

The background of the book cover is a vibrant, microscopic view of various cells and bacteria. The colors range from deep purples and blues to bright yellows and oranges, creating a rich, textured appearance. The shapes are diverse, including large, dark, irregular forms and smaller, more spherical structures.

**BACKTERIA
AND OTHER
IMPROBABLE
TALES**

**RICHARD
MATHESON**

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Backteria

And Other Improbable Tales

Richard Matheson

Backteria and Other Improbable Tales

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Contents

Backteria

He Wanted to Live

Life Size

Man with a Club

Professor Fritz and the Runaway House

Purge Among Peanuts

The Prisoner

The Last Blah in the ETC

Counterfeit Bills

1984 ½

Pride

Now Die In It

Leo Rising

Where There's a Will (written with Richard Christian Matheson)

Getting Together

Person to Person

CU: Mannix

Haircut

An Element Never Forgets

BACKTERIA

My name is Emery Wilson, PhD. I work for The Svennington Laboratory. What we do locate, isolate and investigate exotic viruses and bacteria. Such as MY-7, a virus which causes night sweats, cramps and loss of memory. A portion of this extends unhappily to loss of identity.

In the unhappy case of Arthur Bland this identity loss grew so severe that he not only forgot who he was but what he was. This resulted in a total lapse of human traits. Mr. Bland became convinced that he had become simian and insisted on living in a tree, sustaining his bodily well-being on a diet of bananas and leaves. This condition persisted until, during sleep one night, he fell from the tree and broke his neck, dying instantly. The autopsy revealed more than the presence of MY-7 in his system.

But that is not my account so I will not dwell on it. All I intended to transmit was the information regarding my profession. Such as the investigation of such bacteria as X9- which caused such an excessive loss of balance that most victims of its invasion kept falling on their heads, which resulted in a noticeable percentage of concussions. But, that too, is a different story albeit a sad one. What I mean to tell you is another one. A grim and dreadful one.

Stanley Barenbaum, M.D. was rotund and worried. The rotund part was easy to see, visible to the eye. The worried part was more difficult. I had to surmise it. I was able to do this. Dr. Barenbaum had the expression of a man married to a sex-obsessed woman who, arriving home early one afternoon, sees his handsome brother-in-law's red BMW convertible parked in the driveway of his home. Definitely apprehensive.

“Good afternoon,” he muttered.

I waved him to the chair opposite my desk. He sat down, tentatively, I thought, as though he was prepared to leap to his feet at a moments notice. His smile looked frozen to me.

“What can I do for you?” I asked.

He didn't answer at first but drew in a deep draught of air through his nose. Then he said, “This virus. If that's what it is. We aren't certain what it is. We only know it exists. No, we don't even know that for sure. We only know what we think it is and we're not even certain of that. But we do believe it exists and we're anxious to know –”

At which point he ran out of breath and was compelled to inhale, wheezingly.

“You have a specimen with you?” I asked, speaking quickly lest he interrupt me with another rant.

“We sent it in several days ago,” he said, now sounding almost like a rational human being.

“I haven't seen it yet, I'm sorry,” I apologized. “I'll get to it as soon as possible. Have any of my associates given your office an analysis yet?”

“No,” said Dr. Barenbaum. Whether in irritation or despair – or both – I couldn't tell. Pa

was certainly despair. “We must ascertain what it is,” he said. Definitely despair.

“What is it about this virus – if, indeed, it is a virus – that concerns you so?” I inquired.

He didn’t answer. I sensed that he was loathe to do so.

“Doctor?” I said.

I hadn’t taken notice of his Adam’s apple. I did now as it dipped abruptly and the sound of his nervous swallow was clearly audible. “Please,” I said. By now my curiosity was piqued.

“We refer to it as VD-1,” he said in a muffled voice.

“I beg your pardon?” I responded; not sure I’d heard him correctly.

“VD-1,” he told me again.

“Oh,” I hesitated, then added, “Does that – stand for anything?”

“It does,” he said. His voice was now thin and strengthless.

“Which is?” I had to prompt him.

He sucked in air.

“Virtual Disappearance,” he said.

Dead silence in my office. Was the man serious? Or was I the butt of some inner-office prank? How could I tell?

I decided to pursue the matter. Barenbaum was a doctor wasn’t he? He seemed sincere enough. No point in dismissing the situation pro bonum. My mind doesn’t work that way.

His rumination changed my mind in the silence.

“I know this sounds improbable,” said Dr. Barenbaum. (I chose to leave his title unchallenged for the moment.)

“Let me understand this,” I said, “You refer to disappearance. Do you mean that literally?”

“I do,” said Barenbaum.

“In what way?” I asked, I winced at the notion. “The dissolving of organs? Partial or total dissolution?”

“No,” he said.

“All right,” I went on. “What were the symptoms then? Sweats, dizziness, drowsiness, diarrhea, what?”

“No,” he said.

“For God’s sake, Dr. Barenbaum,” I protested, “What were the symptoms?”

“I told you.” Now he sounded impatient.

“You said –” I began.

“I said disappearance,” he interrupted, “I mean total, absolute, complete disappearance.”

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “You’re saying – !”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” He was furious now. “Don’t you comprehend English? Israel Kershaw disappeared! Physically! Absolutely! In toto!”

I comprehend English. I could not comprehend what he was talking about.

“How did this occur?” I inquired. Quietly. Devoid of rancor. My way.

“He went in the bathroom,” said Dr. Barenbaum. He actually gulped. “And vanished.”

“You mean –?” I started.

“I mean he vanished!” raged Dr. Barenbaum. “The bathroom door was opened after a while and he was gone! Disappeared!”

I couldn’t accept his account: Not yet. There had to be some logic to it.

“What about the window?” I queried. Surely that was an explanation.

“It was locked,” he answered. He was getting tired of speaking to me now. “Anyway, the window was too small. Mr. Kenshaw was, to be blunt, obese.”

He leaned forward in the chair and spoke slowly and distinctly. For the last time, I sensed a change. “Mr. Kenshaw –”

“Your patient,” I said.

“My patient.” His voice was tight, almost threatening. “He went into the bathroom on the evening of the twenty-fifth...”

“The twenty-fifth,” I repeated.

“Yes,” he said through clenched teeth. “He went in with a smile on his face.”

Ah, I thought. A smile. Was that significant? I didn’t see how it could be but I was grasping at straws. How could we be talking about a virus now? Or for that matter, a bacteria?

“I didn’t hear the rest of that,” I said. I hadn’t. “Would you repeat –?”

“I said,” he declared, “– that Mr. Kenshaw had entered the bathroom –”

“With a smile on his face,” I amended.

“Yes!” he cried, “Which is hardly the point!”

“Which is –?” I probed. I felt a need to challenge his account.

“Which is,” he held on. “Mr. Kenshaw went into the bathroom – with a smile on his face –” he added tensely, “He locked the door. His wife heard him lock the door.”

“Go on,” I said.

He shuddered. With aggravation I believe. “An hour later, his wife, receiving no reply to her questions, had the door unlocked. Mr. Kenshaw was not in the bathroom. The bathroom was empty.”

“And –?” I asked.

“And?” he demanded.

I was really grasping at straws by then. “Was there by any chance –” I suggested total straw grasping now. “– any... well – ashes on the floor?” It was the only thing I could come up with as farfetched as it was. Spontaneous Combustion. I’d read about it. Somewhere.

“What?” Barenbaum snapped.

“No... smell of burning flesh in the air?” I asked.

Teeth gritted again. He shook his head slowly. Very slowly.

“And you – believe that – all this –” I didn’t know how else to put it. “Had some connection to the virus? The bacteria? whatever?”

“I do,” he said. “What else –?”

“You know, for a fact, that he’d been infected?” I broke in.

“Of course I know! All my colleagues know! The blood test confirmed it!”

“I see,” I nodded. Haplessly. “And you don’t think –” I broke off. I’d been about to ask him if he thought Mr. Kenshaw’s smile had anything to do with – no. That was ridiculous.

“Well, it only remains for us to examine the specimen,” I told him. “See if there are any answers there.”

“I would hope so,” said Barenbaum stiffly.

“One more question,” I said. “Did Mr. Kenshaw display any peculiarities of behavior prior to his –?” Disappearance, I thought. I hadn’t the heart to say it aloud.

“No, nothing,” Barenbaum answered.

“Nothing at all?” I probed. “It might be evidential.”

“Nothing,” he emphasized. “The usual.”

“Such as –?” I re-probed. Wondering, to myself, why I didn’t just let go of the whole thing and concentrate on examination of the submitted specimen. Surely –

“His job, his health, his childhood, his car –”

“His childhood,” I thought. “Anything there?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “Now will you –?”

“Immediately,” I cut him off. “We’ll start the examination right away.”

And start it we did. And discovered nothing pertinent. Unless establishing that it was definitely a bacteria bore any significance. We suspected that before we began the examination.

But VD-1? Not scientifically acceptable a label. How were we supposed to identify it? The Smiling Germ? Suggested one of our jokester assistants. The Vanishing Cream? The Houdini Effector? Each suggestion was more absurd than the previous one. Accordingly, we merely assigned it the name BU-1. Bacteria Unknown – one.

Only one oddity emerged during the course of our study. One afternoon a thunderstorm caused a twenty minute discontinuation of our electric service. Much to our amazement, the bacteria sample on our electroscope glowed for a number of seconds, then disappeared from view. When the electricity was renewed, the electroscope plate was blank.

By a distressing turn of events, BU-1, as we called it, began to spread in an alarming fashion, very soon taking on the threat of, first, an epidemic, then a pandemic. Newspapers and magazines were inundated with articles about the dire situation, most of them filled with conjecturing – most of it ridiculous – as to the possible meaning of the disappearance aspect.

One particularly mystifying element to the entire enigma was the remarkable fact that

many of the BU-1 victims – approximately thirty-five percent did not disappear at all but suffered a few days of elevated temperature and, on occasion, a minor attack of mental disorientation before eliminating the bacteria from their system.

The remaining sixty-five percent vanished without a trace.

Explanations failed to elucidate, in any way, the uncanny vanishments. (An ungrammatical labeling of the vanishings by the press.)

The answer – such as it was – came to my attention, seven weeks from the outset of The Goodbye Plague as it was now called. This in the guise of Colonel Ula Vanderloop, Commandant of The Royal Dutch Retreat Corps. Colonel Vanderloop, in addition to his military status was a well-known medium and faith healer, having achieved his spiritual eminence mainly through his well-known psychic communications with Jack the Ripper who denied all culpability with the White Chapel atrocities, claiming that on all those occasions he was attending Christian Science lectures in Dover.

Herewith, the details of my meeting with said Colonel Vanderloop. take it or leave it.

“Doctor Wilson,” he began in a stentorian voice. Actually, he referred to me as “Doc Wilson” but we’ll let that go. Any attempt to literalize his speech would be counterproductive.

He introduced himself as per my words, presenting his varied qualifications, both military and spiritual, in a high resonant manner.

I waited for some cessation in his discourse, then asked him, politely of course, the reason for his visit. I wanted to ask why he was intruding on my busy afternoon but, again, politeness prevailed.

At which, the Colonel imparted to me the reason for his visit. An impartation (if there is such a word; if not, there should be) which gave me a literal shock. To be truthful, it jolted me in my chair.

“I have been in contact with Mr. Israel Kenshaw,” was what he told me.

“You have –” I muttered incompletely. It was all I could say.

“– been in contact with him, yes,” the Colonel completed. “You know about the man?”

My lips stirred without sound. Then I managed, “I do.”

“For how long?” he asked.

“Long?” I said. I mumbled. “I never knew the man at all, only about him from Dr. Barenbaum.”

“What I mean,” continued Vanderloop, “what period of time were you acquainted with the man before he passed?”

“Passed,” I said. Sounding like a numbskull kindergartener. I felt like one.

Obviously, the Colonel’s regard for me was equally low. “Yes, passes,” he said. “Passed on.” He waited for some sign of comprehension in my face. Not forthcoming. His porcine features stiffened. “Died,” he stated, obviously using a word anathema to him.

My mouth positively fell open. “I didn’t know he had,” I told him. This was casting a

entirely new light on the BU-1 mystery. The first evidence of fatality.

Now Vanderloop's look became one of amusement. "How droll," he said. "Your M
Kenshaw was of an equal mind."

"Sir?" I asked.

"He insisted that he didn't know either."

"Know?" I said.

"That he'd passed on, man!" The Colonel cried.

"What did he think happened to him?" I asked. I really wondered.

Vanderloop sighed audibly. I could sense that he was not accustomed to this variety of
and A exchange. He was the sort of man who was used to holding forth, to explaining
measuredly, in a word, pontificating.

No point in my noting the bulk of our lengthy conversation. It went in circles, frustrating
both of us.

What finally did become established was that we had no idea whatever about the spiritu
status of Israel Kenshaw. Was he a surviving disincarnate communicating with the living? C
was he living himself, intent on explaining what had ensued following his unforesee
disappearance?

According to Kenshaw, he had traveled back in time to the year when he was ten years ol
a particularly rewarding time of his life. His father was a forest ranger in Sequoia Nation
Park and Kenshaw had been his dedicated "helper." The home he lived in was fore
enclosed. He was an only child. He had never been more content.

Imagine his reaction then when, infected by BU-1, he vanished from his bathroom an
found himself returned to that idyllic period of his childhood. Naturally there was th
complication of his ten-year-old duplicate and his parents.

Understandable consternation. But these drawbacks seemed of little import to Kenshaw. H
seemed overwhelmed with joy, asked to be remembered to Bianca, his wife of nine years an
his few friends, extending his wish that they, too, become infected with BU-1 and return
some longed-for time of their lives.

I must add that all this information – coming especially from the lips of Colonel U
Vanderloop – took me off balance and made me more than dubious. For instance,
Kenshaw's back in 1956 how in the name of all that's holy, could he be contactin
Vanderloop – and, of course, me – in 2011? His explanation that time is flexible failed
convince me.

Still, that it was Kenshaw was undeniable. As were the undeniable identities of so man
other BU-1 victims whose account all bore the same points. One – that they were infecte
Two – that they had disappeared – once almost fatally, as she was driving to work. Thrice
they had returned in time to happily recalled periods of their lives. Four – that they we
very much enjoying their return in time.

In some cases, it was not to childhood. One elderly man "chose" (one assumes that choi
was involved in all these peculiar transpositions) to return to the year he was Captain of
Navy Minesweeper in World War Two. Another aging beldame returned to the days when sh

was a chorus girl in a long-running Broadway Musical. And many more. The effect was stark and worldwide. Consider the case of Bjorn Lutefisk who chose to return to his Uncle Ola's herring factory as the floor manager. Unhappily, the smell reduced Mr. Lutefisk to a gibbering segment of his former self. Consequently, he ended up in an asylum. Uncle Ola began to drink again since he had to contend with two versions of his nephew.

Strangely enough – or, perhaps understandably – a number of BU-1 victims went nowhere. They suffered their mild temperature elevation for a few days and, on occasion, a limited period of mental disorientation. From this, one is drawn to the conclusion that either the infection was not severe enough, or the victim involved had no particular spot in the past they yearned for.

None of which convinced me especially. Notably, the idea of time being flexible. Perhaps so but I was from Missouri on that point. Still, the evidence was there, irrefutable in every detail.

The ongoing and increasing – enigma was not clarified when some media wag in a Nation Enquirer type article defined it as the PUZZLE OF BACKTERIA. Ignoring the facts of the “puzzle,” he claimed that all its victims went back to a time to a more genial environment. That this was not statistically accurate was shunted aside. So Bacteria Unknown-1 became permanently labeled as BACKTERIA.

Not being a professional historian, I will make no attempt to enlarge on the subject. Suffice to say that the number of Backteria victims increased in the hundreds then, in a matter of months, to the thousands and, ultimately ten thousands. The increase, in other words, was geometric. This over the scope of every continent and island in the known world, including the Arctic zones. Not that every victim, as indicated, vanished. Many of them did however, a few of them “reporting in” – as one journalist expressed it – “via the medium of mediums.”

Why this method was utilized was probably self-evident. There was, simply put, no other means of communication available, as obscure as the method proved to be. There was no other way to let those “left behind” know where their vanishing relatives or friends had gone. Especially perplexed by the process – although perfectly willing to “cash in” on it, was the multiple array of mediums throughout the world. Vanderloop alone became so well-to-do that he made a formal bid to purchase Holland in whole or in parts. I will not enumerate the many other mediums who acquired wealth through their intercessions. Most of them never really knew whether their “communications” were alive or dead. Not that it mattered to them.

The most uniquely peculiar occurrence in this Panoply of Plaguaries, as they came to be called, was the incident of Dimitri R. Mupphinsky of Vladivostok. (Middle name Raga) His medium (name unintelligible) reported that Comrade Mupphinsky vanished from his place of business at the end of March. When he communicated with his Uncle Vanya in June, it was to state that he had gone back to his fathers’ farm only to discover that his memory had erred and that life there was intolerable. Which established the conundrum that memory was perhaps, fragile and not essentially reliable. However, if this “Backfire,” as it came to be known, was in effect in other plague victims, I never found out.

My ill-advised participation in the Backteria Mystery took place approximately thirteen months following inception. By then, the disease (we felt obliged to term it so) was widespread. Every country on the globe suffered its share of the bizarre affliction. The Svennington Laboratory was deluged with involvement. That we had no more explanation for the dilemma than any other source didn't seem to matter. We were the first to be engaged in the "Vanishing Chaos" as it also came to be called and that was enough.

My own enmeshment was typical. My marriage was faltering. I felt scant attachment to Brenda and her regard for me was similar. The two girls were on their own, both married with girls of their own. Work at the lab was increasingly unrewarding – especially as an attempt to achieve technological BU-1 explanation was invalid.

It was at that frustrating point that I made my decision.

It was simple to acquire a sample of BU-1. I had made up my mind not to take the haphazard course of seeing if I could "catch" the Backteria since it was easily available to me.

The main problem was to ascertain what period of my life I most aspired to. It never even occurred to me that I might be one of those infected victims who would not disappear but only be exposed to a few days of elevated temperature and perhaps, a brief period of mental disorientation. Far from it. I went all the way.

There was not a plentiful collection of choices to be made. My childhood was a possibility. Mother was a good-natured soul. Father drank some, but by and large was a passable sir. But nothing outstanding. My teenage years were unacceptable. An unhappy array of failed female liaisons and repetitive skin disorders.

My best bet, I decided at length, was the year 1950, Webster College, Miriam Gilford and vividly in recollection, Professor Andrew Vaughn and Egyptology. With what graphic verbiage that man described the search for various Royal tombs such as Tutankhamen's.

Which is what brought me to this unpleasant situation, you see. How could I have known that my subconscious was so imbued with Andrew Vaughn's coercive descriptions that they filled my mind to the spilling point. For here I am in Egypt in the year 1922. No way of letting Brenda know my plight. Vanderloop is beyond my reach; that is for certain.

So who am I residing with? Mr. Howard Carter, as cranky and demanding a man as I have ever run across. Each day in his tomb – he will permit no credit otherwise – is a lastingly travail. I made the blunder of commenting on his feeling for Lord Carnavon's daughter which comment displeased him greatly. The fact that I know he never will consummate his lingering desire for her only makes my state of mind more untenable. My only consolation is the fact that I will not be confronted by my younger self. But damn it's hot! I mean hot!

He Wanted to Live

And in the early morning when he had just about managed to fall into a troubled sleep—Lucy woke him up.

He was all curled up like a fetus in one corner of their bed. He jumped when she touched him. He jumped as if he'd been stabbed. He stared at her in terror. He wanted to shout at her—Don't you dare come near me! She was used to his nerves and she didn't know it was more than nerves now. She said—Breakfast—and she went out of the bedroom.

He lay back on the pillow and looked at the ceiling with hopeless resignation. He looked until his heart slowed down and his hands stopped shaking. He looked out of the window at the gray silence of another morning. Another day. Another collection of wracking hours.

The process began. His brain had hardly dragged itself from darkness. But it started to leave him. He couldn't control it. It thought everything he didn't want it to think.

There was the ceiling and there were the walls. Look at that crack in the ceiling. Suppose the roof gave. Suppose the attic with its dusty forgotten contents showered down on him. Suppose he were crushed as he lay there, the stored away relics breaking every bone.

Maybe the house would catch fire. Lucy was in the kitchen. She gets careless. A flame shoots out from the stove. Ignition. Conflagration.

He dressed and he was afraid. He might catch a germ from the clothes. The tie, the shirt, the coat might get caught in some machinery somewhere—who knew where. It might twist his flesh and cut off his breath, make his veins and arteries stand out in stark relief like pulsing tubes of blue spaghetti. His shoes might force a nail to grow back in. There might be poisoning in his system, blood rotting at the edges and flowing deep in congested waves.

He washed carefully and, when he shaved, his hand shook for fear he would cut his throat. He'd meant to get an electric razor. Why did he always forget? He looked in the cabinet. It was full of death. An unwary opening of bottles, a swallow and quick finish. He slammed the cabinet door shut and hurried out of the bathroom.

He descended slowly on the stairs so he wouldn't fall and shatter his body at the foot of the steps. His house was a trap, a snare set by himself and all the men and women who made what it was. Shifting rugs and loose connections. Smooth floor and smoother bathtub. Burning radiators and fireplaces and furnaces. Broken glass and razor blades and splinters and sharp knives. Man built himself a home and filled it with menace. It was all right when you didn't think about it. But then something happened and you thought about it all the time.

At breakfast he wondered if maybe Lucy was poisoning him. She loved him. He knew that. She had married him and borne him two fine children. But maybe she was poisoning him. Maybe there was poison in the orange juice, sprinkled in with the salt and pepper and the sugar. Maybe he was packing death into his veins shouting—Here! Run riot in my blood!

He shuddered when she brushed against him. He was afraid for the children. And he was afraid of the children. They were his. He loved them with all his heart. He was afraid of

them. Breakfast and supper on weekdays were agonies of wretched ambivalence. It got so he hated everyone at some time or another.

The subway station was very crowded. There were people lined up at the edge of the platform. The train whistled far away. They all shifted on their feet and moved closer to the edge. They touched him, pushed him, shoved him. He wanted to scream. They were trying to push him over the edge.

Suppose they did. Suppose the great steel mass slammed into him and crushed him to pulp on the track, severed his limbs from his body, sent sprays of his blood into the air, splattered his organs on the black ties, coated the pillars with his flesh.

He wanted to yell, to strike out blindly, to fight for his life. But he was civilized. He was modern. He was a man. He couldn't cry or shriek. He had to pretend he wasn't afraid. He must make-believe he was used to this—the surrounding of death in life.

The train was crowded. It was always crowded in the morning. The sweat trickled down his face and across his neck and down from his armpits. The people were packed against him. Packed people were death. Alone they were bad enough. In a mass, in a swaying dimly lit mass they were death itself. They mingled with each other, each of them joined with another and all added up, they were crawling twisting death, all around him. Calling him, plucking at his clothes with flesh-tattered skeleton fingers.

He wondered if he should get off and take the local because there were always less people on the local.

But it was figuring like that that killed a man. Suppose he got on the local in order to avoid the crowds on the express. That day the local would have an accident. He knew it would. That was the way.

Then again, the local went under the river and the express went over it. If he was going to face death then he would rather it was on the express than on the local. Because it would be better to fall off the bridge. There might be a chance—just an outside chance—that he would get to a window and maybe swim up to the surface. He could see the light anyway. It would be better to see the light.

If there was an accident under the river he couldn't see anything. It would be pitch black. If the tunnel walls collapsed and the water rushed in, he'd be drowned in muddy torrential darkness. It would be dark because the electricity would short circuit. There would be people electrocuted and screaming and in the dark he could smell their flesh burning. He couldn't stand that. Water rushing up, up swimming over him, screams in the blackness and drowning. Floating corpses in the black tunnel filled with water. It would be better to go the other way.

He took the express. And the people pushed against him and the train got more crowded at every station. He couldn't bear to be touched by the people. He shrank away from them and tried to stand apart. How did he know that some of them didn't have awful diseases and if they touched him he might get the disease too? Heat made germs float around in the air. Invisible little bugs floating on coughs and everybody's breath.

He had to get away. There had to be somewhere. Everywhere he went there was death and he was afraid. He wanted to live. But death was everywhere. He couldn't get away from it.

At the office, he shivered at his desk. Suppose the building caught on fire and he was

trapped. The flames roaring around and blisters and reddening skin and burning alive, horrible stricken screams. He couldn't bear such agony.

Suppose the building collapsed. He'd hear of such things happening. After all, he was placing his life in the hands of an architect and engineers and builders and how did he know they were trustworthy? How did he know some engineer wasn't mad at something and he didn't make the right figures and seams cracked and the building caved in. The huge beams would crush him. He'd be hurtled to the sidewalk. His head would pop on the concrete like an egg and his brains would spill all over the sidewalk.

He thought about these things all the time. He couldn't work. He sat and scribbled on pieces of paper and thought about dying. How could a man concentrate when he was always fearing? He wanted to live but he couldn't see how. Everything was against him. There weren't any percentages. Everywhere he went, death was waiting for him. He had nothing to say about it. It was going to happen and maybe in the next second. He couldn't alter it. All he could do was think and wonder about it and drive himself sick with worrying.

At lunch he thought that the waiter and the cook in the restaurant were conspiring to poison him. He couldn't eat the food. It choked in his throat. He ate little bits of it to see if he could taste any poison. He tried to dilute it with water.

Then he broke out into a cold sweat because it occurred to him that the water might be poisoned too. So he made the waiter bring him some water from the next table. He knew he was a fool for trying to trick the waiter. But he had to do it anyway.

All afternoon he wanted to scream and leap up from his desk and crash through the window. But he was afraid. He couldn't jump. He couldn't cry out—For God's sake, leave me alone! He sat at his desk and shook with palsied terror. His brain teemed with many thoughts of the many ways a man can die each day. Each was more terrible than the one before. Each heaped its horror on the next until, after a while, he was no better than a helpless child whimpering in the night, fearing each sudden sound and movement. He hungered for peace and there was no peace. Terror was his only food.

When work ended at five, he had to go back to the subway. By that time he was gutted with horror and he stood dull-eyed and limp and was too weak to even shudder. Once more he went through the whole train of thought about the local and the express. It was like a separate litany in his brain. He couldn't stop it any more than he could voluntarily stop breathing.

At home he found the same threats waiting for him. He unlocked the door and stepped into the trap he had formed around him. He ate supper, hating and distrusting his wife and his children and even himself. Fear surrounded him like a shifting mist.

He was afraid of the house. He was more afraid to leave it. Lucy complained. But he wouldn't go anywhere. He sat in his chair quietly and clung to the arms and tried to keep from screaming. Then his mind began to pick out sounds and he began to feel death walking in his house, watching and waiting for him to make one slip, one incautious move.

He wanted to live!

He wanted to live in peace and quiet but they wouldn't let him.

He went to bed early because there was no comfort in waking.

He tossed and turned alone. Lucy would not go to bed so early.

She stayed downstairs and read.

He tried to think of nothing. But his mind would not blank itself. It went on and on. The roof was cracking, the floor was giving, the house was on fire, his system ran with poison, he was sick with infesting germs, there was a prowler with a gun, there was a mad dog outside the door, Lucy was sneaking up the stairs with a butcher knife.

He turned and screamed into the pillow so no one could hear his madness ringing out in the night.

Later he drifted away.

He dreamed the same dream over and over. The falling object, the ugly mushroom cloud, billowing smoke, the spray of burning fire. He writhed with agony as it covered him. There were people watching. Lucy—he screamed—Lucy kill me, please kill me. I can't bear the pain. Please, please kill me.

She laughed at him. His children laughed. Everyone passed him by and laughed.

He was in torture. His body flared up. It was a white hot coal. He screamed from the pain. But they made him live. Live, live!—they cried. It was a chant in the night, a taunt from the blackness of dreaming. Death would not come then and take away the pain. It stood around and watched but it would not come close. Live, live! — it laughed out loud.

He cried, he screamed and woke up to find himself sitting in bed and staring at the night.

The same nightmare?—said Lucy.

Yes—he said.

He sat up for an hour. Then he fell back in a stupor of weariness. He closed his eyes and prayed for a dreamless rest.

And in the early morning when he had just about managed to fall into a troubled sleep—Lucy woke him up.

The littler one was playing with her dollhouse this afternoon. Crinkled knees on ro bespattered rug, she fondled her ones, Molly, Fig and the Puppy Gruff.

Molly is a boy doll. The littler one giggled when I dubbed him so. That is a girl's name, she said. Hush, said I, who is to say?

Fig is a black sambo rajah, jeweled and awesome. And the Puppy Gruff is the Puppy Gruff. Mother was sitting at the big furniture scraping on a hill of debts.

She frowned at me squatting on a buttoned hassock admiring my daughter.

The littler one was rearranging furniture, a blue-veined hand sliding a bathtub to the wall. You must not place a bathtub in the guestroom, I told her, the guests might float ducks in it. I blew a bit of breeze from my lips and the delicate hair wisps at her temple stirred golden. Pappa, said she with a shake.

The furniture arrangement proved so distasteful that she swept her hand across the floor to brush it clean. The furniture bounced nicely on the rug. I think now, said I, that is some fine way to arrange furniture. Little lips pouting, priceless petulance. The distaff giant rose, the floor shook with her coming. I looked up and the far off eyes sprinkled ice dust on our heads.

Get up! she cried. I lifted the piano with two fingers. First, I begged, we must return this.

She bent over and slapped it spinning on the floor. Come here, in a loud way she said. And *you*, a finger spear pointing at my loved one's heart, stay away from the house if you don't appreciate it.

Little head lowered, rising tears. You may play nicely with the house, I said and stood up way high. Mother stamp stamped to the table. I stamp stamped followed.

This simply cannot go on, she gurgled, pushing the everest of bills to me. I am not hungry, I said. Ice dust upon me.

Listen Peg, she hissed so the littler one would hear worse, this simply is the end. Either you get out and work or I leave, *with* the child.

Old tale. Old song. Old misery set to words. Take *my* child? Nonsense.

I'll get work tomorrow, I promised.

Tomorrow, tomorrow I heard an echo from the valley of her throat. How many times have I heard that? How many times did Sal hear it? Tomorrow I said and walked away. That is not all, she cried but I kept on for the doorway.

It is unbelievable the rapidity with which I shrank.

Suddenly from as big as her, down, down.

Whishhh, the doorway far far up like a mountain tunnel. The huge chair noted and prepared to collapse its gargantuan crimson on my tiny body. The sky shook, the clouds tottered miles above me,

I flung up my arm and cried fear.

Pain at my knees. Suddenly I was back again, sprawled across the chair. Pappa! Sweet worried tones caressed my ears.

Mother had such a look and such a trembling, standing by the table choking herself.

I rose with dignity and brushed off some dust not on me. I strode into the hall carefully. The house was slowly beginning to rock. The stairs were swelling, receding, in and out, like a rolling wave carpeted and tacked.

I held tight to the banister. No sense being swept out the window and out to sea.

I prisoned off my room and sat down uh! on my white bed. My feet raised up and placed out on the spread, I fell back.

The pitching slacked off, my ship slid into calm waters. Oh Sal, I whispered, Sal who understood, Sal not here, Sal far away gone and never coming more.

The clock whispered sleep and wake.

I raised squarely up and was without trouble. The room, the hall, all in fine order, wall square, flat and firm, steady ceiling.

I slid down the silent stairs. Ha ha was the chuckle as I swept past the bottom toe and kneeled before the living room. Murmurs in the kitchen, the way clear. Softly, softly. Hello there Fig old bedizened potentate. Molly.

I began to crawl carefully, slowly.

For a while, naturally, I got nowhere since I kept shrinking the farther I went. The room swelled bigger, bigger. Grotesque universe.

Voices! Footsteps!

I scurried to the brink of the rug meaning to slip quickly over the edge and crouch in a hairy black cavern.

Peg! Voice in the distance, crashing from the sky. I could have sworn I was out of sight.

Peg! The thunder roared again.

I wept with fury biting at the roses for their eyes so keen. I raised a look through binocular tears.

The little one, clever darling, made as though frightened. Sweet conspirator! Mother who not know my plan from her.

I started climbing up the red chair, a long haul without a rope.

Fantastic hands reached down to smother me in hot greasy palms. I clawed at their angular sweating monstrosities.

The room wavered, so like it to do that.

I stood up, ready to die for my secret, let the black waves dash on me. The room distorted, cooled and shrank. I held up my hands, screaming, ready for the ceiling to plunge down on me.

But first the tower of me crashed an awful way far down on the rug plateau. I saw roses in my eye when I became unknowing.

I woke in my bed feeling quiet. Someone was sitting across the room.

Come here Sal, I asked so gently. Let me touch your cold gray lips, let me see the clay that stains your eyes.

It was only a white tower that came to me as I slowly drowned in the lake folds of my bed.

Foul lifeguard it reached down and tugged me out. My wrist was enveloped by cold serpents. I heard hmmm at the tower gate. I squinted and saw it was actually a giant whose every pore was a gaping pit.

I turned my head away and was sick it was so ugly and horrible.

I fell away to black things soon.

But before it, I thought this and final too.

When that bleak tower is gone or at slumber I will creep out, fly down the steps of mountain side and run across the rose strewn plain to my home.

In the door, they will leave it open for me. Up, up, up the pretty stairs, two at a time I think.

Into the bed creeping to hear them whisper below, my friends.

Waiting for Sal to tuck me in and kiss me so, *goodnight dear*. Sleep.

Dream on dream within the smooth and creamy silent walls.

The pendulum stops.

Man with a Club

Jeez, wait'll I tell you what happened last night, Mack. I swear you'll never believe it. You think I'm nuts. But I swear Mack, I swear I seen it with my own eyes.

I was out with Dot. *You* know, the broad that lives down near Prospect Park. Yeah, you remember her.

Well, we was going up the Paramount t'see Frankie Laine. Sat'day night, you know. Puttin' on the dog. Show, feed, take her home, give'er the old one two.

Well, anyway, I guess it was, oh, seven thirty when we come up from the I.R.T. station. Forty secon' street. Time Square. You know the place. Where they got stores down the stairs. They sell jelly apples and stuff. Yeah, yeah, that's right.

So we come up the street, see? It's jus' like any time. You know, all the t'eatres lit up with people walkin' around. I grab Dot's arm and we head for Broadway.

Then I see a bunch o' guys across the street. So I figure it's probably some drunk cuttin' up. *You* know. So I says to Dot—come on let's go see what everybody's lookin' at.

So she says—Aw come on, we wantta get a good seat. So I says...haah? Course I don't like no broad crack the whip over me. *Come on* I say. So I pull her arm and we cross the street even though she don't wanna.

So there's a big crowd there, see? There's so many people I can't see what's up. So I taps a guy on the shoulder and I says—what's goin' on? *He* don't know. He gives me a shrug. Is it some guy drunk? I says to him. *He* don't know. He says he thinks it's some guy who ain't got on no clothes. Yeah! That's what the guy said. Woid fo' woid.

So Dot says—let's go, will ya? I give her the eye. *You* know. Cut it out I says. If there's a guy without no clothes, you'll be the first one'll wanna see it, I says. So she gets all snooty. *You* know, like all broads get. Sure.

So anyway, we stick around. I push more in the crowd so I can see. Everyone is kind of quiet. You know how crowds is when they're lookin' at somethin'. Like remember how quiet we all was when we was all watching old man Riley when the truck run over him? Yeah, that's right. Quiet like that.

So I keep shovin'. And Dot comes with me too. She knows what's good for 'er. She ain't givin' *me* up. Not with my dough she ain't. Bet your sweet...haah? Awright, awright, I'm tellin' ya, ain't I? Don't get 'em in a sling.

So we get up to the front practically and we see what's up.

It's a guy. Yeah. The guy had clothes on too. Yeah, ya slob, what didja think, I was gonna say he was bareass on Time Square? Haa haa, ya jerk!

So this guy has on like a bathin' suit see? Like made of fur. You know. Like Tarzan wearin'. But he don't look like no Tarzan. He looks like one of them apes Tarzan fights. Lots of muscles. Jeez he was more musclebound than them weight lifters down the "Y". Muscles all over 'im. *Covered* with 'em!

Covered with hair too. Like an ape. Ya know how cold it was last night? Well this guy wasn't even cold, that's how hairy he was.

But scared? Jeez, was he scared. Scared stiff. He had his back to a store window. You know the one, where they sell jewelry for ninety-nine cents. Yeah, near that t'eatre.

Inside the store this guy is starin' out at this other guy. This ape, this guy in Tarzan clothes. Yeah.

This guy has a club in his hand too. *Big* crappin' thing! Like a ballbat only lot fatter. Covered with bumps. Yeah. Like them cavemen used to carry. Yeah...haah? Wait a second will ya? I'll get to it. You ain't heard nothin' yet. This is a kick.

So we look at this jerk, see? Dot pulls back sort of. What's the matter I says to her, y' sorry he ain't got no clothes on? She don't say nothin'. Just looks white in the gills. Dame. You know.

So I turn to this old jerk next to me. I ask him—who is this guy? But he don't know.

Where'd he come from, I say to him. He shakes his head.

He looked cockeyed, this old jerk. He was staring at this other guy with the club. And his hands is closed like he was prayin' or somethin'. Yeah! Aah, ya meet 'em all over. 'Special' in Time Square. Ha! You said it Mack. Ain't it the truth?

So, anyway, where the hell am I? Haah? Oh, yeah.

So I ask this slob once more another question. I asks him how long he's standin' there. He turns and looks at me like he gonna jump me. Yeah. Jeez, Mack, no crap.

Then he says—just a little while. He turns away again and starts in starin' at the crazy guy with the club. He has a book under his arm too. Whattaya mean who? The old jerk I mean. He keeps starin' at this guy with the club.

So Dot pulls my arm. Come on, she says, let's go. I pull away. Let go woman, I says. I want to see what goes. So I look up front again.

This hairy guy is showin' his teeth at everybody, see? Yeah. Like an animal. Some broad in the crowd is pullin' their dates back. Come *on*, come *on*, they're sayin'. Jeez. Broads. You can't argue with 'em. They're too dumb. *You* know.

Then someone says—*call* a cop. So I figure things're gonna get hot soon. Maybe there'll be a good fight, I says to Dot. So what does she do? Come on Mickey, she says, let's go see Frankie Laine. Laine Schmaine. Aah, fo' Chrissakes anyway. What can ya expect from a dame?

Haah? So I says to her—in a couple o' minutes. Can'tch wait a couple o' minutes? A cop come soon I says to her. Cops always stick their noses in when there's a crowd.

So I turn to a guy on the other side of me and I says to him—where did this guy come from?

Who the hell knows? he says. All I know is, I was walkin' by, all of a sudden, *bang!* There he is, standin' by the window.

So we look at the guy. Would ya look at the guy, says this guy. Look at those teeth. He looks like a caveman.

I'm getting' to that Mack. I'm *getting'* to it. Hold your water.

So I look at the guy with the club, see? His eyes is small. His chin sticks way out. He look like...you remember the time we cut school that day. What day? Shut up a second and I'll tell you what day!

You remember we went through Central Park and we went to that museum? You know *way* up there. Around 80th street or somethin'. I don't know. Anyway, you remember those cases o' heads?

No, ya jerk, don't ya remember? It was upstairs someplace. Well, what the hell. Anyway the heads showed what men looked like from the time they was apes.

So what? So this guy looked like what men looked like t'ousands o' years ago. Or million. Who knows? Anyway, this guy looks like a caveman. Yeah.

Let's see. Where was I? Oh, yeah.

So I hear some guy say—this is hideous.

Yeah! Ha! This guy says—this is *hideous*. Ain't that a kick? Well who the hell d'you think? The *old jerk!* With his bible. I *did* so tell ya it was a bible. Awright, so I said he had a book. See? I meant it was a bible.

So I look at this guy see? The old guy.

He looks like one of those jerks you see down in the Square. You know, giving the crap about—comes the revolution! *You* know. Reds. Yeah.

Anyway I figure I'll humor the old fart. So I says—where do ya think the guy come from?

Well, *holy Jeez*, if this guy doesn't give me the eye like I spit on his old lady or something.

Don't you know? he says to me. Don't you *see*?

Yeah. How do ya like that? Don't I *see*. See what fo' crap's sake? That's what I want to know.

So I look the old jerk over. Some goddam Commie I figure. I would've give him the knee there wasn't so many guys around.

Well, to make a long story short, all of a sudden the crowd *jumps back!* I get almost knocked down. Dot yells blue murder. Look out! someone else yells.

So I look up front.

The crazy guy is tryin' to jump some broad up front. He's *growlin'* at her. Yeah! Look, was there or wasn't I? Well, shut up then. I was there. I saw the bastid with my own eyes. Take my word.

The guy even unloads his club and takes a swat at the broad.

Yeah! That's right. Boy, what a kick. It was like a crappin' movie.

Get a cop, get a cop! the broads start yellin', jumpin', out o' their pants. They're all the same. Somethin' happens and they go runnin' for cops.

Yeah, and some old character is standin' in an ashcan and yellin' — Police! Police! Hell, police! Yeah! Ya shoulda seen the slob. You woulda died.

So everybody is excited and the crowd's breakin' it up. But there's more crowds pushin' in

see? To see what's goin' on. So everybody's shovin' and pushin', pushin' and shovin'. Scenes from a crappin' movie.

What? The guy with the club? Aah, he's back against the window again. Sure. His eyes rollin' around like crazy. All the time he's showin' his teeth. It was a riot Mack, take it from me.

So somebody *gets* a cop. No, wait a second. That ain't all.

This cop pushes through the crowd, see? *Big* son of a bitch. You know the kind. All right *break* it up, *break* it up, he says. Same old crap all the time. *Break* it up.

He comes up to the guy with the club.

And who do you think *you* are, he says, Superman? He gives the guy a shove. Come on your bum, he says, you're under...

And all of a sudden, boppo! The guy swings his club and whacks the bull over the nut. *Jesus did he slug him!* The cop goes down like a sack of potatoes. Blood comes out his ears.

Everyone gives a yell. Dot grabs my hand and pulls me down towards Eight Avenue.

But the guy isn't chasin' anybody. So I pulls away from Dot.

Come on Mickey, she says, let's go to the show. Is *she* scared. She's goin' in her...haah! Awright!

So I says I ain't missin' this for nothin'. What a broad.

You'd think a guy got a chance everyday to see a show like that.

She keeps whinin'. You *told* me you was takin' me to the Paramount, she says.

Look baby, I says, Look, you'll get to the Paramount, see? Just keep your pants on. Did I tell her right? What the hell. Ya can't let 'em walk on ya. Am I right or am I wrong?

Haah? Oh yeah.

Well I leave her down by the Automat down the street. I says I'll be right back. I just wanna get a good look at the knocked out cop.

So I go back. There isn't many people around. They was all scared I guess. Jeez how the guy cracked that cop! I could still hear it, Mack.

So the cop is out cold see? But there's *another* cop comin'. He has his gun out. Sure, whattaya think. You think they take a chance? Hell no. Pull out their rods. What do they care they might hit innocent bystanders. Aah, *you* know cops.

Stand back everybody! yells the cop. *Stand back!* Jeez. All the time! They say the same things.

So-o, I watch him move in on the guy with the club. He's still standin' by that store window. The caveman I'm talkin' about. Pay attention will ya!

So the cop says—*put down* that club if you value your life. Uh-huh. How do you like that?

Well this character just *growls*. He don't know what the hell the cop is talkin' about. He starts to *scream*. Like a animal. Gets down in a crouch like Godoy used to, remember? Yeah.

Does he drop the club? Are you kiddin'? He has it in his mitt so tight you couldn't drag it out with ten horses. Yeah.

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