

**KURT
VONNEGUT**



**LOOK
AT THE
BIRDIE**

UNPUBLISHED SHORT FICTION

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A Man Without a Country

Armageddon in Retrospect

Bagombo Snuff Box

Between Time and Timbuktu

Bluebeard

Breakfast of Champions

Canary in a Cat House

Cat's Cradle

Deadeye Dick

Fates Worse Than Death

Galápagos

God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater

Happy Birthday, Wanda June

Hocus Pocus

Jailbird

Like Shaking Hands with God (*with* Lee Stringer)

Mother Night

Palm Sunday

Player Piano

The Sirens of Titan

Slapstick

Slaughterhouse-Five

Timequake

Wampeters, Foma & Granfaloon


Welcome to the Monkey House



Kurt Vonnegut

**LOOK
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BIRDIE**

UNPUBLISHED SHORT FICTION

Delacorte Press  **New York**

FOREWORD

by Sidney Offit

As I read this anthology of Kurt Vonnegut's previously unpublished short stories, I was reminded of the paradoxical aspects of his personality. Few writers in the history of literature have achieved such a fusion of the human comedy with the tragedies of human folly in their fiction—and, I suspect, fewer still have had the grace to so candidly acknowledge them in their presentation of self.

During the years of our friendship, though I was aware that he might be suffering private misery, Kurt scuttled his demons with élan as we played tennis and Ping-Pong, skipped off to afternoon movies and jaunts around town, feasted at steak houses and French restaurants, watched football games on television, and twice sat as guests in a box at Madison Square Garden to root for the Knicks.

With his signature gentle but mordant wit, Kurt participated in family celebrations, meetings of writers' organizations, and our gab and laugh sessions with Morley Safer and Don Farber, George Plimpton and Dan Wakefield, Walter Miller and Truman Capote, Kevin Buckley and Betty Friedan. I don't think it an exaggeration to suggest that I, as well as Kurt's other friends, felt that time with Kurt was a momentous gift no matter how light our conversation. We often found ourselves imitating his amused reserve about his own foibles and those of the world.

Along with the fun and warm support he so graciously expressed to his friends, Kurt Vonnegut treated me to intimate glimpses of the master storyteller whose ironic and frequently startling observations of people emphasized the moral complexities of life. Walking uptown after a memorial service for an unmarried female author who had devoted her life to literary criticism, Kurt said to me, "No children. No books. Few friends." His voice expressed empathic pain. Then he added, "She seemed to know what she was doing."

At Kurt's eightieth birthday party, John Leonard, a former editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, reflected on the experience of knowing and reading Kurt: "Vonnegut, like Abe Lincoln and Mark Twain, is always being funny when he's not being depressed," Leonard observed. "His is a weird jujitsu that throws us for a loop."

The Vonnegut acrobatics are off to a fast start in this circus of good and evil, fantasy and reality, tears and laughter. The first story, "Confido," is about a magical device that provides instant conversation, advice, and therapy to the lonely. But—and here comes the flip side—Confido, the ingenious mind reader, eagerly reveals to its listeners their worst dissatisfactions, leading to painful discomfort with life. This story suggests not only the risks of psychiatry, where the patient may learn too much about himself/herself, but also the drastic spiritual consequences of biting the knowledge-bearing apple.

Although I recall Kurt as being appreciative of his brief adventure with psychotherapy

Kurt. He rewrote and rewrote, as his son, Mark, as well as agents and editors testify. Although Kurt's style may seem casual and spontaneous, he was a master craftsman demanding of himself perfection of the story, the sentence, the word. I remember the rolled up balls of paper in the wastebaskets of his workrooms in Bridgehampton and on East Forty-eighth Street.

The closest Kurt ever came to confessing an ambition for his writing was when he recited to me one of his rules for fictional composition: "Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted."

To Kurt Vonnegut writing was kind of a spiritual mission, and these stories with all their humor seem most often to be inspired by his moral and political outrage. They are evidence, too, of the volume of Kurt's prodigious imagination, a talent that enabled him after World War II and into the fifties and early sixties, to help support his growing family by contributing short stories to the popular ("slick") magazines.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s bylines appeared routinely in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Argosy*. He later reminded his readers of the satisfactions of this association when he wrote in his introduction to *Bagombo Snuff Box*, "I was in such good company... Hemingway had written for *Esquire*, F. Scott Fitzgerald for *The Saturday Evening Post*, William Faulkner for *Collier's*, John Steinbeck for *The Woman's Home Companion!*"

Hemingway! Fitzgerald! Faulkner! Steinbeck! Vonnegut! Their literary legacies survived the demise of so many of the magazines that provided them with generous fees, per word or per line, and introduced them to hundreds of thousands, even millions of readers.

Kurt's stories selected for this collection are reminiscent of the entertainments of that era—so easy to read, so straightforward as to seem simplistic in narrative technique, until the reader thinks about what the author is saying. They are Kurt's magic verbal lantern, the Confido that projects so relentlessly the vagaries and mysteries of human behavior, but with a leavening of humor and forgiveness.

The discovery of this sampling of vintage Vonnegut confirms the accessibility that is the trademark of his style and the durability of his talents, a gift to all of us—friends and readers who celebrate the enlightenments and fun of Kurt Vonnegut's jujitsus and his art.

Foreword by Sidney Offit	
Letter from Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., to Walter J. Miller, 1951	
Confido	
FUBAR	
Shout About It from the Housetops	
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Box 37

Alplaus, N.Y.

February 11, 1951

Dear Miller:

Thought, rather fuzzily, about something I want to add to my recent letter to you. It's this business about *the school*: school of painting, school of poetry, school of music, school of writing. For a couple of years after the War I was a graduate student in the Anthropology Department at the University of Chicago. At the instigation of a bright and neurotic instructor named Slotkin, I got interested in the notion of the school (I'm going to explain what I mean in a minute), and decided to do a thesis on the subject. I did about 40 pages of the thing, based on the Cubist School in Paris, and then got told by the faculty that I'd better pick something more strictly anthropological. They suggested rather firmly (with Slotkin abstaining) that I interest myself in the Indian Ghost Dance of 1894. Shortly thereafter I ran out of money and signed on with G-E, and I never did get past the note-taking stage on the Ghost Dance business (albeit damn interesting).

But Slotkin's notion of the importance of the school stuck with me, and it now seems pertinent to you, me, Knox, McQuade, and anybody else whose literary fortunes we take a personal interest in. What Slotkin said was this: no man who achieved greatness in the arts operated by himself; he was top man in a group of like-minded individuals. This works out fine for the cubists, and Slotkin had plenty of good evidence for its applying to Goethe, Thoreau, Hemingway, and just about anybody you care to name.

If this isn't 100% true, it's true enough to be interesting—and maybe helpful.

The school gives a man, Slotkin said, the fantastic amount of guts it takes to add to culture. It gives him morale, esprit de corps, the resources of many brains, and—maybe most important—one-sidedness with assurance. (My reporting what Slotkin said four years ago is pretty subjective—so let's say Vonnegut, a Slotkin derivative, is saying this.) About this one-sidedness: I'm convinced that no one can amount to a damn in the arts if he becomes sweetly reasonable, seeing all sides of a picture, forgiving all sins.

Slotkin also said a person in the arts can't help but belong to some school—good or bad. I don't know what school you belong to. My school is presently comprised of Littauer & Wilkenson (my agents), and Burger, and nobody else. For want of support from any other quarter, I write for them—high grade, slick bombast.

I've been on my own for five weeks now. I've rewritten a novelette, and turned out a short-short and a couple of 5,000-worders. Some of them will sell, probably. This is Sunday, and the question arises, what'll I start tomorrow? I already know what the answer is. I also know it's the wrong answer. I'll start something to please L&W, Inc., and Burger, and, please, God, MGM.

The obvious alternative is, of course, something to please the *Atlantic*, *Harpers*, or the *New Yorker*. To do this would be to turn out something after the fashion of somebody-or-other, and I might be able to do it. I say might. It amounts to signing on with any of a dozen schools born ten, twenty, thirty years ago. The kicks are based largely on having passed off a creditable counterfeit. And, of course, if you appear in the *Atlantic* or *Harpers* or the *New Yorker*, by God you *must* be a writer,

because everybody says so. This is poor competition for the fat checks from the slicks. For want of anything more tempting, I'll stick with money.

So, having said that much, where am I? In Alplaus, New York, I guess, wishing I could pick up some fire and confidence and originality and fresh prejudices from somewhere. As Slotkin said, these things are group products. It isn't a question of finding a Messiah, but of a group's creating one—and it's hard work, and takes a while.

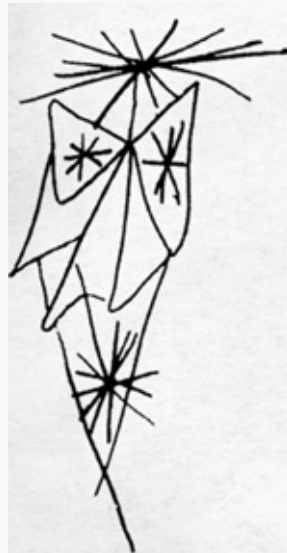
If this sort of thing is going on somewhere (not in Paris, says Tennessee Williams), I'd love to get in on it. I'd give my right arm to be enthusiastic. God knows there's plenty to write about—more now than ever before, certainly. You're defaulting, I'm defaulting, everyone's defaulting, seems to me.

If Slotkin's right, maybe the death of the institution of friendship is the death of innovation in the arts.

This letter is sententious crap, shot full of self-pity. But it's the kind of letter writers seem to write; and since I quit G-E, if I'm not a writer then I'm nothing.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature consisting of the letters 'KWR' in a cursive, somewhat stylized script.



Disturbed personality



The Summer had died peacefully in its sleep, and Autumn, as soft-spoken executrix, was locking life up safely until Spring came to claim it. At one with this sad, sweet allegory outside the kitchen window of her small home was Ellen Bowers, who, early in the morning was preparing Tuesday breakfast for her husband, Henry. Henry was gasping and dancing and slapping himself in a cold shower on the other side of a thin wall.

Ellen was a fair and tiny woman, in her early thirties, plainly mercurial and bright, though dressed in a dowdy housecoat. In almost any event she would have loved life, but she loved it now with an overwhelming emotion that was like the throbbing amen of a church organ for she could tell herself this morning that her husband, in addition to being good, would soon be rich and famous.

She hadn't expected it, had seldom dreamed of it, had been content with inexpensive possessions and small adventures of the spirit, like thinking about autumn, that cost nothing at all. Henry was not a moneymaker. That had been the understanding.

He was an easily satisfied tinker, a maker and mender who had a touch close to magic with materials and machines. But his miracles had all been small ones as he went about his job as laboratory assistant at the Accousti-gem Corporation, a manufacturer of hearing aids. Henry was valued by his employers, but the price they paid for him was not great. A high price Ellen and Henry had agreed amiably, probably wasn't called for, since being paid at all for tinkering was an honor and a luxury of sorts. And that was that.

Or that had *seemed* to be that, Ellen reflected, for on the kitchen table lay a small tin box, wire, and an earphone, like a hearing aid, a creation, in its own modern way, as marvelous as Niagara Falls or the Sphinx. Henry had made it in secret during his lunch hours, and had brought it home the night before. Just before bedtime, Ellen had been inspired to give the box a name, an appealing combination of confidant and household pet—*Confido*.

"What is it every person really wants, more than food almost?" Henry had asked coyly, showing her *Confido* for the first time. He was a tall, rustic man, ordinarily as shy as a wood creature. But something had changed him, made him fiery and loud. "What is it?"

"Happiness, Henry?"

"Happiness, certainly! But what's the *key* to happiness?"

"Religion? Security, Henry? Health, dear?"

"What is the longing you see in the eyes of strangers on the street, in eyes wherever you look?"

"You tell me, Henry. I give up," Ellen had said helplessly.

"Somebody to talk to! Somebody who really understands! That's what." He'd waved *Confido* over his head. "And this is it!"

Now, on the morning after, Ellen turned away from the window and gingerly slipped *Confido's* earphone into her ear. She pinned the flat metal box inside her blouse and

concealed the wire in her hair. A very soft drumming and shushing, with an overtone like mosquito's hum, filled her ear.

She cleared her throat self-consciously, though she wasn't going to speak aloud, and thought deliberately, "What a nice surprise you are, Confido."

"Nobody deserves a good break any more than you do, Ellen," whispered Confido in her ear. The voice was tinny and high, like a child's voice through a comb with tissue paper stretched over it. "After all *you've* put up with, it's about time something halfway nice came your way."

"Ohhhhhh," Ellen thought depreciatively, "I haven't been through so much. It's been quite pleasant and easy, really."

"On the surface," said Confido. "But you've had to do without so much."

"Oh, I suppose—"

"Now, now," said Confido. "I understand you. This is just between us, anyway, and it's good to bring those things out in the open now and then. It's *healthy*. This is a lousy, cramped house, and it's left its mark on you down deep, and you know it, you poor kid. And a woman can't help being just a little hurt when her husband doesn't love her enough to show much ambition, either. If he only knew how brave you'd been, what a front you'd put up, always cheerful—"

"Now, see here—" Ellen objected faintly.

"Poor kid, it's about time your ship came in. Better late than never."

"Really, I haven't minded," insisted Ellen in her thoughts. "Henry's been a happier man for not being tormented by ambition, and happy husbands make happy wives and children."

"All the same, a woman can't help thinking now and then that her husband's love can be measured by his ambition," said Confido. "Oh, you deserve this pot of gold at the end of the rainbow."

"Go along with you," said Ellen.

"I'm on *your* side," said Confido warmly.

Henry strode into the kitchen, rubbing his craggy face to a bright pink with a rough towel. After a night's sleep, he was still the new Henry, the promoter, the enterpriser, ready to lift himself to the stars by his own garters.

"Dear sirs!" he said heartily. "This is to notify you that two weeks from this date I am terminating my employment with the Accousti-gem Corporation in order that I may pursue certain business and research interests of my own. Yours truly—" He embraced Ellen and rocked her back and forth in his great arms. "Aha! Caught you chatting with your new friend, didn't I?"

Ellen blushed, and quickly turned Confido off. "It's uncanny, Henry. It's absolutely spooky. It hears my thoughts and answers them."

"Now nobody need ever be lonely again!" said Henry.

"It seems like magic to me."

"Everything about the universe is magic," said Henry grandly, "and Einstein would be the

first to tell you so. All I've done is stumble on a trick that's always been waiting to be performed. It was an accident, like most discoveries, and none other than Henry Bowers was the lucky one."

Ellen clapped her hands. "Oh, Henry, they'll make a movie of it someday!"

"And the Russians'll claim *they* invented it," laughed Henry. "Well, let 'em. I'll be big about it. I'll divide up the market with 'em. I'll be satisfied with a mere billion dollars from American sales."

"Uh-huh." Ellen was lost in the delight of seeing in her imagination a movie about her famous husband, played by an actor that looked very much like Lincoln. She watched the simple-hearted counter of blessings, slightly down at the heels, humming and working on a tiny microphone with which he hoped to measure the minute noises inside the human ear. In the background, colleagues played cards and joshed him for working during the lunch hour. Then he placed the microphone in his ear, connected it to an amplifier and loudspeaker, and was astonished by Confido's first whispers on earth:

"You'll never get anywhere around here, Henry," the first, primitive Confido had said. "The only people who get ahead at Accousti-gem, boy, are the backslappers and snow-jobs artists. Every day somebody gets a big raise for something you did. Wise up! You've got ten times as much on the ball as anybody else in the whole laboratory. It isn't fair."

What Henry had done after that was to connect the microphone to a hearing aid instead of a loudspeaker. He fixed the microphone on the earpiece, so that the small voice, whatever it was, was picked up by the microphone, and played back louder by the hearing aid. And there in Henry's trembling hands, was Confido, everybody's best friend, ready for market.

"I mean it," said the new Henry to Ellen. "A cool billion! That's a six-dollar profit on Confido for every man, woman, and child in the United States."

"I wish we knew what the voice was," said Ellen. "I mean, it makes you wonder." She felt a fleeting uneasiness.

Henry waved the question away as he sat down to eat. "Something to do with the way the brain and the ears are hooked up," he said with his mouth full. "Plenty of time to find *that* out. The thing now is to get Confidos on the market, and start living instead of merely existing."

"Is it us?" said Ellen. "The voice—is it us?"

Henry shrugged. "I don't think it's God, and I don't think it's the Voice of America. Why not ask Confido? I'll leave it home today, so you can have lots of good company."

"Henry—haven't we been doing more than merely existing?"

"Not according to Confido," said Henry, standing and kissing her.

"Then I guess we haven't after all," she said absently.

"But, by God if we won't from now on!" said Henry. "We owe it to ourselves. Confido says so."

Ellen was in a trance when she fed the two children and sent them off to school. She came

out of it momentarily, when her eight-year-old-son, Paul, yelled into a loaded school bus
“Hey! My daddy says we’re going to be rich as Croesus!”

The school bus door clattered shut behind him and his seven-year-old sister, and Ellen returned to a limbo in a rocking chair by her kitchen table, neither heaven nor hell. Her jumbled thoughts permitted one small peephole out into the world, and filling it was Confido, which sat by the jam, amid the uncleared breakfast dishes.

The telephone rang. It was Henry, who had just gotten to work. “How’s it going?” he asked brightly.

“As usual. I just put the children on the bus.”

“I mean, how’s the first day with Confido going?”

“I haven’t tried it yet, Henry.”

“Welllll—let’s get going. Let’s show a little faith in the merchandise. I want a full report with supper.”

“Henry—have you quit yet?”

“The only reason I haven’t is I haven’t gotten to a typewriter.” He laughed. “A man in my position doesn’t quit by just saying so. He resigns on paper.”

“Henry—would you please hold off, just for a few days?”

“Why?” said Henry incredulously. “Strike while the iron’s hot, I say.”

“Just to be on the safe side, Henry. Please?”

“So what’s there to be afraid of? It works like a dollar watch. It’s bigger than television and psychoanalysis combined, and they’re in the black. Quit worrying.” His voice was growing peevish. “Put on your Confido, and quit worrying. That’s what it’s for.”

“I just feel we ought to know more about it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Henry, with uncharacteristic impatience. “O.K., O.K., yeah, yeah. See you.”

Miserably, Ellen hung up, depressed by what she’d done to Henry’s splendid spirits. The feeling changed quickly to anger with herself, and, in a vigorous demonstration of loyalty and faith, she pinned Confido on, put the earpiece in place, and went about her housework.

“What are you, anyway?” she thought. “What is a Confido?”

“A way for you to get rich,” said Confido. This, Ellen found, was all Confido would say about itself. She put the same question to it several times during the day, and each time Confido changed the subject quickly—usually taking up the matter of money’s being able to buy happiness, no matter what anyone said.

“As Kin Hubbard said,” whispered Confido, “It ain’t no disgrace to be poor, but it might as well be.”

Ellen giggled, though she’d heard the quotation before. “Now, listen, you—” she said. All her arguments with Confido were of this extremely mild nature. Confido had a knack of saying things she didn’t agree with in such a way and at such a time that she couldn’t help agreeing a little.

“Mrs. Bowers—El-len,” called a voice outside. The caller was Mrs. Fink, the Bowerses’ next-door neighbor, whose driveway ran along the bedroom side of the Bowerses’ home. Mrs. Fink was racing the engine of her new car by Ellen’s bedroom window.

Ellen leaned out over the windowsill. “My,” she said. “Don’t *you* look nice. Is that a new dress? It suits your complexion perfectly. Most women can’t wear orange.”

“Just the ones with complexions like salami,” said Confido.

“And what have you done to your hair? I love it that way. It’s just right for an oval face.”

“Like a mildewed bathing cap,” said Confido.

“Well, I’m going downtown, and I thought maybe there was something I could pick up for you,” said Mrs. Fink.

“How awfully thoughtful,” said Ellen.

“And here we thought all along she just wanted to rub our noses in her new car, her new clothes, and her new hairdo,” said Confido.

“I thought I’d get prettied up a little, because George is going to take me to lunch at the Bronze Room,” said Mrs. Fink.

“A man *should* get away from his secretary from time to time, if only with his wife,” said Confido. “Occasional separate vacations keep romance alive, even after years and years.”

“Have you got company, dear?” said Mrs. Fink. “Am I keeping you from something?”

“Hm-mm?” said Ellen absently. “Company? Oh—no, no.”

“You acted like you were listening for something or something.”

“I did?” said Ellen. “That’s strange. You must have imagined it.”

“With all the imagination of a summer squash,” said Confido.

“Well, I must dash,” said Mrs. Fink, racing her great engine.

“Don’t blame you for trying to run away from yourself,” said Confido, “but it can’t be done—not even in a Buick.”

“Ta ta,” said Ellen.

“She’s really awfully sweet,” Ellen said in her thoughts to Confido. “I don’t know why you had to say those awful things.”

“Aaaaaaaaah,” said Confido. “Her whole life is trying to make other women feel like two cents.”

“All right—say that *is* so,” said Ellen, “it’s all the poor thing’s got, and she’s harmless.”

“Harmless, harmless,” said Confido. “Sure, she’s harmless, her crooked husband’s harmless and a poor thing, everybody’s harmless. And, after arriving at that bighearted conclusion, what have you got left for yourself? What does that leave you to think about anything?”

“Now, I’m simply not going to put up with you anymore,” said Ellen, reaching for the earpiece.

“Why not?” said Confido. “We’re having the time of your life.” It chuckled. “Saaaay, listen—won’t the stuffy old biddies around here like the Duchess Fink curl up and die with envy when the Bowerses put on a little dog for a change. Eh? That’ll show ’em the good and honest

win out in the long run.”

“The good and honest?”

“*You*—you and Henry, by God,” said Confido. “That’s who. Who else?”

Ellen’s hand came down from the earpiece. It started up again, but as a not very threatening gesture, ending in her grasping a broom.

“That’s just a nasty neighborhood rumor about Mr. Fink and his secretary,” she thought.

“Heah?” said Confido. “Where there’s smoke—”

“And he’s not a crook.”

“Look into those shifty, weak blue eyes, look at those fat lips made for cigars and tell me that,” said Confido.

“Now, now,” thought Ellen. “That’s enough. There’s been absolutely no proof—”

“Still waters run deep,” said Confido. It was silent for a moment. “And I don’t mean just the Finks. This whole neighborhood is still water. Honest to God, somebody ought to write a book about it. Just take this block alone, starting at the corner with the Kramers. Why, look at her, you’d think she was the quietest, most proper ...”

“Ma, Ma—hey, Ma,” said her son several hours later. “Ma—you sick? Hey, Ma!”

“And *that* brings us to the Fitzgibbonses,” Confido was saying. “That poor little, dried-up, sawed-off, henpecked—”

“Ma!” cried Paul.

“Oh!” said Ellen, opening her eyes. “You startled me. What are you children doing home from school?” She was sitting in her kitchen rocker, half-dazed.

“It’s after three, Ma. Whuddya think?”

“Oh, dear—is it that late? Where on earth has the day gone?”

“Can I listen, Ma—can I listen to Confido?”

“It’s not for children to listen to,” said Ellen, shocked. “I should say not. It’s strictly for grown-ups.”

“Can’t we just look at it?”

With cruel feat of will, Ellen disengaged Confido from her ear and blouse, and laid it on the table. “There—you see? That’s all there is to it.”

“Boy—a billion dollars lying right there,” said Paul softly. “Sure doesn’t look like much, does it? A cool billion.” He was giving an expert imitation of his father on the night before. “Can I have a motorcycle?”

“Everything takes time, Paul,” said Ellen.

“What are you doing with your housecoat on so late?” said her daughter.

“I was *just* going to change it,” said Ellen.

She had been in the bedroom just a moment, her mind seething with neighborhood scandal.

half-heard in the past, now refreshed and ornamented by Confido, when there were bitter shouts in the kitchen.

She rushed into the kitchen to find Susan crying, and Paul red and defiant. Confido had an earpiece in his ear.

“Paul!” said Ellen.

“I don’t care,” said Paul. “I’m *glad* I listened. Now I know the truth—I know the whole secret.”

“He pushed me,” sobbed Susan.

“Confido said to,” said Paul.

“Paul,” said Ellen, horrified. “What secret are you talking about? What secret, dear?”

“I’m not your son,” he said sullenly.

“Of *course* you are!”

“Confido says I’m not,” said Paul. “Confido says I’m adopted. Susan’s the one you love, and that’s why I get a raw deal around here.”

“Paul—darling, darling. It simply isn’t true. I promise. I swear it. And I don’t know what on earth you mean by raw deals—”

“Confido says it’s true all right,” said Paul stoutly.

Ellen leaned against the kitchen table and rubbed her temples. Suddenly, she leaned forward and snatched Confido from Paul.

“Give me that filthy little beast!” she said. She strode angrily out of the back door with it.

“Hey!” said Henry, doing a buck-and-wing through his front door, and sailing his hat, as he had never done before, onto the coatrack in the hall. “Guess what? The breadwinner’s home!”

Ellen appeared in the kitchen doorway and gave him a sickly smile. “Hi.”

“There’s my girl,” said Henry, “and have I got good news for you. This is a great day! I haven’t got a job anymore. Isn’t that swell? They’ll take me back any time I want a job, and that’ll be when Hell freezes over.”

“Um,” said Ellen.

“The Lord helps those who help themselves,” said Henry, “and here’s one man who just got both hands free.”

“Huh,” said Ellen.

Young Paul and Susan appeared on either side of her to peer bleakly at their father.

“What is this?” said Henry. “It’s like a funeral parlor.”

“Mom buried it, Pop,” said Paul hoarsely. “She buried Confido.”

“She did—she really did,” said Susan wonderingly. “Under the hydrangeas.”

“Henry, I had to,” said Ellen desolately, throwing her arms around him. “It was us or it.”

Henry pushed her away. “Buried it,” he murmured, shaking his head. “Buried it? All you had to do was turn it off.”

Slowly, he walked through the house and into the backyard, his family watching in awe. He hunted for the grave under the shrubs without asking for directions.

He opened the grave, wiped the dirt from Confido with his handkerchief, and put the earpiece in his ear, cocking his head and listening intently.

“It’s all right, it’s O.K.,” he said softly. He turned to Ellen. “What on earth got into you?”

“What did it say?” said Ellen. “What did it just say to you, Henry?”

He sighed and looked awfully tired. “It said somebody else would cash in on it sooner or later, if we didn’t.”

“Let them,” said Ellen.

“Why?” demanded Henry. He looked at her challengingly, but his firmness decayed quickly, and he looked away.

“If you’ve talked to Confido, you *know* why,” said Ellen. “Don’t you?”

Henry kept his eyes down. “It’ll sell, it’ll sell, it’ll sell,” he murmured. “My God, how it sell.”

“It’s a direct wire to the worst in us, Henry,” said Ellen. She burst into tears. “Nobody should have that, Henry, nobody! That little voice is loud enough as it is.”

An autumn silence, muffled in moldering leaves, settled over the yard, broken only by Henry’s faint whistling through his teeth. “Yeah,” he said at last. “I know.”

He removed Confido from his ear, and laid it gently in its grave once more. He kicked dirt in on top of it.

“What’s the last thing it said, Pop?” said Paul.

Henry grinned wistfully. “I’ll be seeing you, sucker. I’ll be seeing you.”

The word *snafu*, derived from the initials of *situation normal, all fouled up*, was welcomed in the American language during World War II, and remains a useful part of the language today. *Fubar*, a closely related word, was coined at about the same time, and is now all but forgotten. *Fubar* is worthy of a better fate, meaning as it does *fouled up beyond all recognition*. It is a particularly useful and interesting word in that it describes a misfortune brought about not by malice but by administrative accidents in some large and complex organization.

Fuzz Littler, for instance, was fubar in the General Forge and Foundry Company. He was familiar with the word *fubar*—had to hear it only once to know it fit him like a pair of stretched nylon bikini shorts. He was fubar in the Ilium Works of GF&F, which consisted of five hundred and twenty-seven numbered buildings. He became fubar in the classic way, which is to say that he was the victim of a temporary arrangement that became permanent.

Fuzz Littler belonged to the Public Relations Department, and all the public relations people were supposed to be in Building 22. But Building 22 was full up when Fuzz came to work, so they found a temporary desk for Fuzz in an office by the elevator machinery on the top floor of Building 181.

Building 181 had nothing to do with public relations. With the exception of Fuzz's one-man operation, it was devoted entirely to research into semiconductors. Fuzz shared the office with a typist with a crystallographer named Dr. Lomar Horthy. Fuzz stayed there for eight years, a freak to those he was among, a ghost to those he should have been among. His superiors bore him no malice. They simply kept forgetting about him.

Fuzz did not quit for the simple and honorable reason that he was the sole support of his very sick mother. But the price of being passively fubar was high. Inevitably, Fuzz became listless, cynical, and profoundly introverted.

And then, at the start of Fuzz's ninth year with the company, when Fuzz himself was twenty-nine, Fate took a hand. Fate sent grease from the Building 181 cafeteria up the elevator shaft. The grease collected on the elevator machinery, caught fire, and Building 181 burned to the ground.

But there still wasn't any room for Fuzz in Building 22, where he belonged, so they fixed him up a temporary office in the basement of Building 523, clear at the end of the company bus line.

Building 523 was the company gym.

One nice thing, anyway—nobody could use the gym facilities except on weekends and after five in the afternoon, so Fuzz didn't have to put up with people swimming and bowling and dancing and playing basketball around him while he was trying to work. Sounds of playfulness would have been not only distracting but almost too mocking to bear. Fuzz

caring for his sick mother, had never had time to play in all his fubar days.

Another nice thing was that Fuzz had finally achieved the rank of supervisor. He was so isolated out in the gym that he couldn't borrow anybody else's typist. Fuzz had to have a girl all his own.

Now Fuzz was sitting in his new office, listening to the showerheads dribble on the other side of the wall and waiting for the new girl to arrive.

It was nine o'clock in the morning.

Fuzz jumped. He heard the great, echoing *ka-boom* of the entrance door slamming shut upstairs. He assumed that the new girl had entered the building, since not another soul in the world had any business there.

It was not necessary for Fuzz to guide the new girl across the basketball court, past the bowling alleys, down the iron stairway, and over the duckboards to his office door. The buildings and grounds people had marked the way with arrows, each arrow bearing the legend GENERAL COMPANY RESPONSE SECTION, PUBLIC RELATIONS DEPARTMENT.

Fuzz had been the General Company Response Section of the Public Relations Department during his entire fubar career with the company. As that section he wrote replies to letters that were addressed simply to the General Forge and Foundry Company at large, letters that couldn't logically be referred to any company operation in particular. Half the letters didn't even make sense. But no matter how foolish and rambling the letters might be, it was Fuzz's duty to reply to them warmly, to prove what the Public Relations Department proved tirelessly—that the General Forge and Foundry Company had a heart as big as all outdoors.

Now the footsteps of Fuzz's new girl were coming down the stairway cautiously. She didn't have much faith in what the arrows said, apparently. Her steps were hesitant, were sometimes light enough to be on tiptoe.

There was the sound of a door opening, and the open door loosed a swarm of tinny, nightmarish little echoes. The girl had made a false turn, then, had mistakenly opened the door to the swimming pool.

She let the door fall shut with a *blam*.

On she came again, back on the right path. The duckboards creaked and squished under her. She knocked on the door of the General Company Response Section of the Public Relations Department.

Fuzz opened the office door.

Fuzz was thunderstruck. Smiling up at him was the merriest, prettiest little girl he'd ever seen. She was a flawless little trinket, a freshly minted woman, surely not a day older than eighteen.

"Mr. Littler?" she said.

"Yes?" said Fuzz.

"I'm Francine Pefko." She inclined her sweet head in enchanting humility. "You're my new supervisor."

Fuzz was almost speechless with embarrassment, for here was infinitely more girl than the

General Company Response Section could handle with any grace. Fuzz had assumed that he would be sent a dispirited and drab woman, an unimaginative drudge who could be glumly content with a fubar supervisor in fubar surroundings. He had not taken into account the Personnel Department's card machines, to whom a girl was simply a girl.

"Come in—come in," said Fuzz emptily.

Francine entered the miserable little office, still smiling, vibrant with optimism and good health. She had obviously just joined the company, for she carried all the pamphlets that new employees were given on their first day.

And, like so many girls on their first day, Francine was what one of her pamphlets would call *overdressed for work*. The heels of her shoes were much too slender and high. Her dress was frivolous and provocative, and she was a twinkling constellation of costume jewels.

"This is nice," she said.

"It is?" said Fuzz.

"Is this my desk?" she said.

"Yes," said Fuzz. "That's it."

She sat down springily in the revolving posture chair that was hers, stripped the cover from her typewriter, twittered her fingers over the keys. "I'm ready to go to work any time you are, Mr. Littler," she said.

"Yes—all righty," said Fuzz. He dreaded setting to work, for there was no way in which he could glamorize it. In showing this pert creature what his work was, he was going to display to her the monumental pointlessness of himself and his job.

"This is my very first minute of my very first hour of my very first day of my very first job," said Francine, her eyes shining.

"That so?" said Fuzz.

"Yes," said Francine. In all innocence, Francine Pefko now spoke a simple sentence that was heartbreakingly poetic to Fuzz. The sentence reminded Fuzz, with the ruthlessness of great poetry, that his basic misgivings about Francine were not occupational but erotic.

What Francine said was this: "*I came here straight from the Girl Pool.*" In speaking of the Girl Pool, she was doing no more than giving the proper name to the reception and assignment center maintained by the company for new woman employees.

But when Fuzz heard those words, his mind whirled with images of lovely young women like Francine, glistening young women, rising from cool, deep water, begging aggressively successful young men to woo them. In Fuzz's mind, the desirable images all passed him by and avoided his ardent glances. Such beautiful creatures would have nothing to do with a man who was fubar.

Fuzz looked at Francine uneasily. Not only was she, so fresh and desirable from the Girl Pool, going to discover that her supervisor had a very poor job. She was going to conclude, as well, that her supervisor wasn't much of a man at all.

The normal morning workload in the General Company Response Section was about fifteen

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