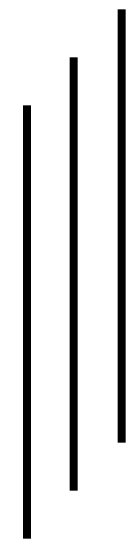


THE
WINGED
AND
GARLANDED

 NIKE

THE
WINGED
AND
GARLANDED



NIKE

a
novel
by
S. G. Scott

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*To my wife, Willis Marie (UpC),
for years of cheerful patience*

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A background note to THE WINGED AND GARLANDED NIKE

For over two-hundred years California has been a magnet for migration – from the early Spanish to the recent wave of high-tech workers. But the single most powerful transformative force for California was the abrupt and chaotic population surge triggered by the discovery of gold in the Sierra Nevada foothills in 1848.

Similar in dynamics to the “Gold Rush” were demographic, environmental and financial impacts from the trillions of dollars the Department of Defense disbursed into California through defense contracts over the thirty years of the Cold War. Defense-oriented companies prospered and the wealth liberally spread to smaller business entities, communities and individuals. It was as if a potent growth hormone had been artificially injected into the state.

The Gold Rush Era was a frenzy of exploitation of the State’s riches, but California’s “Defense Rush” was the opposite – for a tidal wave of fortune poured *into* it, catalyzed by powerful California congressmen and corporations. It became the perfect example of President Dwight Eisenhower’s so-called “Military-Industrial Complex.”

We now impute an air of romance to the Gold Rush Era. In contrast we remember the pervasive pall cast by the shadow of uranium during the Cold War years.

This novel links these two seminal, exploitative eras through Fernville, a town whose roots are from the 19th-Century Gold Rush, but its sustenance is the 20th-Century missile rush – and where its characters can catch the glint from gold and from uranium.

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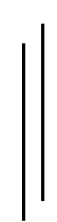
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Prologue

May 20, 1986

Citing the possibility of a Soviet nuclear attack, the Department of Defense (DoD) in 1955 issued Instruction 5220.5, a procurement policy that would favor competing defense companies which dispersed from areas of concentrated industry. Beneficiaries of this policy turned out to be cities such as Wichita, Sunnyvale, Columbus, Ogden, Sacramento, Tulsa, Dallas and this novel's fictional city of Fernville, California.

Excepting the obvious fictional characters, locale and events, all other depictions in this novel are historical.



Before Alice quit drinking in 1970 she endured airline travel by following a strict protocol: bourbon before – gin during – and celebration after with a little brandy in the airport lounge. Ryland Smith was indulgent about this, acknowledging her still-vivid memory of that terrifying dive in the Martin 404 out of Chicago in 1957 during a violent thunderstorm. But he also welcomed a comatose Alice to a talkative one while he worked through his large pile of paperwork. She would sit quietly, her right hand squeezing the armrest at the slightest bump, and with eyes closed pretend to read, occasionally turning a page of the book in her lap.

After surviving years of such travel, Alice regained enough confidence in planes and pilots that a new and alcohol-free regimen gave her a satisfactory peace of mind. Once airborne, Alice Smith transfigured into book-jacket-glamorous *Alice Devereau*, writer of murder mysteries. There she researched, plotted and wrote her novels in deadly earnest, and this creative routine became as calming as her alcoholic one had once been. She was successful in this competitive genre with six published books as well as several yet unpublished ones.

As if she stepped into another skin, Alice regularly drifted off to become *Alice Devereau*, not simply the writing name, but a woman larger in personality and more romantic than the two-dimensional one she believed she was constrained to practice as a “Smith.” When younger, she wondered if truly named Alice Devereau she might have become a different person altogether. “Smith” was a storm anchor, and most of her crimes of commission and omission, in and out of marriage, were committed by Alice Devereau.

“Ryland!” Alice turned and touched her husband’s arm. “Do you realize the thirty years we’ve been away from Fernville are almost a third of its entire lifetime?” She frowned, finding this a revelation of sorts. “If anybody’s left we knew, I guess we’ll see them at its centennial celebration all this week.”

As the Boeing 737 began its descent to the Fernville airport, she switched from her nom de plume persona to become again Alice Smith, the veteran congressman’s wife. Mental telepathy, which Alice occasionally believed in, suggested her husband was then reminded of Richard Hervey, hoping he was dead, while she knew he wasn’t because of the note she’d received a few weeks before.

“Of course there’ll be many missing, Alice. You expect that after thirty years, don’t you?” Ryland Smith replied in a flat voice, only slightly turning his head from the text in his lap. His response carried a slight didactic and hectoring overtone which Alice was accustomed to, believing it derived from his being in charge of almost everybody in the many years prior to his political career. “The Milanos and a few of the Kloitses are still big Republican donors, but I’d bet Austin Cooper and some of those other Fernville characters drank themselves to death.” It was not surprising their first words after forty minutes of flight from Los Angeles hinted around death. Ryland was 76, Alice ten years younger, and their grim musings over newspaper obituary pages, and death in general, had become more frequent now.

This indifferent exchange was routine, for their worlds were largely separate with but few stubborn lines of communication. After nearly forty-seven tumultuous years, their relationship was battered and scarred, but weathering this storm of a marriage was now no longer in question.

Forty-seven years with occasional compatibility had finally added to a positive. They needed each other over their remaining years.

The airliner’s northerly flight path had paralleled the long and narrow Sierra Nevada mountain range, following the juncture of its foothills and the edge of the great, flat San Joaquin Valley of California. The snow remaining on the high granite peaks told Ryland Smith that winter had been fruitful, and streams and rivers he remembered from thirty years before would flow full into the valley until early summer.

As the plane began its approach to the Fernville airport he became aware of pangs from a sentiment he could only label as nostalgia. But as a hard-headed executive and a long-time congressman he believed he hadn’t the internal climate for such frivolous feelings. He had made many short stops throughout his long careers with but little sentimental attachment to any of them. And yet, the approaching city had indeed aroused long-suppressed emotions, as if it were a catalyst for that melancholy summing up, that harsh and secret life-review which the long-of-life people get around to eventually.

“This looks good now, Charlie.” Smith passed the papers to his aide across the aisle. “It’ll be my last speech supporting this Pentagon program and I promised to hit it hard for the President.”

“If you weren’t retiring, Ryland,” his aide quipped, “everyone would think from this speech you were running for senator.”

There. That was it, of course. His long political career was ending. Fernville was one of his last political junkets and it was here where inspiration to enter politics germinated thirty years before and led to his distinguished congressional service. Had he instead continued on the conventional corporate track, he would have been long-retired to those indolent pastures in Florida or Arizona, golfing away with the others, zealously monitoring his stocks and bonds – waiting out his last years. Instead, he remained vital as one of the nation’s key decision-makers, a tough and unsentimental man certainly, yet recognition of a beginning and an ending had now triggered an unfamiliar melancholy.

And yes, he should have aimed for the Senate. There he’d be more effective in promoting President Reagan’s *Strategic Defense Initiative*, the crucial ballistic missile defense issue he would address here in Fernville.

“You *should* have run for senator, Ryland,” Alice said. “You could easily have beaten Hayakawa or George Murphy or Tunney, those unqualified, upstart California senators. On your looks alone. You do look like a Senator among senators.”

Ryland Smith was positively senatorial and knew it, but he recognized the hint of mockery in her tone. “Not so loud, Alice. This is a dead issue,” he said gruffly.

Alice distracted herself from the bouncing of the descending airplane by concentrating on the implications of Richard Hervey’s note and the news clipping she’d just received from him.

“Human Remains Turn Up in Old Mineshaft” was the headline of a short article from the *Fernville Tribune*, dated a few weeks before. It said the new mine owner, Beebe Enterprises, had been assessing the old Kloits hardrock gold mine, closed since 1921. Hervey’s note was terse like the others he’d sent her over those thirty years:

*Alice Devereau knows who that is. And so do I.
I see a demand for a new edition of your novel:
‘Auriferous Grounds – for Murder’
Helen Needham’s private papers to be opened, so
Milano and Kloits clans sweat. Me – feeling rather poorly.
If I’d known I’d live this long ...
Hervey*

“Notice I’ve added something on that mobile Soviet strategic missile with the polar trajectory and ten mirrored warheads,” Smith was saying to his aide. “That news release in the *New York Times* today might wake up even some liberal Democrats.” He tipped his head toward Alice.

An odd fact crossed his mind then – obvious, yet it had never occurred before. His careers had spanned and been driven by the Cold War. For over thirty-five years, with nuclear forces on knife-edge alert, his executive and political skills were expended in that confrontation which now was more ominous than ever. He must work something of this into his speech – a Churchillian effort, he mused, and the last major speech of a retiring elder statesman.

Alice looked up from her work, wide-eyed again. “Ryland ... the dogs and cats in Fernville. They’ll all be new!”

“New?” He frowned, his thoughts broken up. “Well, it’s only been thirty years, Alice,” the slight sarcasm not lost on her.

“Sorry. It just seemed like an interesting observation.”

He turned away, yet he had been touched by her remark, a poignant reminder that almost everyone he knew when he was Fernville’s most powerful and visible corporate executive would be gone, many of them dead.

Alice’s thoughts had already moved beyond cats and dogs and back to Hervey’s note. She sighed and muttered under her breath: “...I would’ve switched to soda, and stayed clear of you.”

Fernville sprawled from the foothills into the flatland with long thrusts of disorderly growth. To the east it lapped up into the Sierra foothills where its housing tracts choked shallow canyons and covered hillsides and ridge tops – all this so changed from Ryland Smith’s remembered images where the city’s modest growth then occurred mostly on its western fringe in the valley.

Quickly the plane came in over a corner of the city. He looked past Alice, hunched over in the window seat though she had never looked out from one. He took in the half-remembered landmarks from the panorama of the modern Fernville with its sprouting office towers and large apartment buildings. And then he looked for their hillside home, once high up on a clean, delineated edge of the town, but it was now lost in a jumble of housing that sought the more prestigious ground farther up in the rising eastern hills.

Just before the plane touched down, Alice placed the small book she had started to read in her bag. It was *Fernville: Improbable Town – A Brief History of the Region - 1851 to 1953*, by Helen Crossman. Alice hadn’t looked at it in years, but it had been the inspiration for *Auriferous Grounds – for Murder*, her first novel, published in 1956, which had received critical accolades never repeated for her later ones. Dick Hervey once wrote to her that some locals were angry and even litigious over what they perceived were slanderous insinuations about them and to certain events. But surely all that must be forgotten by now. Helen

Crossman Needham's self-published, unread and out-of-print local history was amateurish, but Alice had once found several tantalizing puzzles in it. Helen's private papers, scheduled to be made public on the day of Fernville's centennial, might reveal clues to her death in 1955 which was then attributed to a heart attack. But Alice Devereau the novelist thought she saw murder there, and that was one of the reasons she was on that airplane.

She might even try to revive her unpublished second novel, *The Cyanide Process*, an intended sequel to *Auriferous*. One editor's note accompanying the rejection still angered her. The locale was "unrealistic," though it was a look-alike of Fernville. Her voice lacked a "hard and explicit edge," but Alice, bred in the '30s, chose to hide sex and mayhem behind closed doors, trusting them to the readers' fertile imagination over the writer's graphic effusions. And the character of the small-college professor was a "boring stereotype," though he was the incarnation of Richard Hervey. A stereotype? – Well that he couldn't help. Boring? – Then her rendering had failed him.

Alice gripped both armrests and closed her eyes. She repeated a short prayer, always the same, her token acceptance of a guardian angel.

The slightest frown crossed Ryland Smith's reserved brow during this recitation. "Come on, Alice. Keep it down." As the plane touched the runway, he saw the airport familiars: Hertz, Avis, National and Budget. This landing, once snug and countrified between the walnut groves, could now be anywhere in the nation.

And there, close by, was the great building – his building – once beyond the town but now surrounded by the city. Except for its gray color it struck him as unchanged. The bold lettering across the front said:

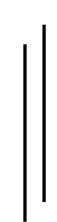
MAXTAR INTERNATIONAL
– Missile Systems Division –

He saw his hands now, the skin a discolored parchment. He had grown old – the town middle-aged. The 1955 cats and dogs were all dead. But *his* building, still dominant over even the modern structures, was as vital and imposing as before.

PART I

THE GHOST FOREST

Fernville, California
October 1955



"For those mired in thinking about it all day, every day, in the corridors of officialdom, nuclear strategy had become the stuff of a living dreamworld."

FRED KAPLAN
The Wizards Of Armageddon, 1983

BEGINNING
(October 12, 1955)

You look up and see the fireball as it rises into the sky. It has all the rich colors of the rainbow. It turns to a beautiful pale yellow and shapes itself into a cosmic mushroom. Then the fire ends, quiet descends – and life continues.

(Anonymous observer, 1948)

At dawn in the fall of 1955 an “Event,” as it was then called, occurred in a remote part of Nevada at exactly five o’clock. There were witnesses: the official ones, of course; some chance travelers in the region; and a diverse few who would remain connected by – and to – the “Event” over the next thirty years.

DICK HERVEY stood at the bedroom window, naked in the cool air, sloshing around a glass of ice water and then raising it in mock ceremony and in perfect synchrony with the distant flash and its sustained afterglow of yellowish, flickering light on the horizon. How did we blunder into this uranium nightmare, he wondered.

ALICE DEVEREAU cracked open her eyelids and began to recognize her bedroom just as Dick Hervey called out: “Now! Look, Alice.” She saw it, she later declared. But she was shivering and dizzy, and Alice Smith was already coming to life saying angrily: “For God’s sake, Dick, get the hell out of here and take what’s left of that rabble with you!”

ALEX MANNOY witnessed it back in the foothills, standing near the abandoned ruins of the Trinity gold mine. He looked at his watch and waited, then acknowledged the Event with a burst of sentiment – for it augured a glorious future for him.

PATTI STADLER heard its delayed signature when the deep, growling rumble vibrated the plate glass of the Las Vegas casino. She recognized its hellish presence only as a charm which would work to reverse the descent of her husband, Howie, into his own private hell. It would change his luck. And this time he promised “red” would be his play.

ARTHUR SONETT, chilled and dazed, pulled himself up against the rough trunk of an apricot tree in Ryland Smith’s small orchard. He raised his head and saw it happen over the eastern foothills, but it made little impression as he began to retch again.

RYLAND SMITH, an official witness of the Event and just a few miles away, saw it indirectly on television screens. Distinguished, even in casual clothes, his first thought during the hand-shaking and shoulder-slapping among the uniformed officers and excited civilians was that this success might help shorten his exile in Fernville.

DAVE CORNWELL claimed he had stumbled out to pee off the Smith deck about then. The damn Russians. There goes Los Angeles. Said he tried to kiss his ass goodbye.

JOHN WICKWARE left the snoring Bernadette and ventured outside to identify the trilling warbler greeting the new day. As the distant pocket of sky suddenly lit up, his first thought was that a lot of biology out there was getting wiped out.

None of them believed the Event had influenced their lives. It seemed to be merely one of those myriads of noisy and unconnected happenings that might linger long in the mind. Dick Hervey, though, would later see the Event as a kind of nodal point where their lives’ orbits crossed, as they did again at a second node thirty years later. And to him, the history teacher, it remained a focal point of that year and that decade which he saw as pivotal in modern times – *The Uranium Decade* – he would always prefer to call it.

Uranium and Gold
Equal in weight – and maybe in consequence

– 1 –

As our collective memory looks back into the decades and centuries, it sees their historic signposts squeezed closer and closer together, an illusion that seems to warp and concentrate the past. Professor John Wickware likened it to a line of telephone poles seen obliquely – their equal separations appearing to grow shorter and shorter in the distance.

Richard Hervey was now reminded of Wickware’s alcoholic ramblings by just such a long line of telephone poles in his view from Ryland Smith’s spacious patio high up in the hills above Fernville. Like an alluvial fan, the small city spilled from the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains into the San Joaquin Valley in central California. Thanks to the recent presence of Maxtar, a large defense industry company, Fernville was enjoying its second childhood of growth. Hervey thought it analogous to its first one, a hundred years before, during its frenetic Gold Rush times.

Richard Hervey’s reflections on the town’s past years raised troubling ones about his own. He searched them, trying to discover when his career momentum faltered from early promise and drifted toward stasis and probable future failure. Circumstances and lack of scholarly focus had left him a middle-aged associate professor in a small state college with a younger staff of PhD specialists beginning to pass him by.

Hervey was yanked out of this abstruse mental territory when he spotted the lithe figure of Alice Smith, girlish yet full breasted, gracefully dodging through the crowd near the pool to deliver a cocktail to old Helen Crossman Needham. And his evening with Alice, just five days before and right over there on this very patio, refused to board the

memory train – replaying itself in graphic and sensual detail, over and over in Hervey’s mind.

The thirty people milling about on the Smith patio were potential recruits for the Bristlecone Alliance, an organization the *Fernville Tribune* weakly characterized as “a local watchdog bunch out to fight various perceived environmental abuses.” Hervey’s daughter, Clarissa, and her latest boyfriend, Don Flatley, had rounded up the group from the Maxtar company, but the lure to them, Dick Hervey realized, was not concern over the threatened habitat of the little burrowing owl, but the free liquor and curiosity about their CEO’s house and his wife.

Alice had brought out Ryland Smith’s stock of expensive liquors, and the recruiting event had quickly turned into a noisy party. Hervey helped himself to more of the rare English gin he could never afford, and as he watched Alice he guessed she was already treading on her slipper ground between the second and third cocktail.

“You’d better give the talk before it’s too late,” said John Wickware, the scientific and idealistic spirit behind the Bristlecone Alliance. He was a small, plump man with a pencil-thin mustache and slicked-down hair. His fixed expression, a shy and tight little grimace easily fooling as a real smile, showed his protruding front teeth, and it was again clear to Hervey why he was “The Gopher” to the students at Fernville State College. Hervey saw a chasm, like a species-difference, separating Ryland Smith and John Wickware. Smith’s forceful and confident personality was necessary to his competitive world. In contrast, Professor Wickware’s diffident manner and his painfully shy and gloomy disposition seemed to be a fitting match to the retiring creatures – the lizards, frogs and salamanders – in his academic field of herpetology.

“Telephone is ringing, Alice!” someone called from down the hallway.

Hervey prodded and coaxed the crowd into the spacious living room and presented them with his stern and practiced classroom demeanor.

“Please! This is not a party in the ordinary sense. Would you pipe down over there until Mrs. Smith gets off the phone.”

“Don’t nag me about it, Ryland,” Hervey heard her voice rising. “It’s a small meeting. College people ... No, we’re not drinking ... well

... OK, a little beer maybe.”

“Hey, Alice. Pass that single malt scotch!” Dave Cornwell shouted, standing close to her. Alice glared at the wild-eyed and heavy-set young man and mouthed an emphatic “Shut up!”

The big guy they called Alex Plutonium said the same thing out loud. That was Ryland Smith himself on the horn, for Chrissakes. Their CEO!

“No, I don’t know his name ... Yes, I’ll find out. Just calm down, Ryland ... Paul’s on a Scout overnight ... Yes ... of course I will.”

*

Ryland Smith told Alice he would call back at ten and wanted the house cleared by then. He hung up in frustration and turned to the Air Force colonel in his Las Vegas hotel room.

“Damn! Alice let some nutty little ecology group meet at our house. Her judgment ... well, you know her well enough by now, Jim.”

Ryland Smith regarded this trespassing into his private sanctum by a milieu of low level employees from Maxtar as a violation of his very person. His priceless collection of 19th-Century lead soldiers could even be robbed and Alice would be blithely unaware, and she probably wouldn’t care anyway.

As a vice president of the giant Maxtar corporation and CEO of its Missile Systems Division in Fernville, Ryland Smith met that high standard for executive presence with his tall, spare frame, long, even-featured face, sandy gray hair, and clothes from shops in Beverly Hills. He had power at Maxtar and prestige in Fernville, but he restricted his social activities there since he and Alice spent most of their free time in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Smith handed a cocktail to Colonel James Lapides and they looked out at the garish neons and the bustle of Las Vegas.

“Little sleep tonight, I guess.”

“Yep. The event’s at five sharp. We’ll be on the road by three. Figure an hour to the Nevada Test Site and some time getting through Security.” Colonel Lapides lowered his voice, ever conscious these days of security breaches, even discussing the weather in a sensitive context.

“This test will be pretty routine, won’t it, Jim?”

“Oh, no. Ted Taylor, the lead warhead designer from Los Alamos, and scientists from Sandia National Lab, give it only a fifty-fifty chance ... maybe even less.”

“That surprises me. I’ve assumed our SPICA warhead was a proven design.”

“Well, Ryland, nuclear warhead information is restricted to Top Secret, Need-To-Know clearance, but I can tell you this ... dimensional constraints in your SPICA nose cone forced Taylor to shrink this basic fission-primary configuration a little ... that’s the plutonium kicker for the hydrogen weapon.” Lapides looked uneasy just saying that and added in almost a whisper: “A plain dud ... or worse, a fizzle ... could set back the SPICA program schedule at least nine months.”

Ryland Smith would welcome such a delay. It would ease Air Force pressure on Maxtar which had its own design problems with the SPICA strategic missile.

Lapides seemed to read Smith’s thoughts and fixed him with his deep-set, blue eyes, silent long enough to cause Smith to look uneasily away. “But it’s Maxtar’s problems with SPICA we’re most concerned about, Ryland.”

Smith felt again that authoritative overtone in Lapides’ voice, a design-review tenor leaking through the colonel’s congenial surface demeanor. And Ryland Smith, near the top of the corporate world, was used to dispensing authority and discomfort – not receiving it.

“Taylor and his people are the best weapon designers in the world. But you’d better get us a reliable vehicle, Ryland. And soon. Critics in the Pentagon and congress are all over us.”

In the same hotel that evening Howie Stadler told his wife to leave him alone. He needed to relax before the crucial play at the roulette table. Patti Stadler, exhausted and tense, angrily shot back, “For God’s sake, let’s go downstairs right now and get it over with!”

Howie Stadler had just finished ten hours of stressful work in the sweaty heat at the Nevada Nuclear Test Site, completing the final setup of the atomic device. Now they were on their second glasses of bourbon and their third cigarettes. Stadler’s face, lined and pale, his eyes a faded blue surrounded by dark and puffy skin, previewed a man beaten up

by reckless dissipation and years of torment from the reds and blacks of the roulette tables.

What a coincidence, he thought. Fifty-fifty out at the test site, according to the casual betting among the science guys, and about the same for him down there on that bright green table in the casino. He knew the simple probabilities of the roulette wheel, but ten years of failure made him believe an intangible agent had been skewing the odds against him.

“No. I’ve got a better idea,” said Stadler. “We’ll do the play in the morning just when the blast wave hits the casino. Maybe a luck charm for us, Patti!” He saw her immediate frown. “Well anyway, Dick Hervey’ll love that dramatic bit.”

“We could use a little help, but Red’s our play this time ... like you promised,” said Patti Stadler. After her earlier outburst, her face softened and she spoke with a kindlier tone, confident their driven, decade-long ordeal was about to end.

She went for a walk. The stress was unbearable on these infrequent occasions. Uncle Dick would indeed be intrigued by the drama, and he’d come up with some metaphoric nonsense to fit it. Typical of him, he once said their mania was like the “Fixed Idea” in literature. “Well, may God deliver us from it tomorrow,” she murmured – invoking the Highest Power to meddle in the immutable laws of probability.

Arthur Sonett tentatively picked up a bottle of scotch. He’d brought Nancy Needham, the clerk at the Maxtar blueprint counter, to the Smith house. This was his third date with her, but he wasn’t getting anywhere despite the rumors floating about the company and Dave Cornwell’s promoting her as close to a sure thing. Rumors permeated Maxtar – about their defense contracts, about management, and about women.

“Go ahead and pour, old buddy,” said Dave Cornwell loudly. “That’s executive booze. You’ll never make enough at Maxtar to feel comfortable around that label.”

“Hold it down, Dave. You saw that look on Mrs. Smith’s face. And Alex told her Maxtar hired you right off the street in Sacramento.”

“Alex Plutonium said that?!” Cornwell assumed a dignified pose,

his glass held high. “Special skill, Arthur. Recreation Management. A nationwide search. I’m not one of you dime-a-dozen missile engineers from L.A. with those big slide rules ... and those little peckers.”

Heads turned. Sonett grimaced. Cornwell could drive you nuts with his loud, obscene patter.

“Well ... OK. Maxtar didn’t exactly find me. I found them in the want ads after my baseball career ended with the Class A Stockton ‘Ports.’ Like the manager said: ‘Cornwell, you may be slow, but you sure can’t hit.’ Anyways, Maxtar needed warm bodies ... Air Force cost-plus contracts, you know. And Personnel found my pulse and claimed they needed a recreation manager.”

Short of walking away, you couldn’t turn Dave Cornwell off. Arthur Sonett poured a large measure of the scotch, a liquor unfamiliar in his Kansas upbringing. He picked up a lemonade. “Gotta take this out to Nancy, Dave. And you’d better quit playing catch with that toy soldier.”

“French foot soldier, 1811, it said there. But your date ... that Nancy Needham ... doesn’t need ’em ... she’s got ’em!”

“Come on, Dave.”

“But look out for Breeder Mannoy. You’ll get hustled if you’re not watchful.”

“How exciting! I didn’t know you were an author, Helen,” Alice said sweetly. “Sit here in this comfortable chair. Professor Hervey said you’re our special guest tonight.” Helen Needham leaned on her cane and slowly eased herself into a straight chair.

“This is fine. If I sat there, I couldn’t get up. Hell, my little history of this region is history itself. A thousand copies, but you can’t find *Improbable Town* now. People have thrown them away. Stolen them from the library.”

“Thrown away? Stolen?!”

“Yeh, and I had to cut out a lot of scandalous stuff before that Stockton outfit would even publish it. But Fernville’s history was pretty boring except for some weird characters in its gold mining days ... and the murder.”

“Murder? I’ve always wanted to write, and murder mysteries are the

easiest way to start, they say. I wouldn't be 'Alice Smith' though. I'd use a romantic name ... like 'Devereau.'

"You can have one of my copies, but don't read between the lines. ... no ... please do!"

"I could write every day out by our pool. I get so bored around this provincial ..."

"My poor Bud left us over thirty years ago, so I wrote under 'Crossman.' Maiden name and a better name than 'Needham.' My granddaughter Nancy over there loves the big company. All those high-paid missile engineers from Los Angeles. Like that big man she's talking to."

"He's Alex Plutonium. That's what that loud, obnoxious guy in the dining room called him."

Dick Hervey realized the young people were restless, their curiosity satisfied about the CEO's house and his wife. The house matched Ryland Smith – big, bland and formal. But Alice, boisterous and overly gregarious now from the alcohol, wouldn't fit their image of a wife of an executive of Smith's stature.

"If you don't mind over there, Mrs. Smith." Richard Hervey sternly looked the crowd into silence. "I want to thank Mrs. Smith for sharing her lovely home with us." Having surveyed the display racks of toy lead soldiers and the meager and humdrum collection of paintings, records and books about the big house, and urged on by the gin, Hervey was tempted to sarcastically comment on Ryland Smith's cultural tastes and draw some laughs at his expense. But it would be at Alice's expense, too, and that could ruin his night. Flushed and smiling, she seemed to be telling him to quickly conclude this meeting and clear them all out. And come to bed.

The Bristlecone Alliance signed up five new members, and Helen Needham surprised the crowd by announcing a donation of two thousand dollars. Hervey concluded the meeting in his dramatic, professorial style:

"The atomic test scheduled for tomorrow morning at the Nevada Test Site will produce a brilliant flash that will be seen even from here

over those mountains. I earlier thought we might see that light as a talisman for the Bristlecone Alliance ... that is, an agent which produces extraordinary effects, works wonders, as Bristlecone promises to do. But instead, my young friends, I now urge you to see it, not as a flash, but rather as a shadow ... cast over all your futures."

Nancy Needham left with Alex Mannoy. Arthur Sonett had stepped out to the backyard to clear his head and hadn't returned. Dave Cornwell was loudly telling everyone who remained that, as the Maxtar recreation club director, he had been authorized to set up a low-keyed football pool.

"And I get to figure the point spreads too. What a company!"

"But why the strange title *Improbable Town*?" Alice asked as she helped Helen Needham into her white Cadillac.

"Many towns, or their growth, were improbable. Fernville more than most. There's often a hereditary line of 'ifs.' If Mr. Farmer Y had garnered all the water rights. If the vein pinched off and then turned right and the miners guessed left. If X hadn't been murdered. If the Defense Department hadn't mandated moving defense plants away from the coasts. Contingency, Alice."

"Murdered?"

"Well, all towns have their murders, dear. ... You seem to be attracted to murders." Helen Needham hesitated and stared at Alice for a long moment. "Yes, you should write about them. Read *Improbable Town* and let's talk about it soon."

"Yes, Ryland, it's quiet now ... No! Of course I haven't." Alice tried to steady her balance, and Dick Hervey tightened his arm around her waist and cupped her left breast with his other hand. "OK, I'll pick you up at the airport at noon."

"Shall I get rid of those two?" Hervey asked. Dave Cornwell was sprawled in a deck chair on the patio, eyes glazed and one fat leg hung over the arm. Another person was asleep on a sofa.

Alice poured more gin. "Oh, let 'em sleep it off. It's a big house."

Hervey remembered to call Howie Stadler in Las Vegas. "Yeh, I get the symbolism, Howie, if you want to call it that ... yes, I see you shar-

ing the fear of uncertainty over your own little game with the terror of uncertainty that uranium brings ... OK. You didn't mean that."

"Professor, what in hell are you talking about?"

"An incredible story, Alice."

"Incredible story? Maybe it could be the basis of the first novel by the new, sensational author, Alice De *ver* eau ... that's 'De *ver* eau' ... and starring the perfect stereotype of the backwater-college professor ... you, Associate Professor Dick. Is there a murder in it?"

"Not yet, anyway ... yes, Howie ... do it at the atomic flash ... OK, the blast wave then ... the device doesn't work? Well, I guess if it fails, then so must you ... no! I'm not being sarcastic." Hervey's patience was exhausted from Howie Stadler's alcohol-fueled ramblings. "Goodbye and good luck, Howie. And be sure to call tomorrow."

"Let's us do it at the atomic flash, Professor."

"I can't wait six more hours, Alice Devereau."

Alex Mannoy and Don Flatley stood near the ruins of the old Trinity gold mine in the early dawn looking at the southeastern horizon.

"It's ours, you know," said Mannoy. "A re-design of a basic fission primary configuration for our SPICA missile warhead."

"How can you know that, Alex? There's a real tight security lid on that atomic stuff."

"Sources. I worked at Los Alamos for a year in '48." He studied his watch. "Get ready now. It's almost five ... a few more seconds ..." They watched the second hand tick down. "Now ... There! Exactly on time. It worked!" A bright flash appeared over the line of high hills, and then an eerie glow with tentacles of pulsating, yellowish light persisted like a pasted overlay on the dark, mountain-edged horizon. Mannoy raised both hands in celebration.

"You took the Bosom Nancy home early to get up for this?" Flatley, not impressed by the extended aura, left Mannoy who stared at the horizon. He picked up some rock samples. "There's a lot of quartz with the granite gneiss. Modern methods could make this old gold mine pay."

"The vein probably petered out. Those old miners were plenty smart."

Mannoy looked back at the lightening dawn sky for a long moment.

"Let's go, Alex. It's all done."

"Flatley, you've got no sense of history. What we just witnessed could change the course of the Cold War. You're thinking gold but I'm seeing plutonium. You could get rich finding rocks holding its mother... uranium."

"All right! Watch the windows, Patti," Howie Stadler said, his voice quick and tense. Exactly at five o'clock came the attenuated flash and glow in the dark sky behind the buildings. And now they were coming, he knew – those outsized blast waves coursing across the cold and desolate desert like invisible tsunami waves, bringing the Event's belated but potent message. But it was a message lost on Howie and Patti Stadler whose thoughts were only on the red and the black. Now they had nearly seven long minutes to wait – seven silent, agonizing minutes.

He stared at his watch and she stared down at the green table – both frozen in place.

"OK. Spin it up!" he finally said.

The two, sharp-eyed casino officials watched the operator spin the roulette wheel for the lone player, a special situation they called it. Patti Stadler leaned on the edge of the big table, its greenness under the fluorescent lights setting off her drawn and pallid face. Her bloodshot eyes focused on the hopping white ball and the spinning wheel of red- and black-numbered pockets.

A faint thunderclap followed by a low rumble filled the casino floor, vibrating the large windows, but was ignored by early morning gamblers intent at slot machines and crap tables.

"Place your chip, sir."

Stadler put his gold chip down on "red" – hesitated – then grabbed it and slammed it on "black."

"Howie! For God's sake! ..."

The little ball bounced – bounced – and plopped into the red 30 slot in the slowing wheel.

"I changed the sonofabitch!" he moaned in disbelief.

"You changed it, you bastard!" Patti Stadler screamed. "We were

red all the way. You just lost us over sixteen-thousand dollars! ... Here we go again.”

*

After Dick Hervey, still a little drunk, made his gesture at the window that morning, he whispered: “Good luck, Howie. For your sake and for Patti’s and mine.” But his thoughts were more dramatic: *As for you, uranium, we blundered and released your ingratiating genie onto this little place with our characteristic lack of due diligence. And we’ll need more than luck to survive what you and your ilk have in mind for us.*



– 2 –

Richard Hervey’s wife, Vera, left him and their daughter, Clarissa, nine years before, running off with the young teaching assistant in Hervey’s very own department on the Greyhound bus to Stockton.

Later, John Wickware argued that Hervey’s independent and quarulous nature had contributed a good part of the overall blame, roughly a third of the whole, to which Hervey reluctantly agreed.

“You can be a rather cantankerous fellow,” Wickware ventured one evening on Hervey’s back porch. He further quantified the matter by allotting another third of the blame to Fernville itself because Vera, raised in San Francisco, hated its provincial nature and the summer’s heat, and had made few friends there.

“In your equation, Wick, I suppose that leaves a third for dear Vera herself,” said Hervey. “But in *my* equation, where you factor in that petulant disposition, those public alcoholic rages and the matter of

the goddamned checking account, they add up to the biggest third by far.”

Hervey was adamant that his short-lived affair with the secretary in Facilities was inconsequential in either equation, serving only as a lightning rod for their many other incompatibilities. After Vera’s emasculating tenure, his life settled into a scholarly routine with a record of near celibacy, where lapses from that were superficial but disentanglements awkward.

Vera eventually settled down in Sacramento, married with two more children. She and Clarissa communicated with some regularity, but it had been long established that Hervey would be Clarissa’s nurturing parent.

Hervey could see something of the erratic Vera in Alice Smith. Generally cheerful and responsive, she could abruptly lapse into a pensive state, not temperamental like Vera’s, just simply elsewhere – her absence expressed by her bright, hazel eyes focused at infinity. Enthusiasms would come and go and she might suddenly take up or abandon an earnest and expensive hobby. Hervey was not surprised Alice fancied astrology when it addressed a compelling need.

He had first noticed her at a September city council meeting with a women’s group involved in yet another intractable traffic squabble. Slim, but with a fine bosom and good legs, she would draw attention simply by her superb posture and girlish walk. Her eyes were set wide over an aquiline nose, and with her full lips on a good face Hervey saw her at 35 as that rare woman with in-person attraction stronger than that conveyed by flattering photograph or embellished description. If she were perceived to be an improper fit to her station as the wife of her older and staid executive husband, it had to do with her lively, outspoken and mercurial nature.

Hervey was distracted by her then, almost unconsciously so. Up on the grammar school stage with the other council members he would be little noticed. Slouched in his chair, impatiently removing and replacing his outdated, steel-rimmed spectacles, and careless about the fit or condition of his clothes, Richard Hervey, spare and balding at 45, could pass for the typical small-town businessman – perhaps the phar-

macist – doing, but not enjoying, his civic duty.

Soon afterward, he met Alice briefly at Myron Haddad's hilltop restaurant, the Vista, and this was the beginning of the chain reaction of their relationship. As Hervey's scholarly research was now atomic politics – his long paper, *Politics Around the Atom (Failure by Personality)*, was half finished and a book, *Hiroshima (Revising History)*, well underway – he would later characterize their relationship as resembling the random turmoil in an atomic reactor – fiercely energetic with neutron-like desires and frustrations striking responsive targets, but always on the verge of a meltdown.

On that September night at the Vista, Richard Hervey looked around the big and busy restaurant feeling out of place. It wasn't that the crowd intimidated him, given his years, station and experience. The place simply didn't suit his sensibilities. As the unchallenged social center of the Fernville region, the Vista Restaurant attracted the sort of people his solitary lifestyle sought to avoid. From the long bar came noisy chatter of the sporting world, centered on the season's promise of their own Fernville State Tigers football team. Business cronies flocked together slamming dice cups on the bar. At the piano bar in the lounge, Bernie the house pianist rippled through the keyboard for a large group of admirers – “sing-along people,” Hervey called them. And his college-age waiter insisted on introducing himself and making conversation.

These annoyances went further, to the over-priced dinner and the eighty-cent martini served at near-room temperature. A couple of small places down in the town made better ones for fifty.

Uranium. He wanted to be back on his screened back porch on that warm evening working on his scholarly paper. He would introduce the clever notion of a rogue atom that had just popped into his mind at dinner when Clarissa wasn't being very conversational. It could be a poetic but telling emphasis: Uranium, harboring bits of its flawed and dangerously-weak sister isotope, U235 – planted atop the element ladder. Nature's grand, unforgiving and unforgivable mistake.

Clarissa emerged from the restroom labeled “Setters,” adjacent to “Pointers,” and joined him by a large picture window which overlooked Fernville. Lately, he sensed an uneasiness about her when they were

together in public, and he speculated it had to do with father's clothes, car and reputation.

Just then the proprietor himself came up. “A rare treat! It's Dick Hervey, genial member of our city council. The lone voice for higher taxes on places like mine.”

“A treat for you, Myron. For me it's inflated prices for food, booze and a view over a burg like Fernville.”

The proprietor looked pained. “Listen, Hervey, you can hear pins fall and shoes squeak at the place in the Fernville Lanes. And that's the second-best restaurant in town.”

“Those background noises are music to Dad's ears when the food's cheap.”

“You remember my daughter, Clarissa, Myron? We just celebrated her nineteenth.”

Haddad smiled. “Congrats. Yeh, I see her here celebratin' with the Maxtar bowling teams.”

“She can afford it, being overpaid by that missile company.”

“Dad likes to brag he's a starving professor,” Clarissa said with a laugh. “Oh, there's Don. He'll give me a ride home. Thanks for dinner, Dad.” They watched her walk with an easy and confident stride to a far table.

“She's quick and she's on to you, Dick. And she's really matured.”

Hervey shrugged. She was certainly becoming womanly anyway. “A few years ago she nearly flunked Fernville High. Thank God for the Department of Defense. Otherwise it looked to be employment at the Giant Orange on Kloits Road. Now she's cleared for ‘Secret’ ... makes almost as much as I do.” He hesitated and despite his glib tone looked genuinely perplexed. “That's her latest boyfriend, Don Flatley, a hot-shot missile engineer at Maxtar, she tells me, but a weird duck.”

“Is it serious?”

“I'd be the last. It's been a revolving door the last few years. Can't discourage legitimate suitors though ... especially those wearing ties and holding masters' degrees in engineering.”

“With those looks and that figure she must be real popular.”

“She is ... and worry over it keeps me awake at night. By the way, Myron, can I drop a few of these subversive circulars by the door

there?" He handed Haddad one of the Bristlecone Alliance flyers as they strolled by the lounge.

"Say, who's the lady in there in that tight white dress singing away at the piano?"

Haddad squinted into the smoky lounge. "Oh, that's Alice Smith ... showing off her tits again. Ryland Smith's wife. You know, the executive guy that runs Maxtar. He oughtta cut off her booze. She can get a little sloppy."

"She's very attractive. And her singing ..."

"She's a regular here. Smith and Joe Milano are sitting over there. Milano, you know, owns a third of my place and half the rest of the town."

Hervey walked into the lounge, bought a beer at the bar and joined the group as Alice finished "Night and Day" in a throaty voice which Hervey thought would exceed the norm at any piano-bar singing venue. After a bit of polite clapping, Bernie the piano player started right in on a jazzed-up and unsingable "Flight of the Bumblebee."

Hervey stood near the piano player, pretending to admire his finger work but secretly admiring Alice's breasts. He was surprised to find himself there. Ryland Smith and Joe Milano had the physical characteristics, the clothes and the manner that counted in a piano lounge. He didn't. Hervey recalled the rancorous arguments the council had with Ryland Smith and his people over utilities, access roads and zoning changes. Hervey's objections were labeled as "obstructionist" and "anti-growth" by company officials and local land owners and were usually voted down.

He eased his way toward Alice and joined the dozen others in "The Dirty Golden Bear," started down the line by a jolly salesman and reluctantly picked up by the piano player. Claps and whistles and then Bernie said he'd take a minute and finish his drink.

"You have a lovely voice and should be on the stage," Hervey ventured.

"I know it. My husband's promised to buy me one."

Alice smiled slightly and after a quick, dismissive glance at Hervey, took a long suck on her cigarette. She was no stranger to piano-bar routines.

"Just kidding. The applause was for your seamstress ... not the songstress."

Alice reached for her drink without looking up. "You're being quite frank ... Frank. Isn't that your name ... Frank, the druggist? Stolid member of our brilliant city council."

"All right," Hervey said, relieved he had not been hit. "Now how did you know I was a pharmacist?"

Alice turned slightly to look up at him. She'd drunk too much, but her wit and curiosity were still engaged. "I watched you birds in action and passed the boring time imagining biographies of you all. If I didn't already know Ed Kloits was an undertaker ... next to him, you were the easiest."

"Well, I appreciate your implied compliment," Hervey said with a theatrical flourish. "But in truth I am a mere associate professor of political science at our small Fernville State College. If I were indeed your presumed pharmacist, this jacket here would be free of elbow patches, this beer Eastern, and curly hair might be sprouting from up here."

Alice laughed and turned to face him. He felt a tiny thrill from left-over memories of romantic tilts of past years. "I'm Richard Hervey."

"Alice Devereau ... well ... Smith, really. I'm a bird in a cage, but still singing."

"Fernville's the cage?"

"What do you think, Frank?! I mean ... Associate Professor ... Dick. We've lived in Atlanta, Chicago, Philly and Los Angeles ... correction ... Beverly Hills, L.A. My husband rises and rises in the Maxtar Corporation. It was supposed to be a year here in Fernburg but we're on the third!" Alice was growing angry as she reminded herself of her plight, and Hervey realized how nearly drunk she was. Ryland Smith was not in for a good night. He swept a glance over her body, sheathed in that white dress, and somehow felt good about Smith's coming dilemma.

"Fernville offers the small-college atmosphere, excellent golf courses, bustling shopping centers ..."

She started to rise from her stool, eyes blazing. "Do you realize this piano bar is it. It! You sound just like my ..."

"A small joke, my dear. Just a quote from the chamber of commerce brochure. Yes, a well-traveled woman like you must find it painful to be

constrained by our small and provincial city.”

Alice seemed mollified and a little baffled. Hervey’s years of dealing with the peccadilloes of the unpredictable Vera had inured him to intimidation from intoxicated women and sharpened his wits in verbal jousts with them.

“Do you always talk that baloney talk, Professor?”

“Well, I must admit to putting on a manner to perplex my students ... and my daughter ... and the city council. But here, let me give you this information on an environmental watchdog group being formed by Professor Wickware at Fernville State.” He handed her a Bristlecone Alliance paper. “It might keep you out of trouble.”

“I could use a bit of that.”

“I see your husband’s moving this way. And I’ve sung my last song.” Alice was beginning to drift off, nodding her head with closed eyes to the music. Bernie had begun to play his concert-like rendition of “Stella by Starlight.”

“I love it. It’s my favorite song, the way Bernie plays it. Bye bye, Professor.”

“Goodnight, Alice Devereau ... Smith.” As he walked away, he murmured, “And mine too, now.”

He drove his dented and faded gray ’39 Buick down the hill and through the streets of the older part of residential Fernville with its small houses built at the turn of the century. His clapboard-sided, three-bedroom cottage was on two isolated acres of brushy, rocky land next to the creek. Don Flatley’s car was parked behind the lone oak tree, its radio playing. That big valley oak had hidden many cars after dark over the last five years.

He poured a little gin over ice, an indulgence he tried to avoid when he had several hours of writing and research ahead, and relaxed on the back porch, the temperature still over 80 degrees. He looked out over the Cedar River, now low and wadeable, and beyond to the highest of the local hills, Roble Mountain, which sat directly under the North Star. The warm, dry San Joaquin Valley air was redolent with agriculture scents wafted in from the west. Noise from the town was muted, so he heard only buzzing insects, croaks of bullfrogs, the occasional

dog bark – and just now the rare, yipping cry of a coyote echoing from distant ravines to the east. With the deep quiet – that lone coyote – the clarity of the sky – the teasing murmur of the creek – and the dark hillsides with their darker splotches of oak and buckeye – Dick Hervey could imagine this scene as unchanged from the time Frederic Kloits first panned for gold nearby in 1850 and his son Peter founded what would become the town of Fernville. Time – he was that close.

As Hervey ruminated, the gin lubricating the rate and endurance of a serial chain of random and gloomy reflections, he became aware of an accompanying background note. It was of Alice Smith. He quit fooling himself and asked point-blank why a dour, middle-aged and small-time teacher could imagine any kind of intercourse with the likes of a wealthy and well-traveled Alice Smith, especially that of a sexual nature – which was just what that persistent leitmotif had been hinting at for the past hour.

Hervey decided on a small refill even though he knew alcohol could no longer prop him up from his late-night affliction – “that vile melancholy,” Dr. Johnson had called it. Alcohol only drove it deeper and truer. Wandering about the old house, itself a stage of present and future degradation, his personal failures were magnified through his now clear-eyed but depressive outlook. He was an aging curmudgeon, seeing the early promise of his ideals, his career and even the high expectations for his child inexorably fade away. The intrusion of the impossible image of Alice Smith cruelly added a sharp twist to that knife of melancholy.

He stopped by the hall mirror and continued this discouraging assessment. There were the reading glasses, the growing bald pate, and, hiding back inside, the gold and silver crowns. He stood there at 45 on long, thin legs, a little stooped, and carrying that small cantaloupe of a pot belly. He was verging on the plunge into the evening years, toward old-age’s self-absorbed and periscopic outlook – toward its remorseless genetic resolution.

The clipped mustache tinged with gray made his heavy face and slightly beaked, capillary-mapped nose appear ruddier. He straightened himself to an inch over six feet – head up, shoulders back – and turned slightly to view himself at his own optimum angle. He removed the

round, steel-rimmed glasses, mentally draped himself in his best, tweed sport jacket, and saw himself as Alice would. And surprisingly, almost joyfully, he saw his professorial look to be really quite impressive. And yes, he thought, with a little hop in the air, that illusive sex-appeal thing – yes, there was something there! Didn't he now and then get those quick, second glances from women in the grocery store and even from a few female students as he strode across the campus with that put-on, distracted air? The hall mirror did for Richard Hervey what gin could no longer do.

He opened the city council information packet with its tentative agenda and background material for the council meeting in two weeks. Would Alice be there? No. Few citizens came twice, not even to observe the handsome pharmacist. It looked like a snoozer this time: no stop sign controversy; not one traffic speed petition; and fortunately no kid's sticky tree-house dilemma.

There was a barking-dog problem on Willow Road and a building-height controversy with yet another partnership of dentists from Los Angeles involved in a real-estate development.

Hervey scanned the last item, then took a large swallow from his glass and settled back to read it again. His practiced council expression when he disagreed with an issue, a wide-eyed mixture of scorn, disbelief and pain, began to evolve on his face.

"For Chrissakes ... what!" He read again agenda item six and its accompanying information:

Presentation by U. S. Army Captain Wayne Crowley for a proposed NIKE AJAX guided missile training base to be located adjacent to the city of Fernville, California.

The NIKE AJAX ground-to-air missile, a joint project of Bell Laboratories, Western Electric and Douglas Aircraft, is a mature and fully tested NATO weapon that plays a key role in the air defense of strategic centers in the United States. Congress plans to release \$160 million soon to enable widespread deployment in the U. S. protecting cities including Washington, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

The proposed installation at Fernville will serve as

a training base for Nike battery personnel. Fernville has been the beneficiary of the Department of Defense concept of Industrial Dispersal, soon to become official DoD policy. This Nike base will be a complement to the defense industries in the Fernville region.

Our formal presentation will cover details and we will answer questions on unclassified matters only.

A 40-acre remote site has been selected, subject to your approval. This site is north of town and encompasses the hilltop known locally as Roble Mountain.

"Goddamn it! That's my view!" Hervey yelled. But then the real issue engaged him. Wasn't it fantasy to believe it possible to defend to a survivable degree against planes and missiles carrying fission and soon hydrogen bombs? Atomic weapons changed everything. Hadn't the Army heard?! Those prescient words of Henry Stimpson, President Truman's Secretary of War, came to mind: "*Deal with the bomb ... as a revolutionary change in the relations of man to the universe.*" Wasn't 20th-Century history Dick Hervey's field and atomic issues his specialty? His paper, *Politics Around the Atom (Failure by Personality)*, was about this very subject – about delusion in high places.

The future would be a crapshoot, a prolonged game of chance – like Howie Stadler's – but with real stakes. Ultimate stakes. It must become obvious that such weapons are self-defeating in military arsenals. My God! Didn't everybody learn from those pictures of the H-bomb explosions?

Now his mind became flooded with images of his Signal Corps days in 1945, and to the one on that cool, wet dawn in the high New Mexico desert. He remembered it as a revelation and something like a three-second persuasion. No. It was not three seconds. It was an increment of time in his brain not longer than the instantaneous flash of that first atomic fire lighting up the Trinity Site mountains. Then – in that instant – in that ungodly flash – he learned everything there was to know of the nuclear stranger. His convictions solidified in that instant, never to change. Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Bikini and Eniwetok could teach him nothing more.

Howie Stadler, next to him in the bunkered trench, seeing the same brightness through heavy, darkened goggles, feeling the same blast of sun-like heat on his face coming from nine miles away, also had a revelation – but the opposite one. The fire went to his intellectual heart, as it did with so many others, seeing not terror and annihilation, but a new and exciting future romancing the atom. Brilliant and ambitious, he followed the beckoning nuclear genie. Tragically for him and Patti, he was snared by obsession with the red and the black, and the Main Chance passed him by.

Hervey smoked one cigarette after another. Roble Mountain, for Chrissakes! His backyard. His oak-topped hill, a mile away and four-hundred feet above the creek, would be sullied by white radar domes, launchers, buildings and vehicles. And no, he thought then, the Army evidently hadn't learned yet – labeling atomic bombs in their *Field Service Regulations* as merely “*Additional firepower of large magnitude.*”

Clarissa came in a little later, disheveled and not in a good mood.

“And how's Dr. Flatley tonight, our L.A. denizen?”

“It's ‘Mister.’ And if ‘denizen’ means ‘jerk,’ then you got it right.”

“Remember, Sweetheart, Fernville's swarming with ties and sport coats, and more arrive every day. The missile industry's bringing a munificence to our city. Maybe some will rub off on me, too.”

“Well, there is a guy, Arthur Sonett, in the bowling league. He's got a great job. A little on the quiet side, but he might be around. Depending.”

Hervey retired to his cluttered den to put in another hour of work. He would soon submit a paper to the journal *The Economist* on the proliferation of nuclear material. Publishing was essential to his standing in his department at Fernville State. But the atomic culture and its politics were increasingly hiding behind veils of secrecy. Sources were drying up. His departmental chairman was lukewarm, even a little nervous, over Hervey's research. Hervey could find himself back teaching English literature, his undergraduate major.

Clarissa was banging around in the bathroom. Strange how the cabinet-door slammings and articles pounded on the counter sounded exactly like Vera in there. Things did not bode well for engineer Flatley,

but Hervey welcomed that. There were plenty of others, and more were arriving every month as Fernville's industrial base expanded, stimulated mainly from the wellspring of the Department of Defense. In a vision he saw his worries and problems with Clarissa vanish as a congenial young missile engineer making nine grand a year appeared. Clarissa married at 20. The sprawling new house on two hillside acres. The grandchild.

The sobering reality of daylight, a slight hangover and later the hassles in getting fall classes underway quickly restored Richard Hervey's cool reason. He laughed over the Vista restaurant episode, a short and patently ridiculous infatuation, if that. And Clarissa was a long way from that three-bedroom house. A long way.

Three days later Hervey picked a letter in feminine handwriting out of his pile of mail.

Dear Associate Professor Dick,

My husband, the Reverend Ryland Smith, admonished me for slumming about in the Vista lounge, and especially for consorting with a known left-wing employee from the college who vehemently opposed his company's expansion to Fernville. Your proposed “Bristlecone Alliance” itself sounds subversive and how the hell does “Bristlecone” fit in? Nevertheless all of the above, there is sufficiently little going on in Fernburg that a little subversion would be welcome. Next Friday at four you may tell our small literary group of ladies more about the Alliance goals and, who knows, you may pick up a member or two, figuratively speaking. If you wish, you may pass yourself off as the local druggist. We meet at above address.

Alice Smith

Dear Mrs. Smith,

Confirming your kind invitation for which I will bring extra literature. “Bristlecone” refers to a pine tree of like name, specimens among them being the oldest living things on the planet and therefore symbolic in a way I can later explain. As a sometime English teacher, I must point out that your “slumming” is spelled incorrectly.

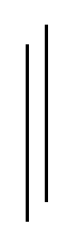
Hervey

Dick Hervey received two other significant letters that day. One from the Atomic Energy Commission denied his request for data about the rate of plutonium generation possible in commercial reactors. “Sensitive,” “need to know,” and “security clearance” were the answers he expected. The other was from Patti Stadler, his favorite niece: “It’s killing him, and me – it’s ruined his career – you were there at the beginning of it all – pray for us” – was also what he expected. It was three years since Howie Stadler’s last gamble at the roulette table. Evidently they had saved enough for another one in two weeks in Las Vegas.

Hervey felt powerless against the secrecy monolith. And he’d failed over the years trying to separate Howie from his red and black obsession. He whimsically compared Howie’s character to uranium U238, a normal enough chemical element except for the bad seed, the less-than-one-percent of that isotope U235 mixed in with the U238. The bad stuff. The stuff of atomic bombs and breeder of that truly nasty character, plutonium. Something unstable like that rattled around in his otherwise normal in-law. Hervey had sensed it in 1944 when they met, when they got drunk in Juarez, Mexico, and had seen it blossom over that Fixed Idea of Howie’s which, like mankind’s enrichment of uranium, was concentrating Howie’s latent flaw to where it looked to be dangerous.

Hervey was pleased with this metaphoric flight of fancy. Yet, it fit too well, knowing that Howie Stadler was a prized assembler of atomic bombs over the years at Pantex and at the Los Alamos and Livermore weapon labs. Hervey guessed that the demon of probability was a growing cancer in Howie, and that win or lose he could never stop avenging himself against it.

Patti’s and the AEC letters were nagging concerns, and more so was the proposed Nike installation spoiling his personal hilltop. But Alice’s note was the one he thought about all week. He worried about what he should wear, then laughed at himself. It was like the first-ever date in high school. But why should he expect it to be other than the friendly pharmacist rounding up supporters for a worthy but unpopular cause? He had nothing to go on but that intuitive tug. And it made the adrenalin flow.



– 3 –

“The Bristlecone Alliance’s got over fifteen members, John,” said Dick Hervey. “Not bad. And money in the bank if Helen Needham comes through with two grand she’s promised.” Earlier, Clarissa had said the fifteen comprised cranky loners, weird idealists and a few disturbed ones, with her father and John Wickware fitting all three categories. A trenchant if exaggerated observation, Hervey admitted, but perhaps sign of a latent talent coming to life.

John Wickware responded with a slight jerk of his head. Hervey was accustomed to Wickware’s diffident manner and averted eyes, but was well aware of Wick’s reputation as Fernville State’s premier scientist, based on his prodigious output of papers in scientific journals.

Hervey poured him a bit more bourbon. They had their parallels all right, he thought. For sure they were two of Clarissa’s cranky loners, maybe even two of her idealists, but more on the arrogant than the weird side. Both drank too much and suffered melancholy and depression, but there Wickware was in a class by himself.

“Kloits Valley is my big worry. The dam.”

“Just a rumor,” said Hervey.

“Water rumors come true ... as water runs downhill.”

Clarissa leaned through the doorway. “Hey, Dad. I’m off to a show. Hi, Professor.”

Hervey followed her inside. “Anybody I know?”

“Well, it’s Don, trying to be nice.”

“What about our new prospect? Dr. Sonett. Or was it merely

Master's-degree Sonett?"

"You should be so lucky. It's Bachelor's-degree Sonett. And don't call them prospects. What's the Gopher doing here again?" she whispered. "He's a bad influence on you. I'll never forget that awful trip in his stinkin' car to the bristlecone place. What a weirdo."

"Be charitable, dear."

"Well, misery loves company."

"I'm worried about a rogue element Nature saddled us with, and you're losing sleep over the Kloits Valley newt."

"It's very local. Breeds only in Kloits Valley. Once did in Cedar Valley."

"Well, you're a world authority on such animals. So Kloits Valley gets dammed and we lose a newt sub-specie. That's too bad, Wick, but in the context ..." Hervey paused.

"You were going to say, Herv, ... 'in the context of my concern about the flawed element.'"

"Well ... yes. Uranium, the rogue element. Nature's Grand Mistake, I call it."

"Your concern would seem to be of greater import than mine."

"Maybe, but people pay too little attention to it and none to me. You, Wick, on the other hand, are renowned among your peers for those little, slimy devils. Ironic."

"Specifically homing and mating behaviors."

"Not exactly mainstream biology, I guess."

"No, Richard. Exactly. Exactly. The salamander is an ancient creature with an incredible sensory apparatus."

This was Wickware's didactic home ground, Hervey knew, but he could then take you to a poetical high ground to make the general point, enrich perspective and squelch argument. Wick had done so impressively years before among those ancient and remote bristlecone pine trees.

They sat in the warm September night for another hour, their long, comfortable silences part of an unusual compatibility. Alcohol loosened their minds in a similar way, allowing intervals of independent mental flight before they returned in due time to the porch for a cogent and

compatible interchange. But that night the most persistent images in Hervey's mind were the face and figure of Alice Smith.

Wickware chuckled and said, "'HOME OF THE SPICA MISSILE' ... My goodness! An advertisement for a weapon of mayhem."

"Yeh, I just saw it, too, under 'Fernville City Limits – Pop. 11,519.' Now down the road on the Tulare town sign we have 'HOME OF BOB MATHIAS, Olympic Decathlon Champion – 1948, 1952.' Maybe we should put a nice addendum on ours: 'IT'LL DELIVER A MEGATON.'"

"My. Sounds big."

"It is. Well beyond your worst nightmare. Or anyone's. Our ancient languages have no words to convey its effect. *Death – destruction* – hardly do it justice. *Annihilation* is maybe a hint at the real thing."

Wickware grunted. Hervey's strong words, conversation-stoppers in normal company, didn't provoke the next long silence. Wickware would be mulling them over, sloshing his glass in little circles, his habit when flirting with a turgid thought, and would finally come back with a nice twist, if not an entirely different observation.

Hervey thought then of that first ungodly atomic blast in July of 1945 and tried to imagine it increased a hundredfold. How did we blunder into this? His train of thought hop-scotched around the subject, finally settling on those days in the high New Mexico desert before the Trinity atomic test – a time vividly etched on his brain.

*

Howie Stadler had rushed into his barracks room at Holloman Air Force Base where Signal Corps and instrumentation personnel were quartered.

"Dick. Listen! I talked with Enrico Fermi today!"

"Really. And who's that?"

"The world-famous physicist! Somebody pointed him out when he walked by with a bunch of important-looking guys. Later, I saw him at the tower, and I mentioned I wanted to be a nuclear physicist, too. It's got to be an atomic thing going on here with guys like that and all the security."

In the days before the big test, unnamed people of all ranks and pedigrees informally mixed together at the Trinity Site, sixty remote

miles away from a settlement. Howie later told Hervey they had rubbed elbows with Oppenheimer, Teller, Bethe and Kistiakowsky.

Howie Stadler had been a straight-A student in high school. In his one year at Ohio State he was seen as a math prodigy with a brilliant future. Sergeant Hervey, fifteen years his senior, took a liking to the bright Pfc and introduced him to his favorite niece, Patti.

Along with other technicians they wired up equipment in the hundred-foot-high steel tower at Ground Zero and laid cable and checked communication equipment in the control and observation bunkers situated nine desolate miles away to the west. They watched the bomb assembly slowly winched up inside, all of them struck by the surreal remoteness, the secrecy, and the tension in the air. Hervey was very curious. Stadler, he remembered, was transfixed.

At 5:29:45 A.M. on July 16, 1945, that first atomic fire instantly defined for Howie Stadler his career, indeed his life's mission. Hervey was also imprinted, his mind seared, but in an opposite way. It was a guiding light to both their futures.

That much remained in Hervey's memory, but the rest of that day's events were jumbled together and vague, some forgotten altogether, as lack of sleep and alcohol took their toll. They were on leave that afternoon, free spirits after weeks of enduring the broiling desert sun and the sudden winds that brought choking dust storms. They rolled out of Holloman Air Force Base in Howie's '38 Pontiac, windows down in the heat, drinking beer and heading south at eighty miles an hour for the only entertainment within a hundred miles – Juarez, Mexico.

They roamed the rutted and pot-holed main street of the city, its bars crowded with soldiers from Fort Bliss, near El Paso. They went from club to club, watching their sleazy floor shows, refusing the poor and assertive señoritas who clustered around their table. Stadler became louder and more aggressive, and Hervey had his initial second-thought about that introduction to his favorite niece.

Wasn't there an incident at the Cucaracha Club which had the best show in town? – seeing things on the stage that would be illegal north of the border. Howie, drunk and obnoxious, trying to dance with the beautiful Yvonne after her spell-binding performance. Later they pushed into another club, "Los Perros y Gatos," crowded with soldiers.

"We know who the 'Gatos' are. 'Perros' must be those tough-looking characters behind the gamblin' tables."

"No," said Hervey, now rotten from alcohol and no sleep for almost twenty-four hours. "The 'Gatos' are just 'Gatos.' The 'Perros' are the ladies of the house, I'm afraid."

He bought a soft drink and leaned against the wall, his head pounding, and watched the small-time gamblers – fending off: "Gracias. No. No. I just got loved next door. No. No drinks." Stadler drifted around, seeking another Yvonne. He settled on a blonde and bought her something from the bar.

Stadler and the girl climbed up the stairs. Through the railings Hervey could see them stop at a small table where Stadler gave an old woman some money.

Hervey thoughts kept returning to the momentous event he'd been privy to. Security and secrecy had been so hammered into the select few that he felt guilty just having it on his mind, trying to understand it. The bomb contraption wasn't large, but the blast and light and heat it produced were uncanny.

He passed the time at the roulette table, putting quarters on the red or black. Howie came down the stairs holding tightly to the railing. His face was ashen and eyes bloodshot.

"You look like you had a wonderful time up there, Howie."

"Jesus, Dick. I threw-up there. That fuckin' Mexican booze."

"Before or after? You've been drinking for ten hours straight, Howie."

Stadler looked sheepish. "I dunno ... can't remember." He leaned on Hervey's shoulder, smelling putrid, and put a dollar on black. "Heh, maybe I can win a buck."

"You should've played red."

"The wheel's got a naught and a double naught. A sucker wheel," said Howie, putting two dollars on black. The white ball plopped into the red 18 slot.

"We'll shove off after I win my buck."

Four dollars on the black – Ball in the 7 slot. Red.

"What's going on here?!" Eight dollars on black. The 32 pocket – red again.

"Let's go, Howie."

Stadler searched through his pockets and wallet. “Heh, stake me five bucks, Dick. I’ve only got eleven left.” Howie looked ill, and Hervey now saw a stubbornness and maybe a meanness in that face. He sighed and handed over the five.

“Try red this time.”

“Doesn’t matter. Any idiot knows that.”

Howie’s sixteen dollars went on black. Hervey watched the ball bounce into the 3 slot.

“Heh! Red again! That can’t happen. The odds are like about 32 to 1 against it.”

“I’ll drive,” said Hervey. It was well past midnight. Howie Stadler fell into a drunken sleep. He had lost his supper, his virginity and three dollars upstairs – thirty-one dollars downstairs. Then, Stadler’s misadventure and the birthing of the nuclear genie became momentarily intertwined, fused, in Hervey’s thoughts. Odds – Probabilities. He stuck his head out the window into the cool air to stay awake. The stars were sharp above that guilty New Mexico desert, and then for him the import of the day’s events became anesthetized by the sheltering blackness of the night.

*

John Wickware tossed down the last of his bourbon in a big gulp and got unsteadily to his feet. With his stoop he was a good eight inches shorter than Hervey. “THE Bernadette will not be happy tonight,” he announced.

“Is she ever? By the way, John. I forgot to tell you about the Nike training battery proposed for my private hill right over there.”

“Really.” Wickware shook his head in disbelief. “And I didn’t tell you my department seems to want to ease me into early retirement.”

“What! Why?”

“Maybe it’s my recondite scholarship. Newts, frogs ... amphibians in general. Doesn’t have the visibility or prestige, I guess. Maybe it’s my controversial writings on anthropocentricity.”

“The jealous frog ... the salamanders’ sense of humor,” Hervey quipped. Wickware ignored him, staring into his empty glass. Hervey knew Wick’s real problem was alcohol. Stories and jokes abounded about his frequent problems in coherently getting through a lecture.

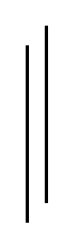
“Well, maybe you should consider changing your specialty,” he said, avoiding the issue.

Wickware looked up at Hervey, his tight semi-smile telling little of his thoughts.

“Our knowledge of salamanders is very limited. The Kloits Valley newt is able to crawl great distances over impossible terrain to return to breed at a specific location in the creek. We don’t know how or why ... but *they* know because they’ve been around for a hundred-million years.” Wickware hesitated and then continued in a boozy, stage-like voice: “The newt shall not be measured by man. In a world older than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained ... *living by voices we shall never hear.*”

“Thank you, John. Lovely. As usual.”

“Not mine. Picked it up somewhere. Used, with little result, to inspire the students.” Wickware hesitated, then said almost in a whisper: “And you should remember, Herv, that the little Kloits Valley creature, a sub-species of the California newt, is ‘*Taricha torosa wickwaria.*’ It’s named after me.”



– 4 –

It had the look of an instrument of destruction and death even from a mile away across the sandy wastes. Then, as the rising sun began to illuminate and reveal its black, grotesque body protrusions, he saw it as a monstrous and menacing insect.

Austin Cooper had turned toward it from his view down the isolated coastline where the low surf of the Atlantic rolled onto a strip of

white beach at Florida's Cape Canaveral. Death and destruction came with the nature and mission of that huge, poised thing, but he wasn't paid to worry over moral justifications for these god-awful weapons of terror. Sure, he wanted peace as much as anyone, but the way to secure it, he and the rest were told, was with the likes of SPICA strategic missiles carrying bigger nuclear warheads.

Cooper felt both pride and apprehension as he looked across at the missile resting at the lower end of long, inclined launch rails. From concepts to specific hardware designs he had guided the integration of the marvelous technologies in this strategic weapon, turning it into the major project of the Missile Systems Division of the Maxtar Corporation. He himself had come up with the "SPICA" acronym: Supersonic-Penetrating-InterContinental-Assault missile, which he named after the bright star on the southern horizon, the best remaining celestial name not already appropriated by the Department of Defense. Tight secrecy had shrouded the enterprise, but after the November, 1954 issue of *Aviation News* speculated that Maxtar was developing a missile of intercontinental range and gave a fair description of it, the public became aware that SPICA was an advanced, air-breathing missile, the first with supersonic capability to deliver a thermonuclear warhead from American soil to interior targets of the Soviet Union.

SPICA was two years ahead of the competition, and Cooper was certain that when it became operational, the missile would give America an insurmountable lead in the strategic arms race with the Soviets. But Austin Cooper also knew they needed a spectacular success this time. Official flight test summaries called the first four test flights partial successes, but in reality he and Maxtar and the Air Force all knew they were failures. Worrisome, too, was that competition in such weapons and for Department of Defense funding had become fierce in this year of 1955.

"Mr. Cooper. You've got a call here from Launch Control."

He groaned. He'd come out to the photography bunker to escape stresses in the control blockhouse during the launching procedures.

"So what's up, Mears?"

"Austin, we're holding at eight minutes to watch the number two

telemetry channel signal. Oscillator problem maybe."

Cooper felt the blood pound in his temples. "That's got all the powerplant data. We don't go without it, Mears! You know that. Why call me?"

"Well ... we just thought you'd want to know, Austin."

"Goddamn it, Mears, I don't want to know! You guys are responsible here at the Cape. Fernville sent me down to baby-sit the Air Force brass. I'm not taking on launch responsibilities too."

He hopped up on the edge of the remote bunker where high-speed photography was made of missile launches. He and the three Air Force men had no protection from above, but they seemed to be well out of harm's way, over a mile from where the missiles blasted off. Sergeant Fricks, though, had just delivered a frightening account of a Northrop Snark test missile that last week had gone out of control within seconds of launch, rolled toward this very bunker and was terminated overhead. "The main body went in the ocean but a part of a wing just fluttered on down. It looked like a fuckin' barn door comin' down on us. It hit twenty yards out there with a big 'whomp.'"

Cooper nodded at Fricks. He was distressed by yet another Snark failure even though it was a competitor to SPICA. Cooper felt a kinship to other missile programs and a sense of fraternity with their top engineers because of widespread concern over the Soviet weapon buildup. And he had no reason to doubt the recent Killian Committee report which speculated that the Soviets were winning the atomic weapon race and could be well in front before 1960.

Sweat rolled down the big man's body in the hot, early morning Florida sun. A skeptical scowl was superimposed over the permanent furrows on his fleshy face, reflecting the inner man whose day-to-day reality was confronting one crisis after another in SPICA's development. That recurring anger slammed him again: The technical lifetime of a chief engineer in the fast-moving missile business, and very probably life itself, would be short. He had to orchestrate the momentum on a complex project as well as survive the nasty politics in a big company. He enjoyed industry-wide prestige and knew powerful Air Force generals, but ulcers and high-blood-pressure came with that territory.

He looked out over the ocean, worried that the goddamned shrimp

boat fleet might be moving into the test range again, which would abort the launch as it had the day before. In this 1955 time of national emergency it was simply unbelievable that a crucial missile test could get cancelled by a bunch of independent fishermen out of Fort Pierce.

“Mr. Cooper, the countdown’s resumed!”

Here we go! His stomach churned. At minus four minutes the remote tracking station on Ascension Island in the South Atlantic checked in through the communication network. God! If SPICA made it that far, nearly five-thousand miles, with a decent termination trajectory, he’d buy the whole crew dinner. But none of the earlier flight tests had come close to reaching that spectacular third phase of the mission when the ramjets ignited, thrusting SPICA to an incredible altitude of seventy-thousand feet and to more than twice the speed of sound. But God willing, Cooper dreamed, this launching drama would become routine, and SPICA, with its atomic warhead, would be on station as the most effective deterrent in the nation’s arsenal.

At minus thirty seconds, pressurization of the red-fuming nitric acid oxidizer and the aniline fuel tanks was complete, and the big Aerojet liquid-propellant booster rockets were poised to blast SPICA off the launch rails.

Austin Cooper’s heart raced. Suddenly, the launch area was engulfed in flames while turbulent, white-gray smoke boiled into the air. Then the missile was out there before him, driven at a shallow angle by the two red-flaming rockets. For six interminable seconds the boost phase tore at Cooper’s guts, just as it did the missile’s guts – its vacuum tubes, relays, pumps and actuators – all of its thousands of parts and connections – in giving birth to the five-thousand-mile flight. Together, the boosters snuffed out and dropped off toward the ocean. Then, the roar of the rockets, the whining screech of the main turbojet engine and the belated thunder from the blastoff all arrived at the bunker in a loud symphony of low-frequency chaos.

“Go! Go!” Sergeant Fricks was yelling as the SPICA climbed smoothly out over the blue Atlantic. Then Cooper’s tension eased, and in those next seconds his mind’s eye traced the entire planned flight excursion: The Wright J-57 turbojet engine drove the missile into a long climb; at thirty-three-thousand feet it throttled back to conserve fuel; the inertial

and celestial guidance systems led the sleek, black body with its stubby wings down the missile range toward the vast and empty Atlantic south of the equator, as ship-stations along the track monitored its progress.

Cooper’s reverie jumped hours ahead to envision SPICA’s chameleon change to a radically different configuration for its deadly terminal-phase attack on the simulated Russian target. The slow and ponderous guided missile, a sitting duck for MiG 15 fighters – just like the Northrop Snark – accelerated as the afterburner fired. As it approached the speed of sound, the short wings slowly pivoted back for supersonic flight. And just before the ramjets ignited and the turbojet engine was jettisoned, electro-mechanical sequences began to arm for detonation what will be the future four-megaton thermonuclear warhead ...

Excited but indistinct voices from the loudspeaker jolted Austin Cooper out of his reverie. He kept his eyes on the missile which was becoming smaller on the horizon.

“We got problems!” Sergeant Fricks cried, as he peered through the gun sights on the camera mount. “Right wing down it looks like. They’re trying to override the autopilot.”

“Shit!” Cooper kicked in anger and frustration at a sandy hummock and slammed down his clipboard. Sick missiles were like sick birds – they never recovered. And then, ten seconds later, black smoke burst out of the body of the missile and pieces began falling out of the sky.

“They terminated it!” Fricks yelled out. “I’m sorry, Mr. Cooper. It looked like we had a good one going.”

The burning missile body, dropping like a rock, was followed by other parts fluttering like pieces of paper in the smoky sky. Cooper watched the main structure plunge into the ocean.

His engineer brain absent-mindedly began to estimate the height of the splash of white water far in the distance.

*

In late September, northeasterly offshore breezes sucked hot air off the western deserts and central California began to suffer under a siege of oven-like temperatures. The rich-green brilliance of the flatland’s irrigated orchards and croplands was in high contrast to the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, dry and clay-brown now since May.

The enormous building stood out starkly in this landscape and

dominated the industrial complex on the edge of Fernville. Vast parking lots around this windowless warehouse hinted at a great bustle and purpose within. Over twelve-hundred workers entered inside those slab-sided, light-green concrete walls, some commuting from the towns of Merced, Stockton and Fresno. They called it the “Beehive.” Large, white letters across the front said:

THE MAXTAR CORPORATION

— Missile Systems Division —

Each time Arthur Sonett walked past the armed guards and through those double doors, he felt an apprehension like that before a high dive into frigid water. The enormous central arena was filled with desks, drafting boards and milling people. He had experienced that work environment before while employed at Boeing and Northrop Aircraft, and he knew it was common throughout the burgeoning defense industry in 1955. But even after two years he still was uneasy with the surreal life there – that surging milieu with its surf-like roar. He guessed a visitor would find it hard to believe that such a chaotic setting could produce advanced and deadly hardware in the shape of the SPICA intercontinental strategic missile.

Those far on the other side of the open bay were hard to identify, but Arthur Sonett could recognize special women by their shapes or the way they moved. And there, just now at seventy-five yards, went shy “Extra-Virgin” Virginia – Dave Cornwell’s appellation – slumped, shoulders squeezed in, trying to diminish, in that fishbowl, the fact of her large breasts.

Along the sides were conference rooms and the small offices of middle managers. The faint rata-tat-tat of rivet guns and other shop noises filtered through the far wall, reminding everyone of the deadly end-product of their design work.

With long strides Arthur Sonett moved his very thin and stooped body cross the open area, dodging people in the aisles and nodding at those who caught his eye. He and the approaching Bob Nelson moved in a sinusoidal synchrony that left them face to face. Both mumbled a “Sorry” as they stepped aside – but again in the same direction. Another

“Sorry” and finally free, Sonett then encountered Jim Wilton in the aisle, slide rule in hand. He must have acknowledged Wilton at least six times that day.

“Hi, Jim. How’s it goin’?”

Arthur Sonett’s work station in the Proposal and Preliminary Design Section was located at the juncture of two low partitions, an elite corner befitting his position as a Group Leader. From there he could observe his five people manipulating white, bamboo-wood slide rules, punching away at clattering Monroe electro-mechanical calculators, plotting data points, adjusting a T-square over a drafting board, or otherwise employed in creative missile design activity.

He removed his jacket, loosened his tie and hunkered down for the duration, another four hours which would seem like six. He was already sweating despite the rudimentary air-conditioning, and by late afternoon the temperature would be close to that outdoors. Working conditions were unpleasant, yes, but the job paid well, you got used to it, and the cause was national security.

The thirty scientists and engineers in that section designed and proposed advanced missile configurations that were to feed Maxtar in the future. Sonett knew many were like him, young nomads in the growing defense industry, beguiled by huge DoD contracts but always worried over their volatile nature.

Alex Manno’s people next to Sonett’s group prepared the preliminary design for a radar-controlled, ground-to-air missile. Manno monitored his group, frowning at the occasional transgressor who day-dreamed or was distracted by a young secretary fifty yards away.

Donald Flatley carried a fixed half-smile as he guided the efforts of his group in the preliminary design for a supersonic drone for the Air Force.

Ingram’s people were involved in the general design of a recoverable film package for a Top Secret reconnaissance satellite, still years away.

Arthur Sonett’s proposal began as a low-cost, subsonic, ground-to-air missile for European deployment against old and slow Russian Tupolev-4 bombers. Now, though, he was excited over a radical idea he’d come up with for an entirely different mission. And a week before he’d finally received key approvals from the Air Force for a redesign of

the missile's nose cone.

Fred Jennings, the manager of Proposals and Preliminary Design, occupied a small but real office where scale models of bombers and fighters filled one wall. A little older than the others at 35, his straight, blond hair was thinning so rapidly that Arthur Sonett already saw him as a bald man. He weighed 230 pounds, up from the 200 when he played halfback for the University of Michigan. Despite his size he moved energetically, quick feet on a big man. If his bulk and manner did not intimidate Sonett and the others, his credentials would. Jennings held a master's degree from Cornell in aerodynamics and had twelve years of impressive missile design. He was one of the key originators of the SPICA missile concept that Maxtar had sold to the Air Force three years before.

Arthur Sonett was uncomfortable in Jennings' presence, even when confident about the subject at hand. And now, not so confident and his armpits beginning to drip, he stood at Jennings' doorway, momentarily a hostage, as the big man gave him the eight-second silent treatment while he finished writing a sentence. He looked up with penetrating blue eyes and a frowning, impatient expression.

"Yeh, Arthur?"

"Uh ... we're gonna need about another three extra weeks, Fred, on our proposal ... with all the nose cone changes and ..."

"Three weeks! What's the big deal, Arthur? Just re-locate a couple of electronic boxes. A few wiring and connector changes. A little documentation."

"Well, we got a weight problem with the new package, and that'll affect our performance estimates. Then there's the ocean base studies ..."

"This is a *proposal*, Arthur, for Christ's sake ... *preliminary* design! Minimize the goddamn details. Anyway it'll be a long shot with the Customer. I want you to get going on that Navy proposal. Ryland Smith's pushing my shop to land their drone job ... get a pipeline into Navy funding."

Arthur Sonett believed Jennings consciously practiced keeping those employees under him in a state of uneasiness, even fear, by his unexpected questions and overbearing manner. Sonett heard his own voice grow

thin and strained, and he looked away from Jennings's steady gaze.

"Also, Bill Fogal's got a ways to go on the drawings and ..."

"Fogal's too slow on the board. I never should have hired him. He's got a review coming up. You'd better kick him in the ass before I do."

Jennings began writing again and Sonett was unsure whether the interview was over. Then Jennings looked back up at him.

"Lockheed and Hughes want this Navy job real bad so we'll need a slick proposal and low prototype costs. Right up your alley. ... Listen ... all right, Arthur, I'll give you three weeks. But that's it. OK, fella?"

"My rec club keeps you engineer types from havin' nervous breakdowns," Dave Cornwell was saying to Arthur Sonett. The afternoon break had ended some time before but Dave Cornwell still hung around. Sonett glanced uneasily at the window in Jennings' office.

"You better take off, Dave. Jennings is startin' to get restless in there."

"Relax, Snakehips. Jennings puts on that phony imperial look around here, but outside the beehive he's kind of a silly ass. Anyways, I'm drummin' up interest for my official Maxtar football pool. Clark Beebe's gettin' nervous about it, but I guaranteed my operation will be entirely transparent to Air Force plant monitors and management. Company morale and efficiency rise. My shop becomes a division!"

"I've got stuff to do here, Dave."

"Old Breeder Mannoy over there thinks he's a football genius. He's braggin' he'll beat my point spreads on the games."

Alex Mannoy's master's degree in nuclear physics made him a little arrogant, Arthur Sonett and the others there felt, but they figured he'd soon be moving on to bigger challenges and more money. He was an apostle of the proposed nuclear breeder reactor – the energy future for the world. Don Flatley called him "Alex Plutonium"; Cornwell, "Breeder Mannoy"; and Arthur Sonett, "Blacksuit Mannoy" for his dark-colored clothes and somber manner.

"Blacksuit secretly loves that 'Breeder Mannoy' name you pinned on him," said Sonett.

"I know. But he's fakin' it. He hasn't had a piece of ass since he's been in Fernville. Probably never."

“See you later, Dave.”

“By the way, Arthur. We in management are alarmed over the way you zero-in on Heat Wave, the mail girl.”

“Just one of many, Dave.” Sonett began to plot turbojet thrust data. “I even caught Jennings checkin’ her out.”

“Flatley’s the exception. He’s day-dreamin’ over there about his dumb little MG-TF sports car or else that new Scientology magic out of L.A. he preaches. Anyways, old buddy, I notice you’re a little awkward around the ladies. Come on out to my bowling league tomorrow night and after a little instruction maybe I can fix you up with Clarissa Hervey, the clerk in Design Review. Flatley’s not getting anywhere. Nice legs ... tits ... not bad in the face.”

“Goodbye, Dave.”

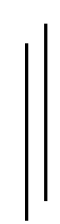
Sonett removed several classified documents from his file cabinet. He watched Cornwell wander off down the aisle, joking and laughing, his short, heavy legs moving quickly in small steps. Arthur Sonett had become used to the variety of characters attracted to the defense industry. It wasn’t like an insurance business or other commercial enterprise. And Dave Cornwell was certainly one of the most colorful ones there.

Arthur Sonett settled into a work routine. Similar environments over the years had conditioned him to blank out noise and the movements of many people. He checked the progress of engineers in his group, studied a secret report on performance estimates for the Soviet Tupolev-4 bomber, and made slide-rule calculations of range and altitude as a function of fuel capacity for his ground-to-air missile ... *Clarissa Hervey* ... he’d smiled at her a couple of times, but hadn’t pursued the matter. She was popular, more attractive than most of the other single girls in the company. Well, maybe Cornwell could grease the skids there ...

Later he sensed the faint and familiar overtone in the building’s normal white noise. It was an amalgamation of conversation, rustling papers and slight adjustments of many people at their work stations. He himself turned slightly and felt a short break from the day’s rigors. Beverly Kloits, the interplant mail girl, was coming through with an afternoon delivery.

He had worked enough years in these crowded barns that he could

sense changes in the building’s mood. He looked forward to the slight volume and pitch changes in the late afternoon background noise that foretold the ending of their day in the building. Now he cautiously squinted over the top of the secret report he was reading – about damage to transistors from neutron radiation – to watch the striking girl swiftly weave in and out of the aisles. Dave Cornwell claimed Heat Wave’s appearance was simply another company benefit, fully equivalent to an extra coffee break. Arthur Sonett discreetly watched her as she worked far back into the main SPICA design areas. And there, for just a few seconds, momentum on the design of the most advanced strategic missile in the free world came to an effective standstill. Dave Cornwell, as usual, was right.



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Alice Smith found Helen Needham’s little-read local history, *Fernville: Improbable Town (A Brief History of the Region - 1850 to 1953)*, chatty and sentimental early on, with the move of Moverly’s Feed and Fuel store out of downtown in 1934 typical of her highlighted events. But when *Improbable* reached 1953, it featured caustic descriptions of the arrival of the Maxtar Corporation and other defense-related companies with such expressions as “Maxtar’s immense, secret and ugly warehouse,” “the invasion of Fernville by Los Angeles,” and “these foreigners.”

Helen Needham summarized this history in a handout for the historical society and chamber of commerce. Alice Smith first read a copy

when she arrived in Fernville in 1953.

Our Fernville in central California lies at the edge of a fertile flatland where it meets the abrupt foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. It's on level ground except for the older business area and a few new residences in the hilly areas on the east side. A small river, the Cedar, flows by the town, carrying a little water even through the dry season.

In 1850 a trapper, Frederic Kloits, panned for gold in Cedar Valley, a couple of miles upstream of the present town, and where in 1855 his son, Peter, began a more ambitious enterprise in its auriferous gravels. Agricultural and cattle people followed and the town of Kloitsville was officially founded in 1886 (and not incidentally, the very place and day of this writer's own birth!). The settlement grew to several thousand when a bitterly divided town council – and bitterly divided ever since – adopted the name “Fernville,” an uninspired compromise between the ugly “Kloitsville” and the lovely “Robles Grande” (Great Oaks) a sonorous Spanish name with which California is blessed with a multitude.

By the 1920s Fernville became the regional farming center; gold mining and cattle ranching flourished, and a few small industries prospered. In 1932 the junior college was established. After World War II its growth spurted, for Fernville had water, rich soil, California weather and empty land before it. And now it has Fernville State College, a four-year liberal arts institution.

Peter Kloits' placer claims in Cedar Valley paid off handsomely, as did a hard-rock mine, the “Trinity,” three miles farther up the canyon, until its rich quartz vein petered out in 1920. The legacy of Frederic Kloits' discovery of Cedar Valley's gold-bearing gravels has passed down through five generations of the Kloits family, still numerous in the area. Peter's son, Henry, became prosperous through his mining operations. The region was shocked in 1921 by his murder – which still raises questions to this day.

In 1950 the chamber of commerce embarked on a modest campaign to increase the town's tax base, an endeavor enthusiastically embraced by all communities. They “sold” Fernville to corporate giant Maxtar. Its Missile Systems Division, encouraged by the Defense Department to disperse such industries, moved to Fernville in 1952 and is now the region's largest employer. A number of smaller companies followed them here.

Fernville, still with the feel of a small city, is on the verge of rapid growth. Planning is beginning in Sacramento for a modern airport and regional freeway.

What would we see if we could look ahead to the town's and to my centennial in 1986? Our little valley town (and me!) might then be unrecognizable!

Alice looked up “auriferous,” a most mellifluous word, and a delightful match to its “gold bearing” meaning. She noted then the suggestive reference to the Henry Kloits murder – strange in a chamber of commerce blurb.

While volunteering later at the historical society, she read and was puzzled by a small change in an updated version. *The region was shocked at his murder in 1921 by a mine worker, Martin Bussio.*

Helen Needham concluded her brief description with a bird's-eye panorama of the region:

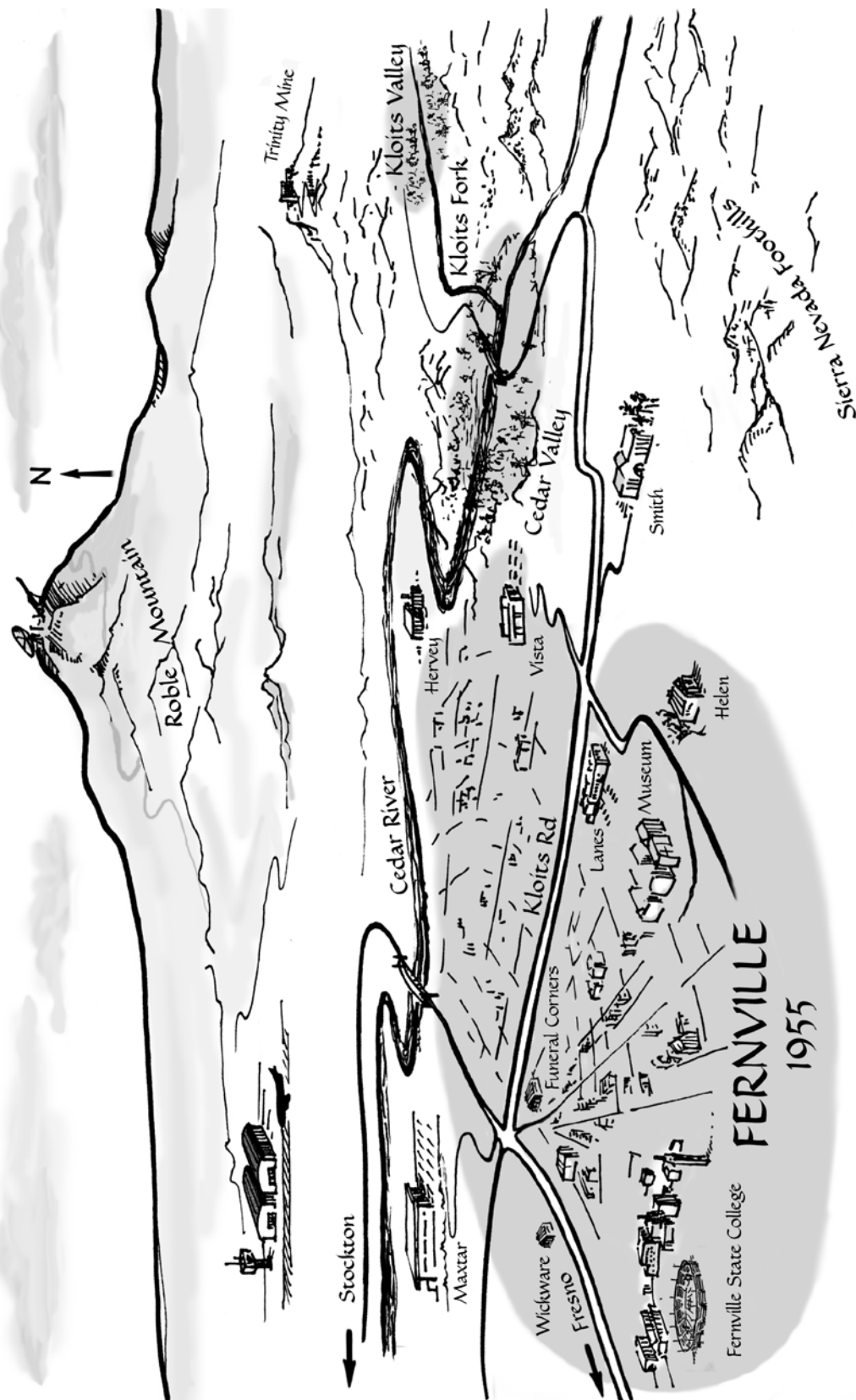
The daily flight from Burbank parallels the magnificent, snow-capped Sierra Nevada range to the east and comes in over the low, oak-covered foothills, passing directly over the vintage structures in the business area, tucked up against the hillsides.

During the postwar boom Fernville expanded westward toward the San Joaquin Valley. At the farthest edge of town, Maxtar's group of buildings will catch the eye of the passenger, for the size of one of the buildings and the sprawl of the complex are greatly out of proportion to everything else in the region.

A nice description, Alice thought. And she remained curious about the Henry Kloits murder.

*

On a late afternoon in September, with the fall air mild and still, Richard Hervey stood knee deep in the small rapid, whipping his bass lure into the shaded, deeper stretches of water. Wearing trunks and an old shirt, his wiry body was supported on long, thin legs, white and hairless. After a cheerless day at Fernville State, he was enjoying the quiet beauty of Kloits Valley, even though the bass were not biting. (He would later tell a puzzled Alice that at his age the fishing experience could be as thrilling and unpredictable as the sexual one, its success material, and often more satisfying.)



Kloits Valley was thinly covered by a mix of oak, pine, madrone and buckeye. In the spring college kids romped in the creek and held barbecues and beer parties. From evidence left on the ground and hanging from bushes, Hervey guessed serious lovers in some numbers made it their rendezvous. Helen Crossman Needham's *Improbable Town* had faithfully depicted that country.

Two miles back in the foothills east of Fernville, the Kloits Fork joins Cedar River in a small valley. By October, Kloits Fork maintains a small but reliable flow while the Cedar, like many California creeks, is often reduced to stagnant ponds. To the north and south are Sierran rivers with lovely names: Mokelumne, Cosumnes, Merced, Tuolumne, Feather. But here, sadly, we have "Kloits."

Never harboring a cedar tree, the valley was named Cedar Valley, and mining of placer gold continued for almost ninety years. From 1917 to 1939 the Kloits Mining Company employed a mammoth floating dredger whose operation literally raped a once lovely valley of its grasses, oaks and pines. It turned the earth inside out, and winter rains washed away the exposed soil leaving ugly and sterile piles of rock tailings. All in the name of gold – a metal of limited utility but of an irrational emotional value.

A dirt road branches north, crosses the Cedar River on a wooden bridge and follows the Kloits Fork up through a wide canyon for two miles to Kloits Valley, narrower and prettier than the lower one. Meager gold pickings spared it from heartless men and their churning dredgers.

Hervey knew the water people in Sacramento had their eye on this valley for part of a huge water project. That's where the dam would go, he guessed, as he drove out the narrow end of the valley – another lost cause for The Bristlecone Alliance to tackle. In the lower valley his car bucked and rolled over rocky little gullies and by old dredger ponds. Bridge boards clattered as his car crawled over the Cedar River, nearly dry below. And the desolation of Cedar Valley was there before him.

"Gold is such a goddamned, insidious, ingratiating metal," John Wickware had exclaimed one night, "considering the wanton and uncompensated wreckage that accompanies its extraction." Like this valley, Hervey now saw, wrought into a lunar landscape.

We watch as Nature gradually repairs it, Helen Needham had writ-

ten, *but hundreds of years will pass before trees and the tall grass prosper again.*

As he neared town, Dick Hervey passed by the long driveways to newly-built hillside residences that looked west out over Fernville. Sugar Pine Lane curved around to his left, and he spotted Ryland Smith's spacious new house high at the end of the cut. Smith must have sunk forty grand into it. His heart beat a little faster as he thought of his Friday appointment there with Alice Smith and her book group.

The defense industries have saturated our little city with inflated paychecks. The foreigners, mostly from Southern California, have triggered a willy-nilly building boom of pretentious dwellings, creating a spirit of envy in old-time residents.

Helen Needham's choleric passage reminded Hervey again of his meager thirty-nine hundred a year from Fernville State.

"Hey, Dad, I already grabbed some dinner. I'm headin' out with Don."

"I wanted to talk over this apartment matter tonight."

"It's settled. Everybody's movin' into those new apartments. Beverly Kloits is already there and Teresa will be if her mom gives in."

"You should save your money," he muttered. "And besides, Beverly lived in a funeral parlor and Ed Kloits is her father. Ample reasons to fly the coop."

"Coop! Yeh, just what I feel like here."

She was irritable until Don Flatley zoomed up in his flashy MG-TF, one of the first sports cars in town. Well-dressed, poised and articulate, he had impressed Dick Hervey as being a big step up for Clarissa. In the interest – well, in *his* interest – of a stable future for Clarissa with a husband holding a real professional job, he would withhold comment on Flatley's strident disdain for the liberal arts in the coming technocracy he foresaw. But that restraint might be unnecessary now, for Clarissa's not-so-secret signals said Donald Flatley and his master's degree were on the verge of termination.

"Don's in audit," said Clarissa as they sat for a few minutes.

"Tax problem?"

"No no, Professor," said Flatley. "Ron Hubbard's 'Scientology.' It's

big in L.A. and starting to sweep the country. I'm working to become a 'Clear' through his Dianetics."

"That rings a bell. Pseudo-scientific gibberish, I once read. But I could be wrong."

"Dead wrong, Professor. You must read Ron's book. Everybody is. I've organized a branch here in Fernville. We'll get involved in a lot of issues to spread the word."

"Let's go, Don."

"Like that traffic bottleneck mess at the six-way intersection on Kloits Road at the funeral parlor," Flatley persisted. "Bulldoze the funeral parlor, realign a couple streets and the problem's solved."

"Better not mess with the Kloits ancestral home."

"In L.A. they don't screw around. Tear down the old house and get on with it."

Hervey felt a sense of relief as they said goodbye. He knew and now welcomed that facial expression and her cold silence as they walked away along the gravel path.

Howie Stadler called at nine as Hervey was cleaning a couple of spots off the sport shirt he would wear to Alice Smith's place. He had business soon near Las Vegas ... "Real business ... you know, the stuff I can't talk about ... oh, Patti wrote you, so you know about the other, the roulette business ... of course I'm going through with it ... yes, Patti's a little nervous ..."

"Well, good luck then."

"Listen, Dick. It's simple probability. This is the fifteenth and the *last* time." His voice took on that thin, stressful tone Hervey was hearing more often. After a short silence Stadler continued, sounding contrite. "I'm going to the Livermore nuclear weapon lab in a couple of weeks. We'd like to drop by."

"Sure. If the weather stays warm, you can sleep on the porch."

Hervey thought it ironic that Stadler, himself plagued by odds, was on the inside of that hermetically-sealed atomic-weapon world, working on the guts of those accumulating horrors, where probability itself was playing an increasingly deadly game with the rest of us.

Still alert at midnight, Hervey got out his childhood oboe and

placed on the vintage phonograph a scratchy recording of the Albinoni Oboe Concerto, Opus seven, Number four, minus the soloist – marketed for would-be virtuosos. He had resurrected the instrument from the attic, where it had remained unplayed for twenty-five years, to serenade Vera with its late-night wail. It had exceeded his expectations, provoking but surviving several long, brutal throws against the far wall. He often resorted to it now, as the forced concentration helped to ease his dark moods. (Alice would later say it was the “ideal musical fit to the depressed small-college professor on the skids.”)

Clarissa came in as he wearily finished the third movement for the fourth time. The drone of Flatley’s MG faded away in the still night. When she came out of the bathroom, Hervey inquired about her night out, expecting a curt reply and getting one.

Flatley was a real jerk! All he ever talked about was his stupid political ideas and that darn sports-car club at the company. “When he calls me ... I’m not home! And would you mind cutting off that weird noise-maker? I gotta get some sleep.”

Clarissa, of medium height, with bright blue eyes from her mother, was comely enough that since junior high school, males were often hanging around the house. She held herself well, had a pleasing smile from heavy lips over good teeth, and her nutty brown hair fell to her shoulders. Her physical changing was gently guided now by tugs and pushes of hierarchical genes. Hervey could detect trends leading to good legs, hips a little wide but within normal limits, and a long trunk carrying the ample bosom between a narrow waist and small shoulders. She came back into the tiny kitchen in her robe for a snack, showing a trace of a shy smile. “Sorry about the yelling, Dad. Don just makes me real mad.”

“It was worth it, sweetheart. I had a feeling he would commit suicide tonight. Maybe it’s time to settle for Bachelor’s-degree Arthur Sonett.”

Clarissa smirked, used to her father’s theatrical manner. “You’re a little more sarcastic than usual. What’s bothering you, anyway?”

“That allegretto.”

“You’ve been at it for two years. What else?”

“Well, I’m having an uncharacteristic emotional disturbance I can’t tell you about. And ... oh, yes. Our peace and quiet and view of Roble

Mountain are about to be wrecked by some dinosaur military erections with half-lives of forty years. They’ll outlive me. And maybe you too, Clarissa.”

*

Myron Haddad’s Vista Restaurant was new and modern with large plate-glass windows for viewing around the compass. Today it was nearly full and the bar was doing well, but Haddad looked unhappy as he stood next to the stepladder with Joe Milano, Junior.

“Darn those big planes! Not ten feet right over us. The ceiling panels, the windows, the walls ... the whole goddamn restaurant shakes. That Martin 404 is worse than the DC-3.”

The airplane engine noise was remarkably transduced to sympathetic vibrations throughout the restaurant, producing a loud and discordant hum. Patrons bore the four-second aural intrusion with good humor, pleased that Fernville was linked by commercial airline to Burbank and Sacramento in the outside world.

Starting with a highway diner at age 20, Myron Haddad was on his fifth place. The Vista was the top restaurant and bar in the region, but was maybe a little too classy, Haddad argued, and more suited to a Los Angeles setting and clientele. It pained him when those unruly Maxtar engineers called it “The Resonator,” the “Vista Vibrator,” and that puzzling “High-Q Lounge.”

Joe Milano, Junior, in an expensive dark suit also bore the stamp of local success. He was proud of the big sign, MILANO FORD, centered in a large window. That one was his father’s, but the smaller one beyond, MILANO USED CARS AND TRUCKS, was his.

“Now about that white Jag, Myron?” Milano said.

“You want to deal on the ’53 Jag, eh?”

“Well, customers come to me for Chevys and Fords, but I go to them with a Porsche or Jaguar. I know the money in this town, and I only get a couple of cars a year like this from L.A.”

“Hi, Helen ... Dick.” Haddad waved at the couple. He turned away. “What a pair! Hervey, the fucking left-winger and that old rich bitch, Helen Needham. I knew Bud Needham since 1910. He was a little slow. Never did anything. Had his problems, God knows, but she was his worst one. Shot himself in ’21. And her so-called local history

book was a piece of crap.”

“Yeh, and she gets a new Caddy in Sacramento every couple of years. Won’t have anything to do with Dad’s Continentals.”

They looked out at the noontime traffic crowding the narrow streets of the old town. Beyond, streams of cars moved back into the industrial area on the edge of town.

“It’s like another Gold Rush around here with all these defense companies and big executives. We really sold this region to those L.A. types. Probably oversold it. We expected to attract, you know, dentists and the like in real estate deals. But Maxtar and all the rest ... boy!”

Haddad raised his glass to the spreading town. “Remember, Joe, their big payrolls trickle down to the rest of us. Loaded Fords and over-priced desserts.”

He cocked an ear. “Heh, let’s check out the heating ducts. Here comes that 404 plane now.”

*

“Sure, Dick, I’m happy to help stake Bristlecone with a couple of thousand ... if only to rile up the locals. My time’s runnin’ out faster than my money.”

“Well, thanks to you, Helen, Wickware and his people can then work on junk from the concrete-pipe-factory and protection for our lovable burrowing owl and what remains of the spring run of Coho salmon. Your book was full of degradations to this region. Wickware refers to it a lot.

“Really! In ’99, when I was 13, my dad, Sidney Crossman, took me to Yosemite up the old wagon road by the Merced River. You should have seen the Valley then. The highway ruined it, of course, bringing in swarms of people. We took nature for granted then, were so ignorant and foolish. Like everybody else my dad and I shot anything that moved, including the little owls standing like sentinels next to their burrows. I could shoot better than the boys and most of the men. It was still wild-west mentality around here in 1900. ... Here, you have my dessert.”

Dick Hervey and Helen Needham finished their weekly lunch.

“No! I pay,” Helen insisted. “You listen and I pay. That’s our deal. And speaking of owls, there’s old Joe and Shirley Milano over there at

their special table glaring at us ... Well, have it in yours, too, Shirley! ... Excuse that, Dick, but they’d like to murder me. Just to get at my private papers.” She gave Hervey a knowing squint. “By the way. Can you tell me if that predatory bastard is right- or left-handed?”

“What? ... Well, he eats right. Your *Improbable Town* took some nasty potshots at Milano and other locals.”

“You should have seen the first go-around they wouldn’t publish. I’d have been targeted for the Cyanide Process.”

“‘Cyanide Process’ means what, Helen?” Hervey sipped his coffee, awaiting her dialogue.

“Well, the early miners amalgamated mercury with the gold in the ore from the stamping machines, then boiled the mercury off. Not very efficient. Peter Kloits first worked in the big quicksilver mines at New Almaden near San Jose before coming here. Around 1875, miners began using a solution of potassium or sodium cyanide. It combined with the gold, and then zinc recovered the gold from solution, nearly pure. The Cyanide Process. Of course cyanide’s a deadly poison. Henry Kloits, Peter’s son, was careless with the stuff. Sterilized the river pretty often. What a bastard! He started the ruin of Cedar Valley. And ‘Cyanide Process’ is also the old miners’ slang for murder.” She paused. “And even suicide, if you’re desperate enough.”

Helen Needham was quiet and seemed to drift off to other times more frequently these days, Hervey saw.

“I wouldn’t tell anybody else, Dick, but in 1902 I got laid the first time at 16 in Kloits Valley, Bud and me. Under a big valley oak.”

Hervey put down his coffee cup, overdoing a look of shock.

“Henry Kloits kept trying to put the make on me ... well, about every other skirt, too. He was a sonofabitch. I’m surprised somebody didn’t kill him years before.”

“His worker, Bussio, shot him, I remember reading.”

“Well, as the story goes, Bussio shot-gunned him in his mining office in Cedar Valley. Blew his face to shreds. He stole the raw gold on hand, the week’s dredger output, about 150 troy ounces, and took off in Henry’s truck. He was seen. Drove to Merced and hopped the train ... was ticketed to Mohave. Disappeared. That’s how the story goes anyway.”

“I recall an old chamber of commerce blurb about questions raised to this day.”

“Ha. I wrote that! Then they fixed it. Questions? Well, maybe those volumes of stuff in the museum hold answers. We won’t go into that. I just told you how the story went. And how it goes.”

Dick Hervey was ready to leave, not much interested in her cryptic response.

“Do you know Alice Smith, Helen? I ran into her in the lounge here a few days ago.”

“Hell, most Maxtar people will have nothin’ to do with me.” She laughed, jowls shaking. “Sure. Alice Smith’s been helping out at the museum. Married to the captain of industry, you know. Kind of flighty ... spirited, some might say ... sexy, you might say ... dangerous, I might say.”

Helen Needham peered at Hervey over the rim of her coffee cup, looking as if she had more to say on the subject. Instead, she drifted off to the past again. “To think I knew Peter Kloits. He died in 1905. He was in the Gold Rush! He hunted bear and fox in 1860 by what was then Tulare Lake out in the middle of the San Joaquin Valley, a huge, rich lake and swamp. But when they dammed and diverted the Kings and Tule Rivers, it became desert and cotton. Some exchange!”

The realities in that span of a hundred years seemed to remind Helen of the limit of her own mortality. She became silent, almost hypnotic. And Dick Hervey, too, was caught up then, seeing time’s stealth: A huge defense company there, building an intercontinental missile whose nose cone could destroy Moscow, but where the breadth of just two long generations could take you back to the relative safety of Peter Kloits, to horses, and to wilderness.

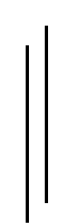
“Your Bristlecone Alliance is about fifty years too late, I’m afraid,” she said sadly. “California was a paradise. Even Fernville’s turnin’ into a little L.A. ... pell-mell, like another Gold Rush, isn’t it? Probably like gold. More useless products.”

Then, Helen Needham reached across and put her hand over Hervey’s, squeezing it.

“You know, Dick, I was born here in ’86, on the very day of Fernville’s founding. I always dreamed ... silly of course ... of reaching the

centennial. I would open up my private papers on that day, secrets I’ve always kept about me and about others in this town ... and then die on it!”

She reached for her cane. “Well, help me up, Dick. I’m off to the ‘Setters.’ Myron Haddad always did have the worst taste.” She struggled to her feet. “My poor Bud opted for the Cyanide Process, you know. My sweetheart always used to kid: ‘Honey, you don’t need ’em; you got ’em.’ Top heavy. But that’s not the only reason I need this cane. I’m 70 but I feel my body degrade as much in a month as it used to in a year. Sure, I knew I’d eventually die, but I never thought I’d grow old like this. I won’t be around to open my private papers in 1986.”



– 6 –

Devastated, Austin Cooper left the photography bunker in Sergeant Fricks’ Air Force truck and began a two-mile trip through the open land of Patrick Air Force Base at Cape Canaveral. The rocket and missile era was burgeoning, and surrounding him there was the most advanced missile hardware in the free world. A mile away stood the giant vertical launching tower holding the Boeing Bomarc mach 2.2 interceptor missile. They passed the Atlas missile site where crews were surveying for the launch complex. Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson announced that it would be three years before that first intercontinental ballistic missile was flight tested and five years until its deployment. Until then the Red Threat must be countered by the bombers of General Curtis LeMay’s Strategic Air Command and by the three long-range cruise

missiles under development: the North American Aviation “Navaho,” the Northrop “Snark” and the Maxtar SPICA.

Austin Cooper, a self-described technological romantic, saw himself as one of the visionaries leading the way to the fantastic world just ahead. He believed this 1955 era was gestating the most significant and exciting weapon breakthroughs in military history: jet bombers; ballistic missiles; atomic explosives from kilotons to megatons; earth satellites before 1960; the transistor, beginning to transform the electronics world; and within a few years, the Air Force claimed, the atomic-powered bomber with its nearly unlimited range.

When Cooper ran his own company before he became chief engineer at Maxtar Missile Systems, he mastered and controlled all aspects of its products and embraced technical challenges without time, energy or intellectual limitation. Those employees who thought the work day ended after eight hours or believed there was another way to do the job did not last long with Austin Cooper. He experienced no tedium until his wife ordered him to find something relaxing to do around the house. His most frustrating two weeks were spent on a vacation cruise to Alaska. He’d forgotten his briefcase, packed with technical papers and journals.

At Maxtar, though, his frustrations over managing the complex SPICA project within the bureaucracy of the big company made him yearn to escape that incompetent milieu of his daytime world who diverted him from his real and pure mission. After the difficult day, a little scotch brought forth unadulterated visions of technical innovations and advanced weapon configurations to hold the Communist “bloc” in check.

They arrived at the Operations building, where his anguish turned to anger over the upcoming formal reviews with the questioning, carping, and second guessing. Cooper had demanded more exhaustive ground tests, but Ryland Smith, back at Fernville, was technically ignorant and had stubbornly refused to press the Air Force for relief from the flight-test schedule – just what you’d expect from an elitist Eastern lawyer trying to run a missile business.

Now he had to call Smith and listen to executives Norris Deepak’s

and Clark Beebe’s asinine comments in the background. And loud-mouth Fred Jennings, of course, would arrogantly reflect with perfect hindsight on where the SPICA program had gone wrong.

“When’s the next shot, Mr. Cooper?” Fricks asked.

“Three weeks or so.”

His flight-test people were trying to make sense from the preliminary data, but the IBM 702 digital computer for data analysis was down with some kind of magnetic drum problem.

“That goddamned thing is always broken,” said Cooper who, like most engineers, still relied on the hand-held slide rule for computational work.

“It could be the electronics in the autopilot,” Mears said.

Cooper turned away, jolted by that possibility. Fred Jennings in last month’s staff meeting had questioned again why Cooper hadn’t yet installed the new transistorized Bendix unit, a first step to eliminate the fragile vacuum tubes in SPICA’s electronic systems.

“I hope to God it isn’t,” he grumbled.

Cooper was apprehensive as he entered the Air Force office. Colonel James Lapides was the Program Manager from R and D headquarters at Wright Field. With a master’s degree in aeronautics and as a practicing engineer, Lapides had earned Cooper’s respect.

Lapides rose from his desk, tall, youthfully good looking and with a full head of sandy hair. He spoke softly and politely with a trace of a southern accent, his slight smile hardly changing with the circumstances of the conversation. Cooper knew Lapides was an ex-fighter pilot who’d flown many combat missions, but Lapides never spoke about those experiences.

“Jim, that was a disaster. I was so damn confident today.”

“Yeh. Not even to the cruise phase. ... Austin, we’ve got to nail down this failure as soon as possible.” His little smile faded a bit and he said emphatically, “The Pentagon and some congress people are looking at us and Snark and Navaho real hard. Look out for possible big cuts.”

“Senator Symington just lobbied for a big increase in Air Force funds. I thought strategic missile programs were in good shape.”

“The money’s going to B-52 production. The first one just rolled

out at Wichita. Symington and Senator Scoop Jackson are pushing hard to catch up to the Russians in long-range bombers.”

“SPICA is invulnerable. It’s way ahead of its time.” Cooper’s voice came out both plaintive and argumentative.

“Yes, but everything’s state-of-the-art ... boosters, swing-wings, big ramjet, avionics, inertial nav, and that’s to say nothing of aero, control, thermo and structures problems.”

Cooper looked at the floor as Lapidès talked, shaking his head vigorously, not denying these truths, but seemingly trying to repel the problems themselves.

“To be realistic we need that three-month stretch-out in the launch schedule.”

The corners of the colonel’s mouth curled back up and his eyes widened. His soft delivery made his words seem more ominous.

“The three strategic cruise programs are in trouble. They’re in between the bombers ... the 36s, 47s and now the B-52s... and ballistic missiles under development. You get H-devices in a few hundred ballistics aimed at key Soviet targets and very quickly congress ... maybe even the Pentagon, and maybe even me realize we’re wasting our money on this technology.”

“But there’s a lot of other factors that ... ”

“Look, Austin. A reliable, strategic cruise missile would give the Reds fits for years. Snark is close, despite dropping fourteen of them into the Atlantic. OK, so you and I know it’s a subsonic turkey, but the Pentagon thinks it makes some strategic sense. And it also makes great economic sense to powerful Southern California politicians.” Lapidès’ eyes narrowed. “SPICA is a beautiful concept but a developmental nightmare. But if we get a five-thousand-mile shot and a supersonic ramjet trajectory ... if we can demonstrate it, Austin, you’ve got a ten-year program and maybe a hundred-million contract.” The faint smile left his face. “If a couple more go in the Atlantic ... ”

“A three-month schedule stretch-out?”

“Not a chance.” They were quiet for a moment. “I’m going out of Orlando tomorrow to White Sands,” said Lapidès. “I’m on the review committee for those Army Nike Ajax tests where it tries to shoot down some drones. General Brucker and Defense Secretary Charlie Wilson

are going to be there plus a senator or two.”

“Speaking of turkeys.”

“I agree. But political clout pressured NATO into ringing a couple of German cities with them. And we’ll soon see more operational Nike Ajax batteries in America.”

*

“Jennings, you’d be irate, too, at losing a couple days’ shrimp haul because some Air Force general closed down your ocean.”

“This is a national emergency, Deepak. Dollar signs are all you ever think about.”

It was six-thirty in the morning and a small group of executives sat around Ryland Smith’s big conference table with coffee and doughnuts awaiting results of the SPICA flight test in Florida. Initial excitement had dissipated after cancellations the previous three mornings, the last one caused by the intrusion of the shrimp boat fleet into the restricted Atlantic Test Range.

“This is just like one long, goddamn wait in the dentist office,” said Fred Jennings.

Smith was surprised at the youth of some of his top managers. The head of Administration, Dr. Clark Beebe, only 35 and responsible for the care and feeding of over twelve hundred people, stared into his coffee cup pondering, Smith guessed, a theoretical question in personnel management.

The Fiscal head, the money man, Dr. Norris Deepak, fidgeted with his cup as he read a document. His nervous, jumpy manner was like that of a high-strung poodle dog, distracted by every movement or comment. At 32 he had the cast of a much older man with flat, thinning hair and a small, mobile face already lined and furrowed. Ryland Smith imagined him then as a young-looking 60.

Fred Jennings slouched in his chair gazing sleepily out the window. He didn’t look particularly bright, Smith thought, and his once athletic build was melting down. But Jennings, he knew, was recognized as one of the top engineers in the missile industry. Smith glanced at the rest, appreciating their reputations for technical or managerial competence, but knowing this group would never be mistaken for lawyers or bankers.

“Northrop dropped another Snark in the Atlantic last week,” Smith said.

“That makes fourteen,” said Jennings. “I’ve been saying since ’52 that Snark’s a subsonic pigeon against Russian air defense ... even if it works, which is doubtful.”

“Yeh, but if they get off a couple of good flight tests and Air Force labels it ‘operational,’ it’ll short-circuit all that carping by Democrats that the Russians are ahead in missiles.”

“That’s right, Ryland,” said Jennings. “Big publicity about the first five-thousand-mile strategic missile with a hydrogen weapon, and the heat goes off Ike’s administration.”

“Especially with B-52s rolling off the line.”

“You guys don’t appreciate the new and complex economic underpinnings of our business,” said Norris Deepak. “It’s more than military success or failure, and it won’t come and go with the political tides.”

“Deepak, your PhD from those left-wing Keynesians at Chicago screwed up your common sense,” Jennings said. “OK, there’s a big defense buildup now, but it’s just a matter of catching up to and getting ahead of Soviet developments.”

Norris Deepak turned to Jennings. “Fred, you should’ve worn a helmet back there with the Michigan Wolverines. Technicians like you are pointed in the desired direction, get your springs wound, contracts signed, asses kicked, and off you go. Visionaries, you’re not.”

Clark Beebe looked up from his coffee cup. “Norris, your inflated paycheck depends on these technicians, as you call them. If SPICA fails a few more times, you’ll find yourself tracking the walnut harvest for the county.”

“I’m an economist, Beebe, not an accountant.”

“Everybody knows,” Jennings sneered, “an economist is a failed accountant.”

Ryland Smith recalled Beebe’s comment that Deepak sought attention by raising controversial issues to compensate for inadequacies in size, voice, and face, and for being cloistered with a horde of scientists and engineers involved in technical matters beyond his comprehension.

Smith showed his displeasure at the unprofessional turn of the con-

versation by walking over to the window. He could just spot his big house high on the distant hillside. Alice would still be in bed nursing a hangover. Her extrovertish capers were diluted in a large venue like Chicago. In a burg like Fernville they stood out – like that humiliating episode in the Vista restaurant lounge the other night.

He paced nervously around the conference room, trying to ignore the trivial banter of his top executives. Now they were complaining about the division name again.

“It reminds everyone of Maxtar’s historical commercial operations.”

“That’s right, Beebe,” said Jennings. “We’re developing the most sophisticated weapon on the planet, but many people still associate ‘Maxtar’ with truck bodies and railroad tank cars.”

Norris Deepak looked scornfully at Beebe and Jennings. “OK, so you’re sensitive about our name, but look at the good company we’re in. Look at the nation’s top one-hundred defense contractors in 1954, listed in *Aviation Week*, and see how silly your concern is.

“There’s National Cash Register. Mack Trucks. Procter and Gamble. What comes to mind, Beebe, when you hear American Safety Razor, National Gypsum, American Woolens or Fruehauf Trailer?”

Ryland Smith began to chuckle as Deepak continued. “Ball Brothers, Jennings? Fruit jars and canning lids? FMC ... Food Machinery and Chemicals. Did tomato-handling equipment get them on the list, Beebe? Cities Service, Armour, Burlington Mills, Norris-Thermidor ... You know, refrigerators.”

“Don’t forget A C Sparkplug,” Ryland Smith said.

“That’s right, Ryland,” Deepak exclaimed. “Our name fits right in with these corporate giants. Selling to the Department of Defense is now a legitimate, even crucial, fact of commercial life, as the sheer size and permanence of the market becomes evident.

“Remember the big flap over Defense Secretary Charlie Wilson’s remark that ‘What’s good for General Motors is good for the country?’ Well, DoD’s been very good for General Motors. They’re top-ranked.”

“Get to your point, Deepak?” said Jennings.

“Maxtar is ranked 27th in the nation in defense contracting. This market, the defense market, is embraced by mainstream corporate

America. It's as stable as automobile or machine tool markets ... probably more so because this customer can't ever be satisfied." Deepak hesitated and then laughed. "And with prosperity like this, who'd want him to be?!"

"What?! ... OK, Deepak, defense is strong," said Smith, frowning at the small man, "but it has to be. This is not some domestic market like, uh ..."

"Like cosmetics," Clark Beebe broke in.

Dr. Deepak rolled his eyes at Beebe. "Well, the cosmetic market does indeed have a common element with the more complex one of defense. Fulfillment in either is elusive."

The telephone rang and Smith nervously picked it up.

"Austin, hold on a second while I put you on this loudspeaker box." Smith adjusted the controls until the hum and squeaks were reduced. "OK now, Austin. How ya doin' down there?"

From his first word the men at the table knew the outcome and turned to each other, shaking their heads. Cooper explained that at an altitude of about four-thousand feet SPICA rolled 70 degrees and that put it off course by over 30 degrees. It headed for the Bahamas and had to be terminated. The cause of failure had not yet been determined.

"I think you've got a problem in that old autopilot package, Austin," Fred Jennings boomed out. "That new transistorized Bendix unit can be plugged right in you know."

"... Still there, Austin?"

"Jennings, you're not close to the hardware. Send me a memo if you feel like contributing."

"Austin, you sound a little strung out," said Beebe. "Take a few days off in Nassau."

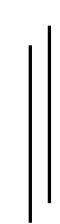
"... Still there, Austin?"

"Ryland, I'll be in my office Friday afternoon. Set up a meeting with the technical managers. Lapidès said Air Force won't buy a schedule stretch-out."

"Remember, Austin, the customer is always right," Deepak piped in. "Especially this Customer, the Department of Defense."

"Ryland, about that meeting Friday. It's going to be all technical, you understand." Austin Cooper sounded so exhausted that the men at

the table turned to the speaker box as if trying to see if he were physically ill. "I don't want any of the soft-science types there ... and I think you know what I mean."



– 7 –

When Vera left nine years before, Dick Hervey experienced a period of disorientation upon finding himself single and responsible for a ten-year-old girl. This period was mercifully short, however – perhaps only weeks – perhaps days. One warm, fall night, while correcting freshman English essays, he looked out over a moonlit Roble Mountain and a sudden idealistic renaissance came over him. Clarissa, no longer subject to the destructive behavior of her mother, was now his alone to inspire, instill, guide, push and otherwise influence so that she might reach her potential as a talented and many-faceted woman – where he would be proud and she ever grateful.

With Vera gone, his financial future appeared brighter. Chances were good for his moving from the junior college to the planned four-year state college in Fernville. And from there his academic career would soar to renown as the scholar of the dawning atomic age – a PhD full-professor at Stanford or UC Berkeley.

Richard Hervey would grant that money and recognition were drives behind this self-aggrandizement. But more fundamental, he kept telling himself, was that release of the atomic genie was of greater import than the Second Coming and its politics crucial to survival – and he himself had a voice, a role to play, in a nuclear enlightenment.

Not too long after that late-night epiphany, Hervey began to recog-

nize clues to his real future. Clarissa began private lessons on the clarinet, tooted and squeaked away indifferently in her room for six months until all three of them gave up. She skipped classes in junior high school and brought home poor grades. Blame it on Vera. And worse, when viewed sober, the prospect of attaining a PhD at his age while stuck and nearly broke in Fernville was slight.

Bristlecone. He had enough on his mind without getting involved in another enterprise, however noble. But being sympathetic to John Wickware's social limitations, Hervey agreed to help him organize the Bristlecone Alliance. Now he found himself editing the literature, describing to a puzzled group at the Rotary Club why the local burrowing owls should be protected, and trying to interest the city council in other Bristlecone issues.

"Mr. Councilman," Mayor Kloits said in public. "Please refrain from messing with the agenda over matters like this. We've got real problems here with traffic and all." In private Mayor Kloits berated him: "I don't give a shit about non-native bullfrogs, Hervey. And neither does anyone else!"

Now he would soon go to Alice Smith's house where, along with that heart-pounding uncertainty, his Bristlecone presentation would likely generate little if any monetary support or interest from that group of Fernville's highest-society women.

Bristlecone. When Clarissa was 13, Wickware invited them to join him on a field trip through the Sierra Nevada Mountains at the end of summer. Hervey could fish, they could drink a little by the campfires, and Clarissa would be removed for a week from that interminable and indolent summer vacation. Wickware sweetened the offer: "I'll be doing science stuff. Collecting. Note-taking. Commenting. Maybe it'll provide an intellectual spark that teenagers these days, God knows, sorely need."

They packed up Wickware's 1935 Oldsmobile with camping gear and worked their way up the canyons of the Sierra Nevada, finally passing over the crest at Sonora Pass and dropping four-thousand feet to the deep rift between the Sierra and the Nevada mountains to the east. Hervey remembered it as a lot of stopping and the turning over of

rocks and logs and the collecting of small, slimy creatures from springs and seeps. Clarissa said they all looked as though they needed another couple of months inside their mother or in their eggs – or somewhere. Wickware said he was looking for variations and population distributions, particularly for *Taricha tarosa*.

"The who?" – "Well, that's the California newt, Clarissa, one of my specialties."

"Now here, Clarissa! Look at this lovely little guy. *Thamnophis Elegans*. Garter snake. If you were one, wouldn't you rather go as 'Thamnophis Elegans' than 'Garter?'" – "Huh?"

"This guy here is a Yosemite toad. Quite rare." – "Ugh."

"Can't find any Long-Toed Salamander, *Ambyst* ..." – "Tears in my eyes." – "Be pleasant, Clarissa."

"Ah! Look here. *Aneides lugubris*. Arboreal salamander. Big head. Yellowish spots. Prehensile tail. Tree climber. What a beauty. Squeaks like a mouse. Here, touch it, Clarissa. Watch out. It can bite." – "Can't we stay in a motel tonight, Dad?"

They were driving south on Highway 395. To the west the mighty, sculpted granitic scarf of the Sierra rose to over fourteen-thousand feet. And paralleling those mountains to the east were the desolate White Mountains, nearly as high. Even in late summer both ranges were snow-capped. Certainly the most spectacular region in California, Hervey thought. Or anywhere.

"I'll get at least two papers out of this," said Wickware.

"Yeh, and I'll get sarcastic complaints for the next year."

"You said it. Next five years." Clarissa was slouched down in the back seat next to a pile of magazines. "Hey, look at that great one!" she suddenly cried, pointing at the little road signs, reading them off one by one:

"The midnight ride – of Paul for beer – led to a warmer – hemisphere. Burma Shave."

"They're just advertising signs, honey."

"The best one was yesterday's: 'Passing cars – when you can't see – may get you a glimpse – of eternity.' I memorized three others, too."

"Oh, Clarissa." Hervey shook his head. "Well, John, so much for a

career in science.”

“Maybe we can interest her in a theory of relativity.”

“What? No, I’m afraid not.”

“Not Einstein’s ... A more ponderable one for us regular folks ... mine. We’ll go up into the White Mountains there. No salamanders, no trout and it’s cold and arid.” Wickware’s voice became dramatic then, one of his lecture techniques. “But the bristlecone pines are there! The oldest living things on the planet. And Dick, those ancient trees might provide the intellectual and creative spark we were talking about.”

A groan from the back seat.

It was a long, difficult drive up the steep, rough dirt road along the open spine of the range. At the 11,000-foot-level they parked and began to climb up a long slope toward the largest trees. Wickware hung back, letting father and daughter go ahead. The strong, chill wind, coming from an unobstructed distance, penetrated their windbreakers and flapped their trousers. Their breaths were rapid and deep at that high altitude. Clarissa, head down and her arms folded across her chest, followed her father. A few more steps in the loose, gravelly soil and they reached the first tree.

It was a magnificent specimen, Hervey thought, a huge, gnarled stump of a thing, a predominance of ancient dead wood, its trunk split and splayed across granite outcroppings. Sparse patches of green needles seemed to cry out that the grotesque thing still lived. He was awed, as Wick said he would be, by this remote and symbolic place of the bristlecone pines.

“We’re looking at time here, Clarissa,” he called out, and then repeated Wickware’s wonderfully apt words: “This tree has seen the planet.” Short of an essay he couldn’t explain the nuances of that, but it might be inspiring to her.

“What do you mean, ‘seen the planet’? I don’t get it.”

“Time. One of the oldest living things on earth. Right in front of you. Touch it. Over four- thousand years. This old beauty has watched a hundred generations like us come and go ... like brief flashes of light.”

“The altitude’s gettin’ to you, Dad.”

The tree wasn’t so much a tree as a monument – a twisted and

split porcelain of ancient, whitish dead wood where a bit of life struggled. Prevailing. Prevailing, Wickware had said. And shivering up there among those remaining tree relics, Hervey was struck how this latest flash of humanity could, and probably would, alter the fragile and vulnerable earth – as on a Bristlecone time-scale.

Then Wickware joined them, panting for air. “‘Bristlecone.’ A marvelous name. A fabled setting. This tree elicits a grand sense of time. It could represent all the creatures and other biology that have suffered in California since the Gold Rush from people who didn’t know or didn’t care.”

Inspired by Wickware’s dramatics, Hervey said, “And I see a kinship of uranium and gold. Both bring great unintended consequences ... both stimulated by those catalytic brothers, Greed and Ignorance.”

“But don’t my concerns pale in comparison with yours, Dick?”

“I’m not so sure now, John. Ask me that again in a hundred years.”

Wickware pulled a small flask from his pocket. “Here, Herv. We must celebrate this bristlecone’s marvelous tenacity. Its evocative power.”

“Yes,” said Hervey, taking the flask. “And especially to its not outliving the human race.”

Next to the Bristlecone detritus, Clarissa kicked at some pebbles in the sand. “Come on, you two. This is startin’ to sound like the back porch. There’s no forest here. Just some old white stumps. It’s like a ... like a *ghost forest*. I’m goin’ back to the car. I’m freezin’.”

*

A light haze hung in the still air over the valley, and a dry heat lingered in the foothills. Faint odors of alfalfa and pine trees wafted over Fernville. The languorous late afternoon seemed to cry out for winter and rain – or at least for the cooler days that fall had promised.

The meandering stone path and custom brick work around the entryway to the Smith house showed great attention to detail in design and crafting. Dick Hervey thought it must give Ryland Smith pleasure each time he ventured up that walkway – seeing professionalism in concept and its physical result carried to the highest level – and knowing that only a few like him could afford to pay for it.

It gave Dick Hervey a deeper sense of inferiority as he walked up

to the front door. He stood there in newly pressed slacks and a white sport shirt, fresh from the shower but already sweating. He punched the doorbell and waited for the peephole to peek. It did, with slow and instructed caution, and then a latch rattled and the big, oak front door opened.

Hervey faced a stern-looking boy of 15 or so, trained not to suffer doorbells casually. After announcing he was Richard Hervey from the college, he was told to proceed straight across the big room to the patio. That's where the ladies were.

"Associate Professor Dick," Alice said with a bright smile. "Welcome to our little literary club." She guided him over to the six others: Shirley Milano, Enid Haddad, Sharon Kloits, Betty Beebe, Barbara Jennings, Debbie Deepak – several of whom Hervey knew casually.

As a literary club it didn't look very serious to Hervey. Several had been swimming and he spotted a couple of empty wine bottles. Their selected novel was the new one of Kathleen Norris, *Mrs. Harriet Townshend*. "Vintage Norris," Hervey had read in a review, "inoffensive, sweet and forgettable." Alice said the session had not been as productive as usual because some had not done their homework. And besides – this damn valley heat. They had got to laughing a lot. Would he like some wine?

Hervey, well known by reputation, realized before the first sip that he was in enemy territory, confronted by a strident group who saw him cornered and unprepared. Alice, in a loose T-shirt and brief shorts, smiled innocently as the savagery began.

Why did he fight expansion of the industrial park?

"... zoning, traffic, orchards..."

Your stubborn railing against the Kloits housing projects on Quick-silver Road.

"... L.A. boxes, pink gravel roofs, utilities, traffic..."

Often, the lone obstructionist on the city council.

"... some there beholden to special interests. Others, not too brilliant. ... Oh. Sorry there. Nothing personal, really."

Negative comments on our defense industry.

"... oversight of that impenetrable monolith has to start somewhere."

Left-wing professors at Fernville State. Berkeley. Communist sympathizers even. So my husband says.

"... the McCarthy era is over, isn't it? Yes, we all signed that loyalty oath. Ridiculous ..."

Ridiculous?!

"Sorry. I mean we should be beyond that paranoia."

Poor Vera. We talked so much. The suffering. How is she?

"Dead."

A conservation group? Environmental watchdog? Sounds crazy. Sounds unnecessary. Sounds Berkeley and Sierra Club.

Stop laughing at me over there, Alice. Long legs, all right, and very nice around the thighs.

"... great symbolism around this ancient tree ..."

Tree! Contribution? Talk to my husband? – Forget it!

"Oh, yes, I'll run for council again. May I count on your vote?... Opposition? Never in my district. The college people, you know."

Naturally. Naturally. But plenty this time, Professor. Maxtar's own candidate.

"Thanks, I'll have a little more, Mrs. Smith." There's a little Vera there, all right. Over-center, ready to flop in different directions. But the sense of humor behind those wide-set, bright, hazel eyes. That's not Vera, and neither is the straight-back, head-erect posture. Poor Vera. Slopey shoulders. Rounded back. Coiled – ready to strike out at the expected slight. And Vera always wore a bra.

"You could lose a lot of votes lunching with Helen Needham," said Shirley Milano, a fine-featured tall woman with coal-black hair. "What do you two talk about?"

"Some old mining tales. Startling stuff. Charming woman, full of colorful stories of Fernville's past."

"That's not what she's full of," said Shirley Milano.

"She's also full of hate and herself," said Sharon Kloits.

The women gathered their things.

"Some Bristlecone information to look over in the privacy of your homes? To share with your husbands?" That broad sarcasm brought only averted eyes.

He followed them to the door.

“Professor, you forgot some of your literature.” Alice hurried back to the patio. When she returned, the women were down the walkway. “Well, here’s the brochures they didn’t read.”

Hervey was irritated. “You threw me to the lions, Mrs. Smith. That was not the right group at all for our cause.”

“It was so funny. They really went after you. Your reputation has got around. The left-wing associate professor with a subversive cause in a right-wing town.” She giggled. “See. You shouldn’t have said I was a lousy singer. Retribution.”

“Retribution can also mean a rewarding.”

“Really. Well, then I meant revenge, I guess. I forgot you were a wordsmith.”

“From the looks of those ladies, I’m ripe for the Cyanide Process.”

“What’s that?”

“Old mining slang for murder, according to Helen Needham.”

“What a great title for a murder mystery.” Alice and Hervey stood by the open door. He sensed a kind of give-and-take beginning, a spontaneity that his sardonic manner often squelched in others. The cars began to drive away.

He moved to the door. Alice touched his arm. “Thanks for coming. I must get Paul off on his scouting overnight.” She seemed tentative, but then said quickly, “There’s lots to talk about. Those women talk all afternoon, but don’t say much. And I’m the worst ... listen ... come back at six. Drive right down the driveway and park in the back.” Alice looked surprised by her own words and stared at him, braced, as if expecting a harsh response.

Hervey, though nonplussed, had a visage that could mask emotion. But he could not suppress the throbbing pulse and the reddening of his face. “I just took a verbal thrashing. I don’t relish a physical one.”

“Goodbye, Associate Professor Dick,” she said, easing him out and waving at the last cars driving away. “Mr. Smith is at a board meeting in Smogsville tonight.”

Dick Hervey drove home and took another shower. The gin beckoned, but he needed to be fast on his feet for any contingency.

Clarissa clamored in the doorway. “Jeez, it was hot in there today.”

“You’d think the DoD could at least keep its employees comfortable. Millions for defense, but only ten cents for air-conditioning.”

“Very funny. It’s Maxtar, not DoD. We’re a company.”

“Honey, I’ll be out this evening. Can you fix something?”

“Don and I are going to have a bite at Fernville Lanes. Then we’re meeting a group at the Vista.”

“I was under the impression lovable engineer Flatley was history?”

“Well, he soon will be. I just learned the jerk’s filed papers to run for city council ... in your district, Dad!”

“Really! Well, I’m not concerned. I’ve got a good base. College people.”

“Anyway, Dave’s gonna set up a date with that Arthur Sonett.”

“Good. But remember, Sweetheart, a young woman like you ... especially you ... is in a buyer’s market around here. Keep your options open and your powder dry.”

“Come on, Dad, cut the baloney! That Dave Cornwell’s a real character. He’s sort of chasin’ after Teresa Bondi ... you know her, the skinny girl. Opposites. It can’t work. Could I have just a little wine after a hard day at work?”

“I’m afraid not. You’re under age.” Vera had that big problem. It would start with a small glass and by 10 P.M. she could be a raving maniac. He hoped Clarissa’s constitution would mimic his, where alcohol, kindly and unkindly, adjusted his mood, but didn’t turn over any big rocks in his personality.

Hervey stopped at Fernville Liquors to buy a nice bottle of wine. It would be red – robust and extrovertish. He followed directions and drove to the end of the driveway next to the patio and parked behind the Continental and next to Alice’s convertible. She stood near the pool and motioned him over. She wore a white skirt and gold-colored blouse.

“Here, he said. We could open this.” Behind his impassive mask Hervey’s insides were boiling with an emotional stew of curiosity, fear, lust, inferiority, insecurity and adventure. He felt like a sixteen-year-old again.

The sunset over the far western range was a brilliant orange and

red, and the great valley of agricultural wealth spread out from Fernville as far as he could see. Hervey pretended to be awed, and would have been contemplative if not for the foreign woman's body close by. He sipped the wine, looking out at the landscape, seeing little.

"Well, Associate Professor Dick, not bad, huh, for a brief stopover on the way up the corporate ladder? Next stop, the Container Division, the biggest and original Maxtar enterprise."

"Alice Devereau, the singer, won't have a captive audience of provincials in Cleveland."

"Am I really that bad?"

"Oh, no. You sing OK, but your presence is ... well ... commanding."

"Commanding! Hah. You wordsmith devil. I guess I drank too much that night. Ryland was angry with me. An embarrassing argument in the lounge."

Hervey felt a little sympathy for Smith, knowing the difficulty of handling a headstrong woman in her cups and in public.

"That telescope there. You can see the whole town. I can spot Ryland's office window in that administration building," she said, pointing.

"Maybe they have one there looking up here."

"Whoops. I'd better not swim naked anymore."

Dick Hervey, his face blank, kept his eyes over the town, its lights now blinking on. Was Alice a loose and artless spirit, or was she shrewdly manipulating the puppet strings? To calm the electricity the word "naked" aroused, he poured them more wine.

Alice brought out another bottle and some snacks. "I really do want to talk. I feel so isolated. Ryland's life is the corporate world. I don't exactly fit. He's terribly successful and there's no stopping him. He's got all the credentials. My God. Just look at him. He could even pass for a young U.S. senator."

Their talk came easily. She had married too young at 19 after only two years in college, dazzled by the handsome and ambitious Ryland Smith. "But who wouldn't have been! Anyway, I got a slow start. Now I'm restless. Need to do something. Get involved. Get a cause. Write novels."

"You could become the burrowing-owl specialist in the Bristlecone

Alliance."

Alice stuck out her tongue. "The ladies were quite vehement, weren't they? But it was really funny. You lost a few votes, I'm sure."

Alice was a good listener, curious and responsive, as if hoping to find direction to her own aimless path from what she felt was the structured one of another. Hervey told of his education, how the war had interrupted his work toward a PhD in 20th-Century history, his need to support the family and the difficulty of finding a suitable teaching job. Fernville was the best of the lot. He told of Vera, the single-handed wrecking crew, and Clarissa, a good girl whom he dearly loved, but whose potential he had probably over-estimated.

"Clarissa. A lovely name."

"My undergraduate specialty was 18th-Century English literature. A charming coincidence."

"Really. Here, let me pour. What a spectacular night!"

Alice and Ryland had the boy, Paul. One child was all Ryland wanted. Fernville High was hardly college preparatory. He'd be sent to a boarding school in the East if they got stuck here.

Hervey became eloquent as if he had a fantasy class of rapt students before him. In the darkness he sensed that the wine had dulled Alice's own talkative inclination. She became still, except for an occasional probing question. And dulled, too, was that state of his mind which often tormented him – that his career momentum, indeed his life's momentum, had eased some years before, and all that youthful idealism and energy were now turning into an inert cynicism. Looking past her wide-set, alert eyes, out to the sunset's remaining tinge of color, he painfully compared his own inexorable downward spiral to Ryland Smith's ascending one. A little more wine pushed that thought, too, into the background.

The Trinity experience led to his later academic specialty, atomic politics and control of the atomic genie. He'd had a religious experience on the spot there. He positively knew in that instant that something had got loose that Nature intended to keep secret. Most of the others, including his nephew, had an opposite revelation. That was leading to great trouble.

"Very poetic, Professor Dick," Alice said quietly in the darkness.

Her voice – Yes, he realized, that was the lynchpin in her attraction. When calm, it had a low, dulcet tone he would remember, hackneyed as it was, as “honey-like.”

He went on. The Bristlecone Alliance was the brainchild of Wickware and several colleagues. Conservation was a new trend. Theirs was to be the focus of a regional organization. Uranium and Bristlecone and gold. There was a kind of metaphysical tie there. It could be an idea for an allegorical essay in a literary magazine.

Hervey had gone too far and at once knew it. His egotistical bent for lecturing everyone had nearly quashed a lush compatibility they'd felt under the darkening, warm sky. Was it by her slight shifting of feet, head turning toward the valley, or by a subtle change in her breathing that suddenly told him Alice's fluctuating attention, now amplified by too much of the good cabernet, was leaning towards some outside concern – perhaps about what she should wear the next day to lunch? Any moment now it would be coming: ‘It's been a delightful evening, Professor. Most interesting. Thanks so much for the visit and we must talk again.’

“Next tutorial tomorrow in Room 16B, Alice. Now we will finish the remains of this bottle on this memorable evening above Fernville. And let us guess where that line of lights there on the outer edge of town will be in thirty years, Fernville's centennial time, and what Alice Devereau, still beautiful in her fading years, will be up to.”

“You wordsmith devil, Dick. Well, I could be ... well, dead, or maybe the glamorous but unhappy wife of a U.S. senator. Or ... maybe ... Alice Devereau, the acclaimed novelist!”

“Acclaimed for her fictional probing into the hidden lives of the pedestrians of little backwater Fernville.”

“Walkers?”

“No. In the adjective sense. Common folks.”

“The mystery in the murder of the dull associate professor. His yearnings, hidden idealism and his frustration over the blonde student in the second row revealed.”

“Ha. Yes, yearnings ... and failures.”

Alice was not beautiful. But that hyperbole, now full in his mind, was not meant to falsely flatter. For wasn't she a near-beauty, and didn't

the warmth and mystery of that glorious evening, the seductive ruby-red wine, the dim starlit reflections off the gold of her blouse and those long-buried stirrings now stretch the definition?

It happened then with no more thought. Dick Hervey stood and took the step to where she sat and then leaned down and gripped her shoulders and kissed her hard on the lips. She moved as if struggling, but she was only trying to stand because of the awkwardness of their position. He relaxed and helped her. His hands roamed her delicate upper arms and shoulders and then to her neck and into her hair. He kissed her now gently, tentatively – like that first uncertain time in high school all over again. Her arms tightened against his back, and the air went out of her as her mouth opened, and finally she was breathing again, deeper and deeper.

But this was different from the high school time. No doubts about the territory directly ahead. This script was written and they simply followed it. They moved slowly to the oversized chaise near the pool. Perhaps it had been noticed and was in their thoughts all evening. And already his hands were on the golden blouse, caressing her full breasts, as they together unbuttoned it. He found no bra there as he knew he wouldn't.

Her white skirt stayed on in their reckless haste. They slipped off her shoes. He slowly eased off her panties, knowing he would long remember the feel of the soft cotton fabric.

He found the absence of a moon fortuitous, for moonlight on Alice before him, the glow on her breasts, belly and on her thighs, would have sensualized him beyond control.

As it was, when he finally entered her, it became furious and brief for them both. Soon they lay there, slowly calming. He was tongued-tied, not with Alice, but with himself. There was an easy “wonderful” and even a “beautiful,” but he had no grip on the real situation. An “I love you” would strike them both as a ghastly, high-schoolish cadence to that serendipitous night.

Instead, he stroked her hair and rubbed her back, hoping she would take it as the response of a sated and mature lover.

He felt the air cooling and shivered slightly. That and the excess wine he'd drunk told him he'd be sorry if she became aroused again. It

had been perfect.

And too much wine was also awakening Alice Smith as Alice Devereau took her leave. She raised her head in a nervous look-around and seemed a bit irritable as she buttoned up.

“Wow. I’m getting a headache. You’d better go, Dick.” She had become tense and spoke awkwardly. “I think we should consider this as a kind of aberration. I ... I just don’t know.”

“Shall I help you pick up?”

“No, no. Could you be as quiet as you can and keep your lights off until you’re down the street a ways. Neighbors, you know.” She wiggled her nose. Then Alice must have realized how brusque she sounded. She kissed him. “I’m sorry, Dick. It’s really been a ... a ... you’re a dear.”

