
1

Moldenke would remain.

As a child they kept him in a crumbling house, a building with structural moans, whose eaves cracked in summer heat and gathered winter ice.

At that point Moldenke's chest held two lungs and a single heart.

He experienced a shortened boyhood, a small degree of youth and carelessness.

Most phenomena puzzled him and sent him on aimless walks among the leafless ether trees. He would fix on his goggles, his gauze pad, and study the flying birds, see them casting frightened earthward glances.

He would press his face against the pane of his bedroom lookout as spring fell and wait for the greenbird. The greenbird would circle a dying ether, peck spirals on its dry trunk. Moldenke would fold himself into a chair and watch the greenbird work, writing down its habits, behaviors, and essences:

Rapid pecking followed by pauses. Long, agile tongue coated with a jellylike substance, good for rooting in tree trunks for larvae and etcetera. When the tongue is retracted it apparently wraps about the brain.

Things were loose in those days for Moldenke. He was free and new green, bright suns behind him, spirals ahead.

2

When his mind wandered it took him to a sunchoked acre of grasses and weed where a snow of pollen lay yellow on the ground, a place like a rotunda, obviously complete, although nothing suggested architecture. There was no apparent ceiling and no visible dome.

Warm winds would lap at his stringy hair arrangement. He would feel no pulse, faint metabolism, conscious only of the hum and flow. He would recall what Doctor Burnheart had said to him on one occasion: "Take wing, Moldenke. Life is flight if you choose to ride the updrafts."

He would circle the acre in pollen silence with his better ear open. The silence would give way to a labored breathing, the sound of a single lung in difficulty. Then, on a cue from no visible source, something with mudded claws would spit clots from surrounding bushes. Moldenke would imagine himself turning away, his chin on his chest, one hand in a pocket.

The Moldenke mind was airy, like a dirigible loosed from its tethers.

3

He felt something without form, something edgeless, rushing at him from the direction of eastern light. He pressed his nose against a lookout, saw a pattern coming together at the horizon of city and sky. He crabbed backwardly up the false stairwell and crouched in a blind spot. "Is that you, Bunce? Mr. Bunce?"

It moved through his room, the visitor, touching

things to its nose and snorting, and sat in Moldenke's chair.

Moldenke turned on a light, "Yes?"

The visitor stood and approached him, opening its car valve to relieve pressure, "You should stay in the chair now, Moldenke. I will remain in the hallway and watch your door. It is a pleasure to know you."

4

The phone rang. Moldenke picked up the speaker:

"Hello?"

"Yes, hello." It seemed a genuine voice. "Is this Moldenke?"

"Yes it is."

"Well, well . . . Moldenke?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"Never mind that. By the way, are you leaning against a wall?"

"No."

"Would you mind?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"Then please lean."

"The phone is in the middle of the room. I can't."

"Good, try squatting."

Moldenke squatted. "There. Now, who's calling?"

"Never mind that, jocko. You know who this is."

"Mr. Bunce?"

"Exactly correct, Mr. Moldenke. Old friend Bunce. What say we halt these amenities and face the grit? I have a reason for calling you, jocko. A number of reasons in fact; one particular is a pressing little matter of tapes. You might say I called to talk tape. That would be sufficient."

"I'm not playing, Bunce."

"He's not playing, he says."

"That's right."

"I warn you not to fiddle, Moldenke. This is a business call and I'm speaking on a business phone."

Moldenke felt floor through his soft, catskin slippers, was conscious of trapped gas within his pajamas, imagined a raincoat under his skin, and an indoor rain.

"We're talking dumps, Moldenke. Don't give me gas. I have some tapes here that may be of major importance to you, all nicely packaged and locked in my kitty-box."

Moldenke hung up.

5

Dear Moldenke,

I think of you often these days. How are things in the cities? I wish you could be with me in this country air. Yes, Moldenke. *Air*. You should be breathing it occasionally, if not constantly. After all, you're the one with the problem heart.

My special regards,
as ever,

Doctor Burnheart

6

She would say, "Play the Buxtehude, Moldenke. I enjoy the chills it gives me." She would close the door behind herself and leave him alone in the piano room with its pots of ivy and ant-traps.

He would begin the Buxtehude on the cold keyboard. In the bedroom she would listen through a wall.

He would play the Buxtehude until ants crawled along his fingers and assembled on his sleeves.

He would then walk to the kitchen, carrying his hands like packages, and scrape the ants into a teaboil.

Roberta would emerge from the bedroom, stand in the doorway in her flannel. Moldenke would turn from the teaboil and smile, his old silver tooth throwing out a rod of light.

Roberta would say, "Tea?"

Moldenke would add mock sugar. "Yes, would you like a cup?"

She would always have a cup. She would say, "As always."

Moldenke would have his with potato milk, she without.

7

When he was a boy, a student, whenever he loaned out a book it would come back with nosewipes in the margins and down the spine.

8

He put the speaker to his better ear and listened for a dial tone. There was static, someone pouring rice from bowl to bowl.

He fixed the speaker in its cradle and went to his lookout. Buildings, vehicles, something above suggesting sky.

Two suns up, a bright day.

American hearts beating in the street.

9

Over the seasons Moldenke's faith diminished. If he opened a spigot and got water, no matter how clouded or sour, he was gratified, as though he no longer expected it, although he loved water as nearly as he loved anything. That was the way with Moldenke, a brightly burning candle with a shortened wick, destined to burn low and give off gas.

10

The phone rang. Moldenke answered:

"Hello?"

"May I speak to Mr. Moldenke?"

"This is Mr. Moldenke speaking. Who's calling?"

"Bunce here, Moldenke. Serious up a minute, please.

No fooling around. I don't like the way you hung up on me last call. I never like to see a hang-up. It shows me you're not as interested as you should be, not as engaged as you might be. What's the trouble? Would you like me to put my forearm up your very delicate chuff pipe and pop your spleen like a cherry, or run my thumbnail down your inner spine, assuming you have one? Is that the sort of thing you want? Bunce doesn't cater to the meek, my friend. Remember *that* even if you forget all else. Remember that much. Open the good ear, jocko. Listen to me. We have the tapes."

"You have the tapes," Moldenke said. "What tapes?"

"What tapes, he says."

"Yes, Bunce. What tapes?"

"Tapes, friend. Tapes! Things said about you in your absence. Yourself as others see you. The works. We

have it all. The whole Moldenke. If you ever have a yen to listen to a few of the tapes, give me a call. The number is 555-333-555333-555-333. I'll be around. Give me a ring sometime. We'll have lunch, slug down a few pinebrews, and talk things over. Put all our bags on the table, if you know what I mean. Are you with me, Moldenke? Can you follow me?"

Moldenke again hung up.

11

He opened the book to a random page, let his finger float to a random line and read: *In 1856 Claude Bernard noted the appearance of cloudy lymph in the duodenum near the entrance of the bile duct.* He read no further.

12

He dialed in a station on the radio and got a weather report:

Cloudy, freezing in the outskirts, cold tonight, colder tomorrow, warming Thursday and Friday, cooling off by Saturday, sleet by Sunday, double suns on Monday, and so on, according to the everyday charts, indicating a possible trend—warm, cool, cooler, etcetera, chance of light-to-heavy blister snow, probable drizzle washing out the artificial month, gas breaks at Amarillo, Great Chicago, and Texaco City, no moons tonight, shelter animals if necessary, please stay tuned . . .

He dialed 555-333-555333-555-333, an obvious woman answered the first ring:

“Chelsea Fish Pavilion.”

“Excuse me,” Moldenke said. “I may have misdialed. My apologies.”

“Sir, what number did you call?”

“I don’t remember. What number did I reach?”

“The Chelsea Fish, 555-333—”

“Thank you, miss. The number sounds familiar, although I don’t think—”

“May I help you, sir?”

“I don’t know, miss. Is there by any odd chance someone in the establishment by the name of Bunce?”

“Yes, sir. The Manager, Mr. Bunce. Would you like me to connect you with him?”

“No, miss. I already am. Thank you. And, miss?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Is he what you call the boss?”

“Yes, sir. He is.”

“I see. Well, thanks, miss. I was only verifying the number. I didn’t have anything to talk about. I may come in and buy a few nice fish sometime.”

“We don’t have any, sir. I’m sorry.”

“Oh?”

“Goodbye, sir.”

“Goodbye, miss.”

14

He went to his kitty-file and took out a Burnheart letter:

Dear Moldenke,

Yesterday I had a productive visit with my friend Eagleman of Atmospheric Sciences. He was full of his ensiform work with *oecanthus* and it took him several cigars to get it all on the table, as it were.

One question, Dinky: how are the polyps?

Cordially yours,

Doc Burnheart

P.S. Have you seen Eagleman's moon?

15

After the mock War was apparently over, the army let Moldenke go. He found work as a bloodboy in a gauze mill outside Texaco City, a klick or two from the L.A. limits. He started low and remained there, sure that safety embraced felicity on a mattress of obscurity. He knew that vertical activity invited dazzling exposure, and that to seek is to be sucked. He recognized loneliness as the mother of virtues and sat in her lap whenever he could. He practiced linear existence and sidewise movement, preferring the turtle to the crane, the saucer to the lamp. He enjoyed the downstairs and chafed at going up. All of this, despite what his mother had told him: "Sonny," she had said, a circle of rouge on each of her cheeks, her eyes like basement windows. "Son," she said, "I want you to always have a job to go to, no matter what it is or where it is or what it involves. What matters is whether or not it lets you go up."

16

The lights went out. The radio died. Moldenke went to the lookout. Both suns were up, and clouded over. It was dark enough to be close to noons, although he didn't have a clockpiece anywhere. The second double Sunday in an artificial month.

He opened his refrigerator and found a cockroach at the lettuce. Something scratched in the eggs.

The juice was off. He would call the Power Co-op.

17

The phone rang. Moldenke answered.

"Hello?"

"Am I speaking with Moldenke?"

"Yes. Bunce? Bunce, my lights are off."

"His lights are off, he says."

"And the radio, and the refrigerator. What about my weather reports? I'm worried. The wind is dying. What about those things, Bunce?"

"Moldenke fiddles on. The lights are off, the wind is dying. Moldenke, if we were back-to-back we'd tangle asses."

"The heat grille went off also. I should add that. I'm getting colder."

"Hey, pal, listen to this: I'm taking you out of the M's and putting you at the top of the A's, smack at the head of my list. Here it is, jock: From now on, only one outgoing call per day, two incoming, all monitored. Consider benefits and privileges terminated, and don't leave your room until I say so. I don't *necessarily* want blood, but don't rule it out. Read a few magazines. No

moving around. Pick a chair you like and stay with it. No changing. I'll have your food sent up. What do you think this is, Moldenke? A nightflying outfit? Don't be so casual about it, boy. How would you like to spend an hour in the hot room? I want seriousness from you. Remember, if you don't ease up, you might get plugged."

"What are you doing, Bunce?"

"What am I doing, he says."

"Why the hot room threat, why the sudden restrictions? If this is a mistake I'll forgive it right now, but if it's a josh I don't know what I'll do. Is it a mistake? A josh? A shuck?"

"No. Perfectly serious. I want your close attention, Moldenke. You're in my hands."

"No, Bunce. I decline. I'm hanging up now; maybe I'll run the movie backward a few frames, and the phone won't ring."

"Can the tricks, boy."

"I don't believe this, Bunce. I need proof, some sign."

"You want proof?"

"I want a sign."

"All right, boy. A sign. Stand there awhile and then go to the lookout."

Moldenke waited, went to the lookout, watched an amber cocacola mist fade into a yellow drizzle. Proof? He scanned two horizons, surveyed the streets. Nothing. No sign. Pigeons in eaves across the way. No k-vehicles. The Health Truck passed.

An ant crawled over Moldenke's shoe and went up a wall.

Something climbed from shelf to shelf in the refrigerator.

A dull hissing, distant, then close. He spun in the darkness, saw its eyelike headlight, heard the jelly slosh.

A genuine month before this, Moldenke had been driving his k-rambler along a white boulevard curving around a stadium. At a certain point on the curve he saw a couple, man and woman. The woman knelt over the gutter, favoring her stomach, her face a shade of purple. Moldenke stopped. The man, tobacco-stained and scholarly, asked if Moldenke would be so kind as to give them a ride to a drugstore for a tin of "shark" tablets, for the woman's illness.

They lifted her onto the back seat and drove on down the wide boulevard, Moldenke beginning to have some doubts about the couple. The woman grunted in the back and gave off an odor.

"Shark tablets?" Moldenke questioned.

The man nodded and agreed.

"For the wife?" Moldenke questioned again.

The man said, "Yez," with a "z," a mannerism Moldenke never enjoyed.

He saw a slight movement over the man's eye. He looked. An eyebrow dangled over the eye, parts of the face flaking down the suit.

He took out a cigar, testing.

"No flames, pliz!" He turned the face toward Moldenke.

Moldenke held out his cigar lighter, his thumb on the flint. "Why not?" He turned the flint slowly, the car filling with gas.

The moustache slid down the tie. Above the paper collar the plastic had begun to curl. Now Moldenke was sure—a pair of jellyheads working the streets. He shouldn't have picked them up, but he had. He would do what Burnheart had told him to do on a number of occasions; he would open them up.

He gunned the k-rambler and drove toward the bot-

toms. Traffic thinned and ended. Civilization gave way to a marshland, veined with treeless ridges. At every klick-marker a blind road turned into the bottoms. He picked one and drove along slush ruts until they ended, stopped, and turned off the motor.

He looked at the rubber face. "Are you a pair of Bunce's jellyheads?"

In the back the woman sat up, said nothing. Most of the man's features had broken loose and tumbled down to the seat and floor. The head, without makeup, a gray balloon, something sloshing inside it.

"I asked if you were on Buncc's payroll." He turned the flint faster.

They chose silence.

"Okay," Moldenke said. "Then get out of the car and take your medicine. I've got you fair. Don't resist me."

They climbed out. Moldenke exposed his letter opener.

"You first." The man came forward. "Bend over." The man bowed. With the letter opener, Moldenke opened a small hole in the back of the neck, enough for two fingers. He put a thumb and a forefinger in and widened the hole, a clear jelly spilling out, down his trench-pants. The air smelled of laboratories. He did the woman, her jelly more clouded, her rubber skull a little thicker than the professor's had been.

In the morning, with two suns behind him like stray moons, he examined his vehicle. The odor of laboratories was there, although faint. In the back seat the same jelly substance, studded with nibs, as though the woman had eaten peanuts, had washed across the upholstery.

19

There was a knock at the door, either soft hands or gloved fingers. The meal was there from Bunce, on a tray in the hall, on the floor. The first meal from Bunce. He was hungry. He took the tray inside and ate. The tray had three hollows: catmeat filled one, boiled crickets filled the second, and a chunk of stale pinebread with ant sauce filled the third.

20

A letter came from Burnheart:

Dear Moldenke,

Cheer up. Things are approaching the jell. Nothing is final as yet, but we are working it through. Eagleman sends his regards. He's a good man to know. We should consider ourselves among the fortunate few. What would a winter night be like without Eagleman's moon? Tell me that. Crowded almost out now with government moons, but still the brightest light in the sky. We have no one to thank for Eagleman except . . . Eagleman.

This letter has a purpose. Enclosed, please find a simple, one-part questionnaire. Fill it out and get it back to me as soon as you can. We can't move an inch without the information.

Cordial greetings,
Burnheart

The questionnaire:

SITUATION REACTION

You are shad fishing in a plainly marked municipal water tub, or (2) you chance by a swollen river. The fog log, you remember from the radio weather, is at

.77. The ambient light is dim, or (2) very bright. As you gaze over the water's surface you see what appears to be the corpse of a dray horse, bridled even in death, with sodden fragments of the dray still attached. No moons are up, or (2) two moons are up, or (3) the sun is simply down, or (4) more than one sun is down. You rise up to your feet and take another look. *Caution:* It may not be a horse at all. *Additional Caution:* If it is a horse it is either bloated, or (2) there is a plate-sized hole in its belly to relieve the pressures of rot. The animal floats closer to the breakwater, now clearly in danger of rubbing barnacles. Your hearts leap up. Your spleen puffs. WHAT NOW? (See below.)

(Use this space)

21

He called the Power Co-op:

“Good afternoon, sir. Power Co-op. May I help you this afternoon, sir?” The voice was feminine, high pitched, a refined whistle.

Moldenke was puzzled. Something already wasn't exactly right. “Miss, how did you know I was male?”

“Sir?”

“I wanted to know how it was that you knew I was a ‘sir,’ instead of a ‘miss,’ or a ‘little boy,’ or something like that.”

“Sir?”

“That's right. You pinned it down as soon as you an-

swered. I hadn't even opened my mouth. But you knew I was male. I wanted to know how you knew. That's all."

"Sir? Didn't you say your name? You said something."

"No, ma'am. Nothing. Was it my breathing? A man's breathing is a touch huskier than a woman's, or a child's, is that the trick?"

"No, sir. Please excuse my enthusiasm. It's my first day on the job, sir. If I've made an error, then we apologize. We beg your pardon."

"Fine, that's fine, miss. Now, what I called about is my electricity. It suddenly went off a while back. No radio, no weather reports, no heat, nothing. I need some service out here."

"Certainly, Mr. Moldenke. We'll do what we can to—"

"Miss?"

"Sir?"

"Now I'm more than a little bit puzzled. First there was the 'sir.' Now you give me a clean, crisp, *Mr. Moldenke*, as though I had actually told you my name. I haven't mentioned the name yet, have I, miss?"

"Yes, sir. You did . . . you must have. Didn't you?"

"No, ma'am. I haven't. I'm sure of it. Let me speak to the supervisor."

"Please, sir. We apologize. This is my first day."

"Don't worry, miss. You'll keep the job. You're very good at it, but a little too fast for me. Your supervisor, please."

"Sir, he's not in the building at the moment."

"Does *he* have a supervisor?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I'll speak to him. Connect me with him."

"Yes, sir. That would be Mr. Bunce. Just a moment."

"Miss?"

"Sir?"

"Never mind. Cancel the whole thing. Goodbye."

“Sir?”

The only outgoing, thrown to the winds.

22

Moldenke sat henlike in his chair, brooding in the dark, chewing a stonepick. The door opened halfway, showing an obelisk of hall light, and Burnheart came in, striking matches.

“Burnheart? Is that you, Burnheart?”

“Moldenke?” He held the match an inch from Moldenke’s chin. “Why do you live like this, Moldenke? You get more like a rat every season. What do they pay you to live here? I smell urine. Where’s the straw?” The match went out. He struck another one, moving it up and down, looking at the whole Moldenke.

“Burnheart. I’m happy to see you. Sit down somewhere. Let’s talk. I thought you were in the country with Eagleman.”

“I was. I *was* in the country. However, now I’m in the city. I move with my moods. My mood said city, and here I am, a toad in the frog pond, as they say. Why am I striking matches like this? Turn on the lights.”

“I can’t. They’re off. That’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you about.”

“What do I know about practical electricity? It’s not my field. What could I say?”

“No, no. I’m concerned about *why* they’re off, not *that* they’re off. I think it’s Bunce.”

“Bunce?”

“You know the man?”

“Bunce. Yes, I know Bunce . . . You must have a candle around. Is there a candle, Moldenke? Some kind of light source?”

“I’m afraid not. Burnheart, tell me what to do. I

don't know of anyone else who can advise me. What should I do about Bunce?"

"What a season this has been, Moldenke. What a season. My old heart won't stand another one like it. So many loads in the old gun and so on. I sometimes consider retiring, quitting the whole thing. Of course, someone always steps in and reminds me that I have nothing to retire from. So I never do. I continue slaving and worrying over nothing substantial. I'm plumb tired. The system is wearing out. I plan to get back to the country as fast as I can. Sometimes, there, I hear the chirp of a snipe, and that reminds me that I'm still alive. What does it all matter?"

"Sit down, Burnheart. Talk."

"Where, Moldenke? Are there chairs in a rat's den? Where shall I sit?" Moldenke occupied the only chair.

"Take this chair."

"No, Moldenke. You stay there. You need the rest. You're still young. Rest while you can. There's nothing ahead but rattles." Another match went out. "Some light is better than none. We'll smoke cigars." Burnheart lit two blue cigars with his last match and gave one to Moldenke. "Here, Moldenke. Puff hard and constant. We'll get close to one another and puff rapidly." Burnheart knelt, squaring his height with Moldenke's. Moldenke remained in the chair. They studied one another in the wavering orange swells of light, through smoke and running eyes.

"Burnheart, I may have broken an unwritten rule of some kind. I'm not sure."

"Well, then. If *you're* not sure, how can *I* be sure? How can we talk about it? Tell me more, Dinky."

"I think I opened up a couple of Bunce's jellyheads. But I'm not sure."

"You're not sure?"

"No, I had been chewing stonepicks. I was seeing and feeling through cotton. I'm not certain."

"I've told you about stonepicks. Say I haven't."

"You have."

"You had one in your mouth when I came in. Say you didn't."

"I didn't."

"So you opened a pair of jellies?"

"Yes, *maybe* I did. The recollection is full of holes."

"But there is a recollection?"

"Yes, I woke up with it. It was strong. I checked my clothes, my vehicle. There was definitely jelly, and those nibs."

"What did you do it with?"

"I may have done it with my letter opener."

"May I see it?" Moldenke gave him the letter opener, a simple chrome affair with swirls. He smelled it, touched it, gave it back. The cigars were halfway done. "I'd say you did it, or someone did it with your letter opener, wearing your clothes, and driving your vehicle. One or the other. I'm afraid I don't know what to say, Dinky. Bunce has a great deal of pull."

"Help me, Burnheart."

"I don't know, Moldenke. I just don't know. All I can do is be your friend. I'm only a scientist. I have my limits."

"Should I run?"

"I'd sit still for a while."

"What should I do?"

"I'd do nothing for a while."

They blinked, coughed. The cigars wore down. Burnheart went to the lookout. "There it is. The city. The rooftops of the city. Back in the city again. My mood is changing sooner than I expected it would. I'll have to head back toward the country."

"Burnheart. Stay longer."

"No. I have experiments to run, rats and rabbits to feed. You know the game."

"Are you leaving now?"

"Yes. I only came to bring you a letter I'd written and forgot to mail. I thought I'd deliver it personally as long

as I was in the city. It may be the last time I'm here. My city moods come less and less often these days, and this one feels final." He gave Moldenke a letter. "It may be a little out of date, as they say."

"I'll read it anyway."

"Well, Dink. I'll be seeing you. If you need my advice about anything, give me a call. Don't flounder around uncertain about things. Call me."

"Are we friends, Burnheart?"

"Straight on, Dink. Double-clutching heart-mates. I'll see you around." He left, closed the door softly behind him.

23

He dialed 555-333-555333-555-333.

"Fernberg's Clock & Hock, Bunce on the line."

"Mr. Bunce?"

"Yes?"

"I thought I'd call and sort of feel things out."

"Who is this?"

"Moldenke."

"Oh, Moldenke. I didn't recognize the voice. Throat polyps, is that it? You shouldn't be breathing so much, boy. Wear the gauze pads. Wear the gauze pads. Why do you think we give them to you? What do you want? I'm a busy man this season."

"Like I said before, I thought I'd call and sort of—"

"I heard it the first time. Explain yourself."

"Well, there really isn't too much in the way of things to explain, Mr. Bunce. I suppose, if you have to say something, say I'm testing. Throwing out my bait."

"Don't tell me what to say."

"I didn't."

"Don't."

"I won't."

"The future lies ahead of us, boy, hanging there like a thunderstorm. Make yourself a shelter. Quit gassing, stop your aimless pissing-off. Collect things. Pull your coats tight. Get ready."

"Mr. Bunce?"

"Yes?"

"Suppose, in a few minutes from now, suppose I get up from this chair and walk to the door, open the door, step into the hall, walk down the stairs, through the main gate, and out into the street. What then?"

"Don't bother, champ. You won't get past the open door part. I've got a man in the hall. You won't make it. Stay with the chair."

"I'm beginning to itch."

"He's beginning to itch."

"Sores on the underthigh."

"Sores on the underthigh, he says."

"I'm not very comfortable with these restrictions."

"He's not very comfortable. Moldenke! You gutted two of my very best street workers. You expect comfort, you expect to be left alone? Moldenke?"

"What?"

"Look at the palm of your left hand."

"I can't. The lights are out."

"Wait a second. I'll turn them on for a minute." The lights flickered and went on. Moldenke stood up, legs stiff, bloodless. He sat back down. The refrigerator hummed. The radio went on, the heater grille twittered like a redbird. Feet shuffled on the carpet in the hall. Somewhere in the building unit a toilet flushed.

"Did you do that, Bunce? Did you make the lights go on? Is my electricity somehow flowing through the Fernberg Clock & Hock?"

"Look at the left palm, Moldenke." He looked at the palm.

"Okay, Bunce. I'm looking. Now what?"

"Are you looking at it closely?"

“As close as I can under the circumstances.”

“What are the circumstances?”

“Mucus collecting in one of the eyes. It’s all but cemented shut.”

“Wear the goggles, boy. Why do you think we give you goggles? Now, hold the palm up there and look twice as hard.” Moldenke did that. “Are you looking hard enough?”

“I’m looking. I’m looking.”

“Pay attention to surface conditions, qualities of the skin, stuff like that.”

Moldenke studied the palm. The lights surged, the radio went louder. Outside, the wind picked up. The door of the refrigerator opened and swung back on its hinges. A weather report came on the radio:

Possible dry storms in the bottoms area, reports not confirmed, estimates of high winds, gauzemen working overshifts, nothing official, stay tuned, remain calm . . .

“Did you hear that, Bunce?”

“Yes, I heard it. It was a good one. I liked it. What about the palm? Have you looked at it sufficiently?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Good. Now, look at the pocket on the hip matching that palm you just looked at so intently.” Moldenke looked at the left pocket, examined it.

“Examine the pocket, Moldenke.”

“I am. I am.” He saw grease, hanging strings, and dirt.

“Good. Tell me what you see.” Moldenke told him what he had seen. “Fine. Look at the palm again.” He looked at the palm again. “Have you looked?”

“Yes.”

“Perfect. Now, put the palm in the pocket, along with the hand.” He put the hand in his pocket, along with the palm. “Is it in there good?”

“Yes. It’s not so easy sitting down.”

“Good enough. Now, take it out.” He took it out.

“Is it out?”

“Yes. It’s out.”

“Excellent, boy. Now, tell me what you’ve learned from this.”

“I suppose I’ve learned that the palm remains while the pocket wears away. Skin regenerates, cloth is a one-way business. Something like that. I learned something along those lines. Am I right?”

“Close enough, close enough. Hah! And they call old Burnheart a great scientist. I wonder about his pupil. Moldenke, you’re a clever boy. Pure reason, almost untainted, white light, etcetera. I would probably love you, Moldenke, if times were right. I’d strap on my artificial vagina for you. We could slug a few pinebrews and watch some football. If things were only a little tighter, or a great deal looser than they are, who knows? Sure, I wear a smear of rouge. Sure, I’ve dug potatoes out of garbage hills. Sure, I’ve played my share of football. And what does it come to? A throat full of polyps and a set of false eyes. Moldenke, you’re sliding downward. I am not your friend. The test is over.”

24

He read the letter Burnheart had left:

Dear Friend Moldenke,

Some years back, as I gather, the government phased out the postal cats. Heretofore, as you may be aware, the government was actually paying them 10chit a paper week to eat the rats and other rodents that were eating the mail, a kind of twisted food-chain deal. That plan went along nicely for a time, until some jellyhead in some post office hole decided that further rules were needed in order to stem the tide of profiteering, slave-

holding, and poison-running, which rose among the cats. These rules were known as the Private Bag Ordinances (the P.B.O.'s), and they generally held that the rats of a given mail bag were the property, the *private* and *exclusive* property of the cat who could daily stalk the area of the bag. Naturally, this served only to increase the dominance of the stronger cats over the weaker cats, as you might expect. Not surprisingly, the weaker cats lobbied for ordinances declaring that all bags must be watched equally and that all proceeds should be divided accordingly.

Enough of this, Moldenke. I'm off to the greenhouse. See you in the city.

As always,

Burnheart

25

Burnheart called:

"Moldenke?"

"Burnheart?"

"Yes, speaking. Dink? One question: why hasn't he thought of unplugging the phone?"

"The phone? The telephone? My telephone?"

"Right. Why not?"

"I don't know. I hadn't thought of it either."

"Wrong, Dink. He's thought of it. He's considered it. A few years back I might have said he was capable of oversights, but not now. The most we can hope for now is chance and accident. Are you with me? Together, Dink. Me and you. We'll roll him like a pill in our fingers. Say, Dink? Have you noted my high mood?"

"Yes. You seem up. Upper than you were the last I saw you."

"Naturally. I'm back in the country. One sniff of the

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