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Beyond the Zero

Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death.

—WERNHER VON BRAUN

ASCREAMING COMES ACROSS THE SKY. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to no.

It is too late. The Evacuation still proceeds, but it's all theatre. There are no lights inside the cars. No light anywhere. Above him lift girders old as an iron queen, and glass somewhere far above that would let the light of day through. But it's night. He's afraid of the way the glass will fall—soon—it will be a spectacle: the fall of a crystal palace. But coming down in total blackout, without one glint of light, only great invisible crashing.

Inside the carriage, which is built on several levels, he sits in velveteen darkness, with nothing to smoke, feeling metal nearer and farther rub and connect, steam escaping in puffs, a vibration in the carriage's frame, a poisoning, an uneasiness, all the others pressed in around, feeble ones, second sheep, all out of luck and time: drunks, old veterans still in shock from ordnance 20 years obsolete, hustlers in city clothes, derelicts, exhausted women with more children than it seems could belong to anyone, stacked about among the rest of the things to be carried out to salvation. Only the nearer faces are visible at all, and at that only as half-silvered images in a view finder, green-stained VIP faces remembered behind bulletproof windows speeding through the city. . .

They have begun to move. They pass in line, out of the main station, out of downtown, and begin pushing into older and more desolate parts of the city. Is this the way out? Faces turn to the windows, but no one dares ask, not out loud. Rain comes down. No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into*—they go in under archways, secret entrances of rotted concrete that only looked like loops of an underpass . . . certain trestles of blackened wood have moved slowly by overhead, and the smells begun of coal from days far to the past, smells of naphtha winters, of Sundays when no traffic came through, of the coral-like and mysteriously vital growth, around the blind curves and out the lonely spurs, a sour smell of rolling-stock absence, of maturing rust, developing through those emptying days brilliant and deep, especially at dawn, with blue shadows to seal its passage, to try to bring events to Absolute Zero . . . and it is poorer the deeper they go . . . ruinous secret cities of poor, places whose *names he has never heard*. . . the walls break down, the roofs get fewer and so do the chances for light. The road, which ought to be opening out into a broader highway, instead has been getting narrower, more broken, cornering tighter and tighter until all at once, much too soon, they are under the final arch: brakes

grab and spring terribly. It is a judgment from which there is no appeal.

The caravan has halted. It is the end of the line. All the evacuees are ordered out. They move slowly, but without resistance. Those marshaling them wear cockades the color of lead, and do not speak. It is some vast, very old and dark hotel, an iron extension of the track and switchery by which they have come here. . . . Globular lights, painted a dark green, hang from under the fancy iron eaves, unlit for centuries . . . the crowd moves without murmurs or coughing down corridors straight and functional as warehouse aisles . . . velvet black surfaces contain the movement: the smell is of old wood, of remote wings empty all this time just reopened to accommodate the rush of souls, of cold plaster where all the rats have died, only their ghosts, still as cave-painting, fixed stubborn and luminous in the walls . . . the evacuees are taken in lots, by elevator—a moving wood scaffold open on all sides, hoisted by old tarry ropes and cast-iron pulleys whose spokes are shaped like Ss. At each brown floor, passengers move on and off. . . thousands of these hushed rooms without light. . . .

Some wait alone, some share their invisible rooms with others. Invisible, yes, what do the furnishings matter, at this stage of things? Underfoot crunches the oldest of city dirt, last crystallizations of all the city had denied, threatened, lied to its children. Each has been hearing a voice, one he thought was talking only to him, say, “You

didn't really believe you'd be saved. Come, we all know who we are by now. No one was ever going to take the trouble to save *you*, old fellow. . . .”

There is no way out. Lie and wait, lie still and be quiet. Screaming holds across the sky. When it comes, will it come in darkness, or will it bring its own light? Will the light come before or after?

But it is already light. How long has it been light? All this while, light has come percolating in, along with the cold morning air flowing now across his nipples: it has begun to reveal an assortment of drunken wastrels, some in uniform and some not, clutching empty or near-empty bottles, here draped over a chair, there huddled into a cold fireplace, or sprawled on various divans, un-Hoovered rugs and chaise longues down the different levels of the enormous room, snoring and wheezing at many rhythms, in self-renewing chorus, as London light, winter and elastic light, grows between the faces of the mullioned windows, grows among the strata of last night's smoke still hung, fading, from the waxed beams of the ceiling. All these horizontal here, these comrades in arms, look just as rosy as a bunch of Dutch peasants dreaming of their certain resurrection in the next few minutes.

His name is Capt. Geoffrey (“Pirate”) Prentice. He is wrapped in a thick blanket, a tartan of orange, rust, and scarlet. His skull feels made of metal.

Just above him, twelve feet overhead, Teddy Bloat is about to fall out of the minstrels’ gallery, having chosen to collapse just at the spot where somebody in a grandiose fit, weeks before, had kicked out two of the ebony balusters. Now, in his stupor, Bloat has been inching through the opening, head, arms, and torso, until all that’s keeping him up there is an empty champagne split in his hip pocket, that’s got hooked somehow—

By now Pirate has managed to sit up on his narrow bachelor bed, and blink about. How awful. How bloody awful . . . above him, he hears cloth rip. The Special Operations Executive has trained him to fast responses. He leaps off of the cot and kicks it rolling on its casters in Bloat’s direction. Bloat, plummeting, hits square amidships with a great strum of bedsprings. One of the legs collapses. “Good morning,” notes Pirate. Bloat smiles briefly and goes back to sleep, snuggling well into Pirate’s blanket.

Bloat is one of the co-tenants of the place, a maisonette erected last century, not far from the Chelsea Embankment, by Corydon Throsp, an acquaintance of the Rossettis’ who wore hair smocks and liked to cultivate pharmaceutical plants up on the roof (a tradition young Osbie Feel has lately revived), a few of them hardy enough to survive fogs and frosts, but most returning, as fragments of peculiar alkaloids, to rooftop earth, along with manure from a trio of prize Wes-sex Saddleback sows quartered there by Throsp’s successor, and dead leaves off many decorative trees transplanted to the roof by later tenants, and the odd un stomachable meal thrown or vomited there by this or that sensitive epicurean—all got scumbled together, eventually, by the knives of the seasons, to an impasto, feet thick, of unbelievable black topsoil in which anything could grow, not the least being bananas. Pirate, driven to despair by the wartime banana shortage, decided to build a glass hothouse on the roof, and persuade a friend who flew the Rio-to-Ascension-to-Fort-Lamy run to pinch him a sapling banana tree or two, in exchange for a German camera, should Pirate happen across one on his next mission by parachute.

Pirate has become famous for his Banana Breakfast. Messmates throng here from all over England, even some who are allergic or outright hostile to bananas, just to watch—for the politics of bacteria, the soil’s stringing of rings and chains in nets only God can tell the meshes of, have seen the fruit thrive often to lengths of a foot and a half, yes amazing but true.

Pirate in the lavatory stands pissing, without a thought in his head. Then he

threads himself into a wool robe he wears inside out so as to keep his cigarette pocket hidden, not that this works too well, and circling the warm bodies of friends makes his way to French windows, slides outside into the cold, groans as it hits the fillings in his teeth, climbs a spiral ladder ringing to the roof garden and stands for a bit, watching the river. The sun is still below the horizon. The day feels like rain, but for now the air is uncommonly clear. The great power station, and the gasworks beyond, stand precisely: crystals grown in morning's beaker, stacks, vents, towers, plumbing, gnarled emissions of steam and smoke. . . .

"Hhahh," Pirate in a voiceless roar watching his breath slip away over the parapets, "hhaahhh!" Rooftops dance in the morning. His giant bananas cluster, radiant yellow, humid green. His companions below dream drooling of a Banana Breakfast. This well-scrubbed day ought to be no worse than any—

Will it? Far to the east, down in the pink sky, something has just sparked, very brightly. A new star, nothing less noticeable. He leans on the parapet to watch. The brilliant point has already become a short vertical white line. It must be somewhere out over the North Sea . . . at least that far . . . icefields below and a cold smear of sun. . . .

What is it? Nothing like this ever happens. But Pirate knows it, after all. He has seen it in a film, just in the last fortnight. . . it's a vapor trail. Already a finger's width higher now. But not from an airplane.

Airplanes are not launched vertically. This is the new, and still Most Secret, German rocket bomb.

"Incoming mail." Did he whisper that, or only think it? He tightens the ragged belt of his robe. Well, the range of these things is supposed to be over 200 miles. You can't see a vapor trail 200 miles, now, can you.

Oh. Oh, yes: around the curve of the Earth, farther east, the sun over there, just risen over in Holland, is striking the rocket's exhaust, drops and crystals, making them blaze clear across the sea. . . .

The white line, abruptly, has stopped its climb. That would be fuel cutoff, end of burning, what's their word . . . Brennschluss. We don't have one. Or else it's classified. The bottom of the line, the original star, has already begun to vanish in red daybreak. But the rocket will be here before Pirate sees the sun rise.

The trail, smudged, slightly torn in two or three directions, hangs in the sky. Already the rocket, gone pure ballistic, has risen higher. But invisible now.

Oughtn't he to be doing something . . . get on to the operations room at

Stanmore, they must have it on the Channel radars—no: no time, really. Less than five minutes Hague to here (the time it takes to walk down to the teashop on the corner . . . for light from the sun to reach the planet of love . . . no time at all). Run out in the street? Warn the others?

Pick bananas. He trudges through black compost in to the hothouse. He feels he's about to shit. The missile, sixty miles high, must be coming up on the peak of its trajectory by now . . . beginning its fall. . . *now*. . .

Trusswork is pierced by daylight, milky panes beam beneficently down. How could there be a winter—even this one—gray enough to age this iron that can sing in the wind, or cloud these windows that open into another season, however falsely preserved?

Pirate looks at his watch. Nothing registers. The pores of his face are prickling. Emptying his mind—a Commando trick—he steps into the wet heat of his bananery, sets about picking the ripest and the best, holding up the skirt of his robe to drop them in. Allowing himself to count only bananas, moving barelegged among the pendulous bunches, among these yellow chandeliers, this tropical twilight. . .

Out into the winter again. The contrail is gone entirely from the sky. Pirate's sweat lies on his skin almost as cold as ice.

He takes some time lighting a cigarette. He won't hear the thing come in. It travels faster than the speed of sound. The first news you get of it is the blast. Then, if you're still around, you hear the sound of it coming in.

What if it should hit *exactly*—ahh, no—for a split second you'd have to feel the very point, with the terrible mass above, strike the top of the skull. . .

Pirate hunches his shoulders, bearing his bananas down the corkscrew ladder.



Across a blue tile patio, in through a door to the kitchen. Routine: plug in American blending machine won from Yank last summer, some poker game, table stakes, B.O.Q. somewhere in the north, never remember now. . . Chop several bananas into pieces. Make coffee in urn. Get can of milk from cooler. Puree 'nanas in milk. Lovely. *I would coat all the booze-corroded stomachs of England*. . . Bit of marge, still smells all right, melt in skillet. Peel more bananas, slice lengthwise. Marge sizzling, in go long slices. Light oven *whoomp* blow us all up someday oh, ha, ha, yes. Peeled whole bananas to go on broiler grill soon as

it heats. Find marshmallows. . . .

In staggers Teddy Bloat with Pirate's blanket over his head, slips on a banana peel and falls on his ass. "Kill myself," he mumbles.

"The Germans will do it for you. Guess what I saw from the roof."

"That V-2 on the way?"

"A4, yes."

"I watched it out the window. About ten minutes ago. Looked queer, didn't it. Haven't heard a thing since, have you. It must have fallen short. Out to sea or something."

"Ten minutes?" Trying to read the time on his watch.

"At least." Bloat is sitting on the floor, working the banana peel into a pajama lapel for a boutonnière.

Pirate goes to the phone and rings up Stanmore after all. Has to go through the usual long, long routine, but knows he's already stopped believing in the rocket he saw. God has plucked it for him, out of its airless sky, like a steel banana. "Prentice here, did you have anything like a pip from Holland a moment ago. Aha. Aha. Yes, we *saw* it." This could ruin a man's taste for sunrises. He rings off. "They lost it over the coast. They're calling it premature Brennschluss."

"Cheer up," Teddy crawling back toward the busted cot. "There'll be more."

Good old Bloat, always the positive word. Pirate for a few seconds there, waiting to talk to Stanmore, was thinking, Danger's over, Banana Breakfast is saved. But it's only a reprieve. Isn't it. There will indeed be others, each just as likely to land on top of him. No one either side of the front knows exactly how many more. Will we have to stop watching the sky?

Osbie Feel stands in the minstrels' gallery, holding one of the biggest of Pirate's bananas so that it protrudes out the fly of his striped pajama bottoms—stroking with his other hand the great jaundiced curve in triplets against 4/4 toward the ceiling, he acknowledges dawn with the following:

Time to gather your arse up off the floor,
 (have a bana-na)
Brush your teeth and go toddling off to war.
Wave your hand to sleepy land,
Kiss those dreams away,
Tell Miss Grable you're not able,
Not till V-E Day, oh,

Ev'rything'll be grand in Civvie Street
(have a bana-na)
Bubbly wine and girls wiv lips so sweet—
But there's still the German or two to fight,
So show us a smile that's shiny bright,
And then, as we may have suggested once before—
Gather yer blooming arse up off the floor!

There's a second verse, but before he can get quite into it, prancing Osbie is leaped upon and thoroughly pummeled, in part with his own stout banana, by Bartley Gobbitch, DeCoverley Pox, and Maurice ("Saxophone") Reed, among others. In the kitchen, black-market marshmallows slide languid into syrup atop Pirate's double boiler, and soon begin thickly to bubble. Coffee brews. On a wooden pub sign daringly taken, one daylight raid, by a drunken Bartley Gobbitch, across which still survives in intaglio the legend SNIPE AND SHAFT, Teddy Bloat is mincing bananas with a great isosceles knife, from beneath whose nervous blade Pirate with one hand shovels the blonde mash into waffle batter resilient with fresh hens' eggs, for which Osbie Feel has exchanged an equal number of golf balls, these being even rarer this winter than real eggs, other hand blending the fruit in, not overvigorously, with a wire whisk, whilst surly Osbie himself, sucking frequently at a half-pint milk bottle filled with Vat 69 and water, tends to the bananas in the skillet and broiler. Near the exit to the blue patio, DeCoverley Pox and Joaquin Stick stand by a concrete scale model of the Jungfrau, which some enthusiast back during the twenties spent a painstaking year modeling and casting before finding out it was too large to get out of any door, socking the slopes of the famous mountain with red rubber hot-water bags full of ice cubes, the idea being to pulverize the ice for Pirate's banana frappés. With their nights' growths of beard, matted hair, bloodshot eyes, miasmata of foul breath, DeCoverley and Joaquin are wasted gods urging on a tardy glacier.

Elsewhere in the maisonette, other drinking companions disentangle from blankets (one spilling wind from his, dreaming of a parachute), piss into bathroom sinks, look at themselves with dismay in concave shaving mirrors, slap water with no clear plan in mind onto heads of thinning hair, struggle into Sam Brownes, dub shoes against rain later in the day with hand muscles already weary of it, sing snatches of popular songs whose tunes they don't always know, lie, believing themselves warmed, in what patches of the new sunlight come

between the mullions, begin tentatively to talk shop as a way of easing into whatever it is they'll have to be doing in less than an hour, lather necks and faces, yawn, pick their noses, search cabinets or bookcases for the hair of the dog that not without provocation and much prior conditioning bit them last night.

Now there grows among all the rooms, replacing the night's old smoke, alcohol and sweat, the fragile, musaceous odor of Breakfast: flowery, permeating, surprising, more than the color of winter sunlight, taking over not so much through any brute pungency or volume as by the high intricacy to the weaving of its molecules, sharing the conjuror's secret by which—though it is not often Death is told so clearly to fuck off—the living genetic chains prove even labyrinthine enough to preserve some human face down ten or twenty generations . . . so the same assertion-through-structure allows this war morning's banana fragrance to meander, repossess, prevail. Is there any reason not to open every window, and let the kind scent blanket all Chelsea? As a spell, against falling objects. . . .

With a clattering of chairs, upended shell cases, benches, and ottomans, Pirate's mob gather at the shores of the great refectory table, a southern island well across a tropic or two from chill Corydon Throsp's mediaeval fantasies, crowded now over the swirling dark grain of its walnut uplands with banana omelets, banana sandwiches, banana casseroles, mashed bananas molded in the shape of a British lion rampant, blended with eggs into batter for French toast, squeezed out a pastry nozzle across the quivering creamy reaches of a banana blancmange to spell out the words *C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre* (attributed to a French observer during the Charge of the Light Brigade) which Pirate has appropriated as his motto . . . tall cruets of pale banana syrup to pour oozing over banana waffles, a giant glazed crock where diced bananas have been fermenting since the summer with wild honey and muscat raisins, up out of which, this winter morning, one now dips foam mugsfull of banana mead . . . banana croissants and banana kreplach, and banana oatmeal and banana jam and banana bread, and bananas flamed in ancient brandy Pirate brought back last year from a cellar in the Pyrenees also containing a clandestine radio transmitter . . .

The phone call, when it comes, rips easily across the room, the hangovers, the grabassing, the clatter of dishes, the shoptalk, the bitter chuckles, like a rude metal double-fart, and Pirate knows it's got to be for him. Bloat, who's nearest, takes it, forkful of *bananes glacées* poised fashionably in the air. Pirate takes up a last dipper of mead, feels it go valving down his throat as if it's time, time in its

summer tranquility, he swallows.

“Your employer.”

“It’s not fair,” Pirate moans, “I haven’t even done me morning pushups yet.”

The voice, which he’s heard only once before—last year at a briefing, hands and face blackened, anonymous among a dozen other listeners—tells Pirate now there’s a message addressed to him, waiting at Greenwich.

“It came over in a rather delightful way,” the voice high-pitched and sullen, “none of *my* friends are that clever. All *my* mail arrives by post. Do come collect it, won’t you, Prentice.” Receiver hits cradle a violent whack, connection breaks, and now Pirate knows where this morning’s rocket landed, and why there was no explosion. Incoming mail, indeed. He gazes through sunlight’s buttresses, back down the refectory at the others, wallowing in their plenitude of bananas, thick palatals of their hunger lost somewhere in the stretch of morning between them and himself. A hundred miles of it, so suddenly. Solitude, even among the meshes of this war, can when it wishes so take him by the blind gut and touch, as now, possessively. Pirate’s again some other side of a window, watching strangers eat breakfast.

He’s driven out, away, east over Vauxhall Bridge in a dented green Lagonda by his batman, a Corporal Wayne. The morning seems to grow colder the higher the sun rises. Clouds begin to gather after all. A crew of American sappers spills into the road, on route to clear some ruin nearby, singing:

It’s . . .

Colder than the nipple on a witch’s tit!

Colder than a bucket of penguin shit!

Colder than the hairs of a polar bear’s ass!

Colder than the frost on a champagne glass!

No, they are making believe to be narodnik, but / know, they are of lasi, of Codreanu, *his* men, men of the League, they . . . they kill for him—they have *oath!* They try to kill me . . . Transylvanian Magyars, they know *spells* . . . at night they whisper. . . . Well, hrrump, heh, heh, here comes Pirate’s Condition creeping over him again, when he’s least expecting it as usual—might as well mention here that much of what the dossiers call Pirate Prentice is a strange talent for—well, for getting inside the fantasies of others: being able, actually, to take over the burden of *managing* them, in this case those of an exiled Rumanian

royalist who may prove needed in the very near future. It is a gift the Firm has found uncommonly useful: at this time mentally healthy leaders and other historical figures are indispensable. What better way to cup and bleed them of excess anxiety than to get someone to take over the running of their exhausting little daydreams for them . . . to live in the tame green lights of their tropical refuges, in the breezes through their cabanas, to drink their tall drinks, changing your seat to face the entrances of their public places, not letting their innocence suffer any more than it already has . . . to get their erections for them, at the oncome of thoughts the doctors feel are inappropriate . . . fear all, all that they cannot afford to fear . . . remembering the words of P. M. S. Blackett, "You can't run a war on gusts of emotion." Just hum the nitwit little tune they taught you, and try not to fuck up:

Yes—I'm—the—

Fellow that's hav-ing other peop-le's fan-tasies,

Suffering what they ought to be themselves—

No matter if Girly's on my knee—

If Kruppingham-Jones is late to tea,

I don't even get to ask for whom the bell's . . .

[Now over a lotta tubas and close-harmony trombones]

It never does seem to mat-ter if there's daaaanger,

For Danger's a roof I fell from long ago —

I'll be out-one-day and never come back,

Forget the bitter you owe me, Jack,

Just piss on m' grave and car-ry on the show!

He will then actually *skip* to and fro, with his knees high and twirling a walking stick with W. C. Fields' head, nose, top hat, and all, for its knob, and surely capable of magic, while the band plays a second chorus. Accompanying will be a phantasmagoria, a real one, rushing toward the screen, in over the heads of the audiences, on little tracks of an elegant Victorian cross section resembling the profile of a chess knight conceived fancifully but not vulgarly so—then rushing back out again, in and out, the images often changing scale so quickly, so unpredictably that you're apt now and then to get a bit of lime-green in with your rose, as they say. The scenes are highlights from Pirate's career as a fantasist-surrogate, and go back to when he was carrying, everywhere he went, the mark of Youthful Folly growing in an unmistakable Mongoloid point, right out of the middle of his head. He had known for a while that certain episodes

he dreamed could not be his own. This wasn't through any rigorous daytime analysis of content, but just because he *knew*. But then came the day when he met, for the first time, the real owner of a dream he, Pirate, had had: it was by a drinking fountain in a park, a very long, neat row of benches, a feeling of sea just over a landscaped rim of small cypresses, gray crushed stone on the walks looking soft to sleep on as the brim of a fedora, and here comes this buttonless and drooling derelict, the one you are afraid of ever meeting, to pause and watch two Girl Guides trying to adjust the water pressure of the fountain. They bent over, unaware, the saucy darlings, of the fatal strips of white cotton knickers thus displayed, the undercurves of baby-fat little buttocks a blow to the Genital Brain, however pixilated. The tramp laughed and pointed, he looked back at Pirate then and said something extraordinary: "Eh? Girl Guides start pumping water . . . *your sound will be the sizzling night* . . . eh?" staring directly at no one but Pirate now, no more pretense. . . . Well, Pirate had dreamed these very words, morning before last, just before waking, they'd been part of the usual list of prizes in a Competition grown crowded and perilous, out of some indoor intervention of charcoal streets . . . he couldn't remember that well . . . scared out of his wits by now, he replied, "Go away, or I will call a policeman."

It took care of the immediate problem for him. But sooner or later the time would come when someone else would find out his gift,

someone to whom it mattered—he had a long-running fantasy of his own, rather a Eugène Sue melodrama, in which he would be abducted by an organization of dacoits or Sicilians, and used for unspeakable purposes.

In 1935 he had his first episode *outside* any condition of known sleep—it was during his Kipling Period, beastly Fuzzy-Wuzzies far as eye could see, dracunculiasis and Oriental sore rampant among the troops, no beer for a month, wireless being jammed by other Powers who would be masters of these horrid blacks, God knows why, and all folklore broken down, no Gary Grant larking in and out slipping elephant medicine in the punchbowls out here . . . not even an Arab With A Big Greasy Nose to perform on, as in that wistful classic every tommy's heard . . . small wonder that one fly-blown four in the afternoon, open-eyed, in the smell of rotting melon rinds, to the seventy-seven-millionth repetition of the outpost's only Gramophone record, Sandy MacPherson playing on his organ "The Changing of the Guard," what should develop for Pirate here but a sumptuous Oriental episode: vaulting lazily and well over the fence and sneaking in to town, to the Forbidden Quarter. There to stumble into an orgy held by a Messiah no one has quite recognized yet, and to know, as your

eyes meet, that you are his John the Baptist, his Nathan of Gaza, that it is you who must convince him of his Godhead, proclaim him to others, love him both profanely and in the Name of what he is . . . it could be no one's fantasy but H. A. Loaf's. There is at least one Loaf in every outfit, it is Loaf who keeps forgetting that those of the Moslem faith are not keen on having snaps taken of them in the street. . . it is Loaf who borrows one's shirt runs out of cigarettes finds the illicit one in your pocket and lights up in the canteen at high noon, where presently he is reeling about with a loose smile, addressing the sergeant commanding the red-cap section by his Christian name. So of course when Pirate makes the mistake of verifying the fantasy with Loaf, it's not very long at all before higher echelons know about it too. Into the dossier it goes, and eventually the Firm, in Their tireless search for negotiable skills, will summon him under Whitehall, to observe him in his trances across the blue baize fields and the terrible paper gaming, his eyes rolled back into his head reading old, glyptic old graffiti on his own sockets. . . .

The first few times nothing clicked. The fantasies were O.K. but belonged to nobody important. But the Firm is patient, committed to the Long Run as They are. At last, one proper Sherlock Holmes London evening, the unmistakable smell of gas came to Pirate from a dark street lamp, and out of the fog ahead materialized a giant, organlike form. Carefully, black-shod step by step, Pirate approached the thing. It began to slide forward to meet him, over the cobblestones slow as a snail, leaving behind some slime brightness of street-wake that could not have been from fog. In the space between them was a crossover point, which Pirate, being a bit faster, reached first. He reeled back, in horror, back past the point—but such recognitions are not reversible. *It was a giant Adenoid.* At least as big as St. Paul's, and growing hour by hour. London, perhaps all England, was in mortal peril!

This lymphatic monster had once blocked the distinguished pharynx of Lord Blatherard Osmo, who at the time occupied the Novi Pazar desk at the Foreign Office, an obscure penance for the previous century of British policy on the Eastern Question, for on this obscure sanjak had once hinged the entire fate of Europe:

Nobody knows-where, it is-on-the-map,
Who'd ever think-it, could start-such-a-flap?
Each Montenegrin, and Serbian too,
Waitin' for some-thing, right outa the blue—oh honey

Pack up my Glad-stone, 'n' brush off my suit,
And then light me up my bigfat, cigar—
If ya want my address, it's
That O-ri-ent Express,
To the san-jak of No-vi Pa-zar!

Chorus line of quite nubile young women naughtily attired in Busbies and jackboots dance around for a bit here while in another quarter Lord Blatherard Osmo proceeds to get *assimilated* by his own growing Adenoid, some horrible transformation of cell plasma it is quite beyond Edwardian medicine to explain . . . before long, tophats are littering the squares of Mayfair, cheap perfume hanging ownerless in the pub lights of the East End as the Adenoid continues on its rampage, not swallowing up its victims at random, no, the fiendish Adenoid has a *master plan*, it's choosing only certain personalities useful to it—there is a new election, a new pretention abroad in England here that throws the Home Office into hysterical and painful episodes of indecision . . . no one knows *what* to do . . . a halfhearted attempt is made to evacuate London, black phaetons clatter in massive ant-cortege over the trusswork bridges, observer balloons are stationed in the sky, “Got it in Hampstead Heath, just sitting *breathing*, like . . . going in, and out . . .” “Any sort of *sound* down there?” “Yes, it's horrible . . . like a stupendous *nose* sucking in snot. . . wait, now it's . . . beginning to . . .oh, *no* . . . oh, God, I can't describe it, it's so beast—” the wire is snapped, the transmission ends, the balloon rises into the teal-blue daybreak. Teams come down from the Cavendish Laboratory, to string the Heath with huge magnets, electric-arc terminals, black iron control panels mil of gauges and cranks, the Army shows up in full battle gear with bombs full of the latest deadly gas—the Adenoid is blasted, electric-shocked, poisoned, changes color and shape here and there, yellow fat-nodes appear high over the trees . . . before the flash-powder cameras of the Press, a hideous green pseudopod crawls toward the cordon of troops and suddenly *ssbblop!* wipes out an entire observation post with a deluge of some disgusting orange mucus in which the unfortunate men are *digested*—not screaming but actually laughing, *enjoying* themselves. . . .

Pirate/Osmo's mission is to establish liaison with the Adenoid. The situation is now stable, the Adenoid occupies all of St. James's, the historic buildings are no more, Government offices have been relocated, but so dispersed that communication among them is highly uncertain—postmen are being snatched off of their rounds by stiff-pimpled Adenoid tentacles of fluorescent beige,

telegraph wires are apt to go down at any whim of the Adenoid. Each morning Lord Blatherard Osmo must put on his bowler, and take his briefcase out to the Adenoid to make his daily *démarche*. It is taking up so much of his time he's begun to neglect Novi Pazar, and P.O. is worried. In the thirties balance-of-power thinking was still quite strong, the diplomats were all down with Balkanosis, spies with foreign hybrid names lurked in all the stations of the Ottoman rump, code messages in a dozen Slavic tongues were being tattooed on bare upper lips over which the operatives then grew mustaches, to be shaved off only by authorized crypto officers and skin then grafted over the messages by the Firm's plastic surgeons . . . their lips were palimpsests of secret flesh, scarred and unnaturally white, by which they all knew each other.

Novi Pazar, anyhow, was still a *croix mystique* on the palm of Europe, and EO. finally decided to go to the Firm for help. The Firm knew just the man.

Every day, for 2 1/2 years, Pirate went out to visit the St. James Adenoid. It nearly drove him crazy. Though he was able to develop a pidgin by which he and the Adenoid could communicate, unfortunately he wasn't nasally equipped to make the sounds too well, and it got to be an awful chore. As the two of them snuffled back and forth, alienists in black seven-button suits, admirers of Dr. Freud the Adenoid clearly had no use for, stood on stepladders up against its loathsome grayish

flank shoveling the new wonderdrug cocaine—bringing *bods* full of the white substance, in relays, up the ladders to smear on the throbbing gland-creature, and into the germ toxins bubbling nastily inside its crypts, with no visible effects at all (though who knows how that *Adenoid* felt, eh?).

But Lord Blatherard Osmo was able at last to devote all of his time to Novi Pazar. Early in 1939, he was discovered mysteriously suffocated in a bathtub full of tapioca pudding, at the home of a Certain Viscountess. Some have seen in this the hand of the Firm. Months passed, World War II started, years passed, nothing was heard from Novi Pazar. Pirate Prentice had saved Europe from the Balkan Armageddon the old men dreamed of, giddy in their beds with its grandeur—though not from World War II, of course. But by then, the Firm was allowing Pirate only tiny homeopathic doses of peace, just enough to keep his defenses up, but not enough for it to poison him.

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

Teddy Bloat's on his lunch hour, but lunch today'll be, ack, a soggy banana

sandwich in wax paper, which he's packing inside his stylish kangaroohide musette bag and threaded around the odd necessities— midget spy-camera, jar of mustache wax, tin of licorice, menthol and capsicum Meloids for a Mellow Voice, gold-rim prescription sunglasses General MacArthur style, twin silver hairbrushes each in the shape of the flaming SHAEF sword, which Mother had Garrard's make up for him and which he considers exquisite.

His objective this dripping winter noon is a gray stone town house, neither large nor historic enough to figure in any guidebook, set back just out of sight of Grosvenor Square, somewhat off the official war-routes and corridors about the capital. When the typewriters happen to pause (8:20 and other mythical hours), and there are no flights of American bombers in the sky, and the motor traffic's not too heavy in Oxford Street, you can hear winter birds cheeping outside, busy at the feeders the girls have put up.

Flagstones are slippery with mist. It is the dark, hard, tobacco-starved, headachy, sour-stomach middle of the day, a million bureaucrats are diligently plotting death and some of them even know it, many about now are already into the second or third pint or highball glass, which produces a certain desperate aura here. But Bloat, going in the sandbagged entrance (provisional pyramids erected to gratify curious gods' offspring indeed), can't feel a bit of it: he's too busy running through plausible excuses should he happen to get caught, not that he will, you know. . . .

Girl at the main desk, gumpopping, good-natured bespectacled ATS, waves him on upstairs. Damp woolen aides on the way to staff meetings, W.C.s, an hour or two of earnest drinking, nod, not really seeing him, he's a well-known face, what's'isname's mate, Oxford chums aren't they, that lieutenant works down the hall at ACHTUNG. . . .

The old house has been subdivided by the slummakers of war. ACHTUNG is Allied Clearing House, Technical Units, Northern Germany. It's a stale-smoke paper warren, at the moment nearly deserted, its black typewriters tall as grave markers. The floor is filthy lino, there are no windows: the electric light is yellow, cheap, merciless. Bloat looks into the office assigned to his old Jesus College friend, Lt. Oliver ("Tantivy") Mucker-Maffick. No one's about. Tantivy and the Yank are both at lunch. Good. Out wiv the old camera then, on with the gooseneck lamp, now aim the reflector just so . . .

There must be cubicles like this all over the ETO: only the three dingy scuffed-cream fiberboard walls and no ceiling of its own. Tantivy shares it with an American colleague, Lt. Tyrone Slothrop. Their desks are at right angles,

so there's no eye contact but by squeaking around some 90°. Tantivy's desk is neat, Slothrop's is a godawful mess. It hasn't been cleaned down to the original wood surface since 1942. Things have fallen roughly into layers, over a base of bureaucratic smegma that sifts steadily to the bottom, made up of millions of tiny red and brown curls of rubber eraser, pencil shavings, dried tea or coffee stains, traces of sugar and Household Milk, much cigarette ash, very fine black debris picked and flung from typewriter ribbons, decomposing library paste, broken aspirins ground to powder. Then comes a scatter of paperclips, Zippo flints, rubber bands, staples, cigarette butts and crumpled packs, stray matches, pins, nubs of pens, stubs of pencils of all colors including the hard-to-get heliotrope and raw umber, wooden coffee spoons, Thayer's Slippery Elm Throat Lozenges sent by Slothrop's mother, Nalline, all the way from Massachusetts, bits of tape, string, chalk . . . above that a layer of forgotten memoranda, empty buff ration books, phone numbers, unanswered letters, tattered sheets of carbon paper, the scribbled ukulele chords to a dozen songs including "Johnny Doughboy Found a Rose in Ireland" ("He does have some rather snappy arrangements," Tantivy reports, "he's a sort of American George Formby, if you can imagine such a thing," but Bloat's decided he'd rather not), an empty Kreml hair tonic bottle, lost pieces to different jigsaw puzzles showing parts of the amber left eye of a Weimaraner, the green velvet folds of a gown, slate-blue veining in a distant cloud, the orange nimbus of an explosion (perhaps a sunset), rivets in the skin of a Flying Fortress, the pink inner thigh of a pouting pin-up girl . . . a few old Weekly Intelligence Summaries from G-2, a busted corkscrewing ukulele string, boxes of gummed paper stars in many colors, pieces of a flashlight, top to a Nugget shoe polish can in which Slothrop now and then studies his blurry brass reflection, any number of reference books out of the ACHTUNG library back down the hall—a dictionary of technical German, an P.O. *Special Handbook* or *Town Plan*—and usually, unless it's been pinched or thrown away, a *News of the World* somewhere too—Slothrop's a faithful reader.

Tacked to the wall next to Slothrop's desk is a map of London, which Bloat is now busy photographing with his tiny camera. The musette bag is open, and the cubicle begins to fill with the smell of ripe bananas. Should he light a fag to cover this? air doesn't exactly stir in here, they'll know someone's been in. It takes him four exposures, click zippety click, my how very efficient at this he's become—anyone nips in one simply drops camera into bag where banana-sandwich cushions fall, telltale sound and harmful G-loads alike.

Too bad whoever's funding this little caper won't spring for color film. Bloat

wonders if it mightn't make a difference, though he knows of no one he can ask. The stars pasted up on Slothrop's map cover the available spectrum, beginning with silver (labeled "Darlene") sharing a constellation with Gladys, green, and Katharine, gold, and as the eye strays Alice, Delores, Shirley, a couple of Sallys—mostly red and blue through here—a cluster near Tower Hill, a violet density about Covent Garden, a nebular streaming on into Mayfair, Soho, and out to Wembley and up to Hampstead Heath—in every direction goes this glossy, multicolored, here and there peeling firmament, Carolines, Marias, Annes, Susans, Elizabeths.

But perhaps the colors are only random, uncoded. Perhaps the girls are not even real. From Tantivy, over weeks of casual questions (*we know he's your schoolmate but it's too risky bringing him in*), Bloat's only able to report that Slothrop began work on this map last autumn, about the time he started going out to look at rocket-bomb disasters for ACHTUNG—having evidently the time, in his travels among places of death, to devote to girl-chasing. If there's a reason for putting up the paper stars every few days the man hasn't explained it—it doesn't seem to be for publicity, Tantivy's the only one who even glances at the map and that's more in the spirit of an amiable anthropologist—"Some sort of harmless Yank hobby," he tells his friend Bloat. "Perhaps it's to keep track of them all. He does lead rather a complicated social life," thereupon going into the story of Lorraine and Judy, Charles the homosexual constable and the piano in the pantehnicon, or the bizarre masquerade involving Gloria and her nubile mother, a quid wager on the Blackpool-Preston North End game, a naughty version of "Silent Night," and a providential fog. But none of these yarns, for the purposes of those Bloat reports to, are really very illuminating. . . .

Well. He's done now. Bag zipped, lamp off and moved back in place. Perhaps there's time to catch Tantivy over at the Snipe and Shaft, time for a comradely pint. He moves back down the beaver-board maze, in the weak yellow light, against a tide of incoming girls in galoshes, aloof Bloat unsmiling, no time for slap-and-tickle here you see, he still has his day's delivery to make. . . .

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

Wind has shifted around to the southwest, and the barometer's falling. The early afternoon is already dark as evening, under the massing rainclouds. Tyrone Slothrop is gonna be caught out in it, too. Today it's been a long, idiot chase out to zero longitude, with the usual nothing to show. This one was supposed to be

another premature airburst, the lumps of burning rocket showering down for miles around, most of it into the river, only one piece in any kind of shape and that well surrounded, by the time Slothrop arrived, with the tightest security he's seen yet, and the least friendly. Soft, faded berets against the slate clouds, Mark III Stens set on automatic, mustaches mouthwide covering enormous upper lips, humorless—no chance for any American lieutenant to get a look, not today.

ACHTUNG, anyhow, is the poor relative of Allied intelligence. At least this time Slothrop's not alone, he's had the cold comfort of seeing his opposite number from T.I., and shortly after that even the man's section chief, come fussing onto the scene in a '37 Wolseley Wasp, both turned back too. Ha! Neither of them returning Slothrop's amiable nod. Tough shit, fellas. But shrewd Tyrone hangs around, distributing Lucky Strikes, long enough to find at least what's up with this Unlucky Strike, here.

What it is is a graphite cylinder, about six inches long and two in diameter, all but a few flakes of its Army-green paint charred away. Only piece that survived the burst. Evidently it was meant to. There seem to be papers stashed inside. Sergeant-major burned his hand picking it up and was heard to holler *Oh fuck*, causing laughter among the lower paygrades. Everybody was waiting around for a Captain Prentice from S.O.E. (*those prickly bastards take their time about everything*), who does presently show up. Slothrop gets a glimpse—windburned face, big mean mother. Prentice takes the cylinder, drives away, and that's that.

In which case, Slothrop reckons, ACHTUNG can, a bit wearily, submit its fifty-millionth interbranch request to that S.O.E., asking for some report on the cylinder's contents, and, as usual, be ignored. It's O.K., he's not bitter. S.O.E. ignores everybody, and everybody ignores ACHTUNG. A-and what does it matter, anyhow? It's his last rocket for a while. Hopefully for good.

This morning in his IN basket were orders sending him TDY some hospital out in the East End. No explanation beyond an attached carbon copy of a note to ACHTUNG requesting his reassignment „as part of the P.W.E. Testing Programme.” Testing? P.W.E. is Political Warfare Executive, he looked that up. Some more of that Minnesota Multiphasic shit, no doubt. But it will be a change from this rocket-hunting routine, which is beginning to get a little old.

Once upon a time Slothrop cared. No kidding. He thinks he did, anyway. A lot of stuff prior to 1944 is getting blurry now. He can remember the first Blitz only as a long spell of good luck. Nothing that Luftwaffe dropped came

near him. But this last summer they started in with those buzzbombs. You'd be walking on the street, in bed just dozing *off* suddenly here comes this farting sound over the rooftops—if it just keeps on, rising to a peak and passing over why that's fine, then it's somebody else's worry . . . but if the engine cuts off, look out Jackson—it's begun its dive, sloshing the fuel aft, away from the engine burner, and you've got 10 seconds to get under something. Well, it wasn't really too bad. After a while you adjusted—found yourself making small bets, a shilling or two, with Tantivy Mucker-Maffick at the next desk, about where the next doodle would hit. . . .

But then last September the rockets came. Them fucking rockets. You couldn't adjust to the bastards. No way. For the first time, he was surprised to find that he was really scared. Began drinking heavier, sleeping less, chain-smoking, feeling in some way he'd been taken for a sucker. Christ, it wasn't supposed to keep on like *this*. . . .

"I say Slothrop, you've already got one in your mouth—"

"Nervous," Slothrop lighting up anyway.

"Well not *mine*" Tantivy pleads.

"Two at a time, see?" making them point down like comicbook fangs. The lieutenants stare at each other through the beery shadows, with the day deepening outside the high cold windows of the Snipe and Shaft, and Tantivy about to laugh or snort oh God across the wood Atlantic of their table.

Atlantics aplenty there've been these three years, often rougher than the one William, the first transatlantic Slothrop, crossed many ancestors ago. Barbarities of dress and speech, lapses in behavior—one horrible evening drunken Slothrop, Tantivy's guest at the Junior Athenaeum, got them both 86'd feinting with the beak of a stuffed owl after the jugular of DeCoverley Pox whilst Pox, at bay on a billiard table, attempted to ram a cue ball down Slothrop's throat. This sort of thing goes on dismayingly often: yet kindness is a sturdy enough ship for these oceans, Tantivy always there blushing or smiling and Slothrop surprised at how, when it's really counted, Tantivy hasn't ever let him down.

He knows he can spill what's on his mind. It hasn't much to do with today's amorous report on Norma (dimpley Cedar Rapids subdeb legs), Marjorie (tall, elegant, a build out of the chorus line at the Windmill) and the strange events Saturday night at the Frick Frack Club in Soho, a haunt of low reputation with moving spotlights of many pastel hues, OFF LIMITS and NO JITTERBUG DANCING signs laid on to satisfy the many sorts of police, military and civilian, whatever "civilian" means nowadays, who look in from time to time, and where against

all chance, through some horrible secret plot, Slothrop, who was to meet one, walks in sees who but *both*, lined up in a row, the angle deliberately just for him, over the blue wool shoulder of an en-gineman 3rd class, under the bare lovely armpit of a lindy-hopping girl swung and posed, skin stained lavender by the shifting light just there, and then, paranoia flooding up, the two faces beginning to turn his way. . . .

Both young ladies happen to be silver stars on Slothrop's map. He must've been feeling silvery both times—shiny, jingling. The stars he pastes up are colored only to go with how he feels that day, blue on up to golden. Never to rank a single one—how can he? Nobody sees the map but Tantivy, and Christ they're *all* beautiful . . . in leaf or flower around his wintering city, in teashops, in the queues babushkaed and coatwrapped, sighing, sneezing, all lisle legs on the curbstones, hitch-hiking, typing or filing with pompadours sprouting yellow pencils, he finds them—dames, tomatoes, sweater girls—yes it is a little obsessive maybe but . . . “I know there is wilde love and joy enough in the world,” preached Thomas Hooker, „as there are wilde Thyme, and other herbes; but we would have garden love, and garden joy, of Gods owne planting.” How Slothrop's garden grows. Teems with virgin's-bower, with forget-me-nots, with rue—and all over the place, purple and yellow as hickeys, a prevalence of love-in-idleness.

He likes to tell them about fireflies. English girls don't know about fireflies, which is about all Slothrop knows for sure about English girls.

The map does puzzle Tantivy. It cannot be put down to the usual loud-mouthed American ass-banditry, except as a fraternity-boy reflex in a vacuum, a reflex Slothrop can't help, barking on into an empty lab, into a wormholing of echoing hallways, long after the need has vanished and the brothers gone to WWII and their chances for death. Slothrop really doesn't like to talk about his girls: Tantivy has to steer him diplomatically, even now. At first Slothrop, quaintly gentlemanly, didn't talk at all, till he found out how shy Tantivy was. It dawned on him then that Tantivy was looking to be fixed up. At about the same time, Tantivy began to see the extent of Slothrop's isolation. He seemed to have no one else in London, beyond a multitude of girls he seldom saw again, to talk to about *anything*.

Still Slothrop keeps his map up daily, boobishly conscientious. At its best, it does celebrate a flow, a passing from which—among the sudden demolitions from the sky, mysterious orders arriving out of the dark laborings of nights that for himself are only idle—he can save a moment here or there, the days again

growing colder, frost in the morning, the feeling of Jennifer's breasts inside cold sweater's wool held to warm a bit in a coal-smoke hallway he'll never know the daytime despondency of . . . cup of Bovril a fraction down from boiling searing his bare knee as Irene, naked as he is in a block of glass sunlight, holds up precious nylons one by one to find a pair that hasn't laddered, each struck flashing by the light through the winter trellis outside . . . nasal hep American-girl voices singing out of the grooves of some disc up through the thorn needle of Allison's mother's radiogram . . . snuggling for warmth, blackout curtains over all the windows, no light but the coal of their last cigarette, an English firefly, bobbing at her whim in cursive writing that trails a bit behind, words he can't read. . . .

"What happened?" Silence from Slothrop. "Your two Wrens . . .

when they saw you . . ." then he notices that Slothrop, instead of going on with his story, has given himself up to shivering. Has been shivering, in fact, for some time. It's cold in here, but not that cold. "Slothrop—"

"I don't know. Jesus." It's interesting, though. It's the weirdest feeling. He can't stop. He turns his Ike jacket collar up, tucks hands inside sleeves, and sits that way for a while.

Presently, after a pause, cigarette in motion, "You can't hear them when they come in."

Tantivy knows which "they." His eyes shift away. There is silence for a bit.

"Of course you can't, they go faster than sound."

"Yes but—that's not it," words are bursting out between the pulses of shivering—"the other kind, those V-Is, you can hear them. Right? Maybe you have a chance to get out of the way. But these things explode first, a-and *then* you hear them coming in. Except that, if you're dead, you *don't* hear them."

"Same in the infantry. You know that. You never hear the one that gets you."

"Uh, but—"

"Think of it as a very large bullet, Slothrop. With fins."

"Jesus," teeth chattering, "you're such a comfort."

Tantivy, leaning anxiously through the smell of hops and the brown gloom, more worried now about Slothrop's shaking than any specter of his own, has nothing but established channels he happens to know of to try and conjure it away. "Why not see if we can get you out to where some of them have hit. . . ."

"What for? Come on, Tantivy, they're completely destroyed. Aren't they?"

"I don't know. I doubt even the Germans know. But it's the best chance we'll

have to one-up that lot over in T.I. Isn't it."

Which is how Slothrop got into investigating V-bomb "incidents." Aftermaths. Each morning—at first—someone in Civil Defence routed ACHTUNG a list of yesterday's hits. It would come round to Slothrop last, he'd detach its pencil-smear'd buck slip, go draw the same aging Humber from the motor pool, and make his rounds, a Saint George after the fact, going out to poke about for droppings of the Beast, fragments of German hardware that wouldn't exist, writing empty summaries into his notebooks—work-therapy. As inputs to ACHTUNG got faster, often he'd show up in time to help the search crews—following restless-muscled RAF dogs into the plaster smell, the gas leaking, the leaning long splinters and sagging mesh, the prone and noseless caryatids, rust already at nails and naked threadsurfaces, the powdery wipe of Nothing's hand across wallpaper awhisper with peacocks spreading their fans down deep lawns to Georgian houses long ago, to safe groves of holm oak . . . among the calls for silence following to where some exposed hand or brightness of skin waited them, survivor or casualty. When he couldn't help he stayed clear, praying, at first, conventionally to God, first time since the other Blitz, for life to win out. But too many were dying, and presently, seeing no point, he stopped.

Yesterday happened to be a good day. They found a child, alive, a little girl, half-suffocated under a Morrison shelter. Waiting for the stretcher, Slothrop held her small hand, gone purple with the cold. Dogs barked in the street. When she opened her eyes and saw him her first words were, "Any gum, chum?" Trapped there for two days, gum-less—all he had for her was a Thayer's Slippery Elm. He felt like an idiot. Before they took her off she brought his hand over to kiss anyway, her mouth and cheek in the flare lamps cold as frost, the city around them at once a big desolate icebox, stale-smelling and no surprises inside ever again. At which point she smiled, very faintly, and he knew that's what he'd been waiting for, wow, a Shirley Temple smile, as if this exactly canceled all they'd found her down in the middle of. What a damn fool thing. He hangs at the bottom of his blood's avalanche, 300 years of western swamp-Yankees, and can't manage but some nervous truce with their Providence. A *détente*. Ruins he goes daily to look in are each a sermon on vanity. That he finds, as weeks wear on, no least fragment of any rocket, preaches how indivisible is the act of death . . . Slothrop's Progress: London the secular city instructs him: turn any corner and he can find himself inside a parable.

He has become obsessed with the idea of a rocket with his name written on it—if they're really set on getting him ("They" embracing possibilities far far

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