure it, you wouldn't have seen anything wrong with the smile. But somehow it seemed odd and twisted, there was something horrible about it, because the expression didn't mean anything, if it ever had.

Henry came alive like a somnambulist abruptly knocked out of sleep. He lunged forward out of the brush with a wild and tormented scream. Jeanette fell back. He ran toward her, raising the Protector like a club. He saw the stunned hurt look of confusion on Larry's face, and then he swung. He heard the thud and saw Larry's face sliding out of sight and heard him scratching and moaning down there in the bottom of the dry swimming pool.

He felt the sharp bitter pain somewhere inside him as he grabbed Jeanette and his breath was wheezing in his chest as he dragged her through the brush. His toupee was gone. His magno-dentures had come loose and he spat them away.

She stared up into his face and screamed. She was on her knees, her head bobbing between her shoulders. Her face was all white and twisting as she stared up at Henry. For a long time he stood there. He could hear a dog barking somewhere over the fields.

Jeanette's voice broke into crooning terror, then into sobs. He heard a scraping on concrete. Like something half dead coming out of the ground, Larry's blood-smeared face waggled up over the edge of the pool. His body wriggled out onto the side and he started climbing slowly and heavily to his feet.

"What's the matter with you, Joady?" Larry whispered. "You ought not to do a thing like that. You've been like a father to me, Joady—"

"We'll take care of you, Joady," Jeanette whispered. "I love you. I want to care for you now. Larry does too."

Henry stumbled back, a ponderous motion which resembled that of a man wretchedly spastic. They were ignorant of it all. Larry had never had a chance to learn any better. And Jeanette couldn't allow herself even to wonder

about how Joady might feel about it.

Maybe a lot of the women didn't really realize how it was. They just took it all for granted. They just went along with it, glad to be young and healthy, alive, glad they would stay alive.

Do I envy them really, Joad asked himself? Do they have anything in their heads to live forever for? They've spent all their lives staying beautiful, and living forever, but with what? How will their breasts look when no men are around to see?

LIVE forever? Joad shook his head. He'd never known a one of them ever to take any time out from being young and beautiful really to live.

They were right anyway. They had all crossed over into another time. Maybe Jeanette, maybe all of them were incapable of feeling or seeing things the way old Joady and a few other old men were seeing and feeling things now.

Henry felt as though he had awakened on another planet. Who felt pity for the dinosaurs that became extinct? It was better for the women, perhaps, that even the tender miracle of pity was unknown.

Henry backed farther away until their images blurred and he leaned against the rock wall and dropped the Protector on the ground. He chuckled a little. Then he laughed a while.

It was all theirs. Let them have it and live forever in it. Larry, you poor devil, you'll be in service for a while, but you'll have your day in hell, too. And Jeanette—he had seen into her world, sterile and meaningless, going on and on. And he was glad to get out of that one, too.

He turned and stumbled off out through the gate and into the woods, climbing the hill in the moonlight beyond the house. Deep in the woods somewhere he was still laughing a little.

And then he saw the figure standing there. A shaft of moonlight came through the skeletal trees and he saw that it was a woman. He saw the glint of metal in her hand. He had known he was being followed, watched. All the time they had been waiting for him.

They didn't want old Joady Bear stirring up any inconveniences.

Henry laughed again as he started running. Not because he was afraid. But because he could feel the pain starting in his heart, and he knew that this time he could only run a little way. And he was right.

He felt the pain clenching his chest inside, shutting off air, sending him into the leaves curled up with pain like a child.

He could see her face vaguely, cold and impersonal and he heard her say, "So now you find out."

She was young, young and very pretty, Henry thought. She raised the gun and pointed it at his head.

"You don't need to do that," Henry gasped. He felt his strength already gone. And he could no longer maintain himself on the slight incline and he started sliding down into the gully.

"You don't need to do that, lady." He could barely speak. "I'm already retired."

She lowered the gun. Somewhere below in the darkness, he could hear the whispering of water over stones.

The spasm in his chest seemed to wrench his soul apart and he closed his eyes and gave way to it. Dimly he heard the dying sound of his life throbbing away.

And he was still laughing.

This last thing they had not done for him.

He was already retired. He had managed it for himself. He could feel the dead dry leaves swirling around him as he rolled downward into the night.

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