

## STAND ON METAPHOR

The great contribution of SF to the corpus of literature is “the future as metaphor,” John Brunner wrote, and he did his best over a writing career of forty years to add to it. In that period he published more than a hundred and fifty short stories and more than fifty novels as well as a dozen collections of short SF, a dozen suspense and historical novels, half a dozen collections of poetry, and a handful of monographs.

While J. G. Ballard’s career suggested a transformation of British SF into a different, more recognizably British, genre, Brunner’s career demonstrated the pitfalls of easy generalizations. Ballard was born and spent his formative years in China; Brunner’s birth and upbringing were totally British. Ballard wrote comparatively few stories and novels; Brunner wrote a great many. Ballard directed his work toward British publications and a British audience; Brunner aimed at U.S. publishers.

Born in 1934, John (Killian Houston) Brunner tried to make a living as a writer from an early age, selling an anonymous SF novel to a British paperback publisher at the age of seventeen and getting his first story published (“Thou Good and Faithful,” under the name of John Loxmith) in *Astounding* in 1953. After some disappointments in which he had to turn to other jobs, including several years as an editor, he received contracts for two books with Ace and resumed a freelance career that he pursued until his untimely death, of a heart attack at the World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow, in 1995.

Although Brunner published in British magazines, and became with Aldiss and Ballard the leading lights of Moorcock’s *New Worlds* and of the New Wave

that it stirred up, the American market was the only one that could support Brunner's full-time writing aspirations. Throughout the 1960s he wrote for Ace Books, which was one of the two or three publishers that could accommodate his productivity. But Ace also provided limited advances and limited print runs (and, as an audit later demonstrated, limited royalties), and Brunner, like Philip K. Dick, another talented Ace author, had to write a lot of books very fast in order to make a limited living.

Brunner's early writing has been called "literate space opera." Almost immediately he demonstrated his ability to revivify familiar SF ideas with new contexts and with writing craft, and often by revealing their darker potentials. He published eight novels in two years and thirty-four novels in ten years. By the middle of that period his novels were being published occasionally in Britain, and by other publishers, including Ballantine Books, in America, and several of his novels, including *The Squares of the City* (1965), demonstrated his literary ambitions.

Those ambitions would come to fruition in 1968 with the publication of *Stand on Zanzibar*, a long, panoramic novel focusing on a near-future world trying to cope with overpopulation, and written in an experimental style adapted from John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* It won the Hugo Award and half a dozen others and earned a panel discussion (a first for an SF author) at the prestigious Modern Language Association conference.

Brunner followed *Stand on Zanzibar* with *The Jagged Orbit* (1969), which took racism as its topic, *The Sheep Look Up* (1972), which dealt even more despairingly with pollution, and *The Shockwave Rider* (1975), which offered a glimmer of hope about a computerized future and the information explosion. The effort to produce these remarkable dystopian works (and the ten other novels interspersed), as well as the darkness of the vision they embodied, drained Brunner's creative energies for a time, but he returned in the mid-1980s with the life-affirming *The Crucible of Time* (1983) and *The Tides of Time* (1984), and he continued to produce mature novels such as *A Maze of Stars* (1991).

"The Totally Rich" was written during Brunner's most productive early period, just ten years after his first magazine appearance, and published in *Worlds of Tomorrow*, a companion magazine to *Galaxy* and *If*. Ten years later, Brunner called it "my best, no argument." It is the ultimate conspiracy story, not so much because of the conspiracy itself but because it is so simply told and so plausible. It reminds the reader of the quintessentially American exchange between F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Fitzgerald: "The rich are different from you and me." Hemingway: "Yes, they're richer."

Even though the locale of "The Totally Rich" is European, its concerns seem American. This was the secret of Brunner's success. He wrote British science fiction, with its greater sophistication of style and its pessimistic European attitudes, and sold it to the Americans. And even when Americans themselves were represented as the villains, they loved it.

Perhaps that is why Brunner never seemed British enough for the British—that and his commitment to the intrinsic usefulness of science fiction. He wrote, "[E]ven metaphors drawn from an obsolete future can be invaluable in preparing us for eventual reality, whatever form—out of an infinite number—it may actually take."

# THE TOTALLY RICH

BY

JOHN

BRUNNER

They are the totally rich. You've never heard of them because they are the only people in the world rich enough to buy what they want: a completely private life. The lightning can strike into your life and mine:—you win a big prize or find yourself neighbor to an ax-murderer or buy a parrot suffering from psittacosis—and you are in the searchlight, blinking shyly and wishing to God you were dead.

They won their prizes by being born. They do not have neighbors, and if they require a murder they do not use so clumsy a means as an ax. They do not keep parrots. And if by some other million-to-one chance the searchlight does tend towards them, they buy it and instruct the man behind it to switch it off.

How many of them there are I don't know. I have tried to estimate the total by adding together the gross national product of every country on earth and dividing by the amount necessary to buy a government of a major industrial power. It goes without saying that you cannot maintain privacy unless you can buy any two governments.

I think there may be one hundred of these people. I have met one, and very nearly another.

By and large they are night people. The purchase of light from darkness was the first economic advance. But you will not find them by going and looking at two o'clock in the morning, any more than at two in the afternoon. Not at the approved clubs; not at the Polo Grounds; not in the Royal Enclosure at Ascot nor on the White House lawn.

They are not on maps. Do you understand that? Literally, where they choose to live becomes a blank space in the atlases. They are not in census lists, *Who's Who*, or Burke's *Peerage*. They do not figure in tax collectors' files, and the post office has no record of their addresses. Think of all the places where your name appears—the yellowing school registers, the hospital case records, the duplicate receipt form in the store, the signature on letters. In *no single* such place is there one of their names.

How it is done...no, I don't know. I can only hazard a guess that to almost all human beings the promise of having more than everything they have ever conceived as desirable acts like a traumatic shock. It is instantaneous brainwashing; in the moment the promise is believed, the pattern of obedience is imprinted, as the psychologists say. But they take no chances. They are not absolute rulers—indeed, they are not rulers of anything except what directly belongs to them—but they have much in common with that caliph of Baghdad to whom a sculptor came, commissioned to make a fountain. This fountain was the most beautiful in the world, and the caliph approved it. Then he demanded of the sculptor whether anyone else could have made so lovely a fountain, and the sculptor proudly said no one but he in the whole world could have achieved it.

Pay him what was promised, said the caliph. And also—put out his eyes.

I wanted champagne that evening, dancing girls, bright lights, music. All I had was a can of beer; but at least it was cold. I went to fetch it, and when I came back stood in the kitchen doorway looking at my...living room, workshop, lab, whatever. It was a bit of all these.

All right, I didn't believe it. It was August 23rd, and I had been here one year and one month, and the job was done. I didn't believe it, and I wouldn't be able to until I'd told people—called in my friends and handed the beer around and made them drink a toast.

I raised the can. I said, "To the end of the job!" I drank. That hadn't turned the trick. I said, "To the Cooper Effect!" That was a little more like it, but it still wasn't quite complete.

So I frowned for a moment, thought I'd got it, and said triumphantly, "To Santadora—the most wonderful place on earth, without which such concentration would never have been possible: may God bless her and all who sail from her."

I was drinking this third toast with a sense of satisfaction when Naomi spoke from the shadows of the open porch.

"Drink to me, Derek," she said. "You're coming closer, but you aren't quite there."

I slammed the beer can down on a handy table, strode across the room, and gave her a hug. She didn't respond; she was like a beautiful doll displaying Paris creations in a store window. I had never seen her wearing anything but black; and tonight it was a black blouse of hand-spun raw silk and tight black pants tapering down to black espadrilles. Her hair, corn-pale, her eyes, sapphire-blue, her skin, luminous under a glowing tan, had always been so perfect they seemed unreal. I had never touched her before. Sometimes, lying awake at night, I had wondered why; she had no man. I had rationalized to myself that I prized this haven of peace, and the concentration I found possible here, too much to want to involve myself with a woman who never demanded anything but who—one knew it—would take nothing less than everything.

"It's done," I said, whirling and throwing out my arm. "The millennium has arrived! Success at last!" I ran to the haywire machine which I had never thought to see in real existence. "This calls for a celebration—I'm going out to collect everyone I can find and..."

I heard my voice trail away. She had walked a pace forward and lifted a hand that had been hanging by her side, weighed down by something. Now it caught the light. A bottle of champagne.

"How—?" I said. And thought of something else, too. I had never been alone with Naomi before, in the thirteen months since coming to Santadora.

"Sit down, Derek," she said. She put the champagne bottle on the same table as the beer can. "It's no good going out to collect anyone. There isn't anybody here except you and me."

I didn't say anything.

She cocked a quizzical eyebrow. "You don't believe me? You will."

Turning, she went to the kitchen. I waited for her to return with a pair of the glasses I kept for company; I was leaning forward with my hands on the back of a chair, and it suddenly seemed to me that I had subconsciously intended to put the chair between myself and this improbable stranger.

Dexterously she untwisted the wire of the champagne bottle, caught the froth which followed the cork in the first glass, poured the second and held it out to me. I came—moving like a stupid, stolid animal—to take hold of it.

“Sit down,” she said again.

“But—where is everybody else? Where’s Tim? Where are Conrad and Ella? Where—?”

“They’ve gone,” she said. She came, carrying her glass, to sit facing me in the only other chair not cluttered with broken bits of my equipment. “They went about an hour ago.”

“But—Pedro! And—!”

“They put out to sea. They are going somewhere else.” She made a casual gesture. “I don’t know where, but they are provided for.”

Raising her champagne, she added, “To you, Derek—and my compliments. I was never sure that you would do it, but it had to be tried.”

I ran to the window which overlooked the sea, threw it open, and stared out into the gathering dark. I could see four or five fishing boats, their riding lights like shifting stars, moving out of the harbor. On the quay was a collection of abandoned furniture and some fishermen’s gear. It *did* look as though they were making a permanent departure.

“Derek, *sit down*,” Naomi said for the third time. “We’re wasting time, and besides, your wine is getting flat.”

“But how can they bring themselves to—?”

“Abandon their ancestral homes, dig up their roots, leave for fresh woods and pastures new?” Her tone was light and mocking. “They are doing nothing of the kind. They have no special attachment to Santadora. Santadora does not exist. Santadora was built eighteen months ago, and will be torn down next month.”

I said after an eternal silence, “Naomi, are you—are you feeling quite well?”

“I feel wonderful.” She smiled, and the light glistened on her white teeth. “Moreover, the fishermen were not fishermen and Father Francisco is not a priest and Conrad and Ella are not artists except in a very small way of business, as a hobby. Also my name is not Naomi, but since you’re used to it—and so am I—it’ll serve.”

Now, I had to drink the champagne. It was superb. It was the most perfect wine I had ever tasted. I was sorry not to be in the mood to appreciate the fact.

"Are you making out that this entire village is a sham?" I demanded. "A sort of colossal—what—movie set?"

"In a way. A stage setting would be a more accurate term. Go out on the porch and reach up to the fretted decoration overhanging the step. Pull it hard. It will come away. Look at what you find on the exposed surface. Do the same to any other house in the village which has a similar porch—there are five of them. Then come back and we can talk seriously."

She crossed her exquisite legs and sipped her champagne. She knew beyond doubt that I was going to do precisely as she said.

Determinedly, though more to prevent myself feeling foolish than for any better reason, I went onto the porch. I put on the light—a swinging yellow bulb, on a flex tacked amateurishly into place—and looked up at the fretted decoration on the edge of the overhang. The summer insects came buzzing in towards the attractive lamp.

I tugged at the piece of wood, and it came away. Holding it to the light, I read on the exposed surface, stamped in pale blue ink: "Número 14,006—José Barcos, Barcelona."

I had no ready-made reaction. Accordingly, holding the piece of wood like a talisman in front of me, I went back indoors and stood over Naomi in her chair. I was preparing to phrase some angry comment, but I never knew what it was to be, for at that moment my eye was caught by the label on the bottle. It was not champagne. The name of the firm was unknown to me.

"It is the best sparkling wine in the world," Naomi said. She had followed my gaze. "There is enough for about—oh—one dozen bottles a year."

My palate told me there was some truth at least in what she said. I made my way dizzily to my chair and sank into it at last. "I don't pretend to understand this. I—I haven't spent the last year in a place that doesn't exist!"

"But you have." Quite cool, she cradled her glass between her beautiful slim hands and set her elbows on the sides of the dirty chair. "By the way, have you noticed that there are never any mosquitoes among the insects that come to your lights? It was barely likely that you would have caught malaria, but the chance had to be guarded against."

I started. More than once I'd jokingly commented to Tim Hannigan that one of Santadora's greatest advantages was its freedom from mosquitoes....

“Good. The facts are beginning to make an impression on you. Cast your mind back now, to the winter before last. Do you recall making the acquaintance of a man going under the name of Roger Gurney, whom you subsequently met one other time?”

I nodded. Of course I remembered Roger Gurney. Often, since coming to Santadora, I'd thought that that first meeting with him had been one of the two crucial events that changed my life.

“You gave Gurney a lift one rather unpleasant November night—his car had broken down and there was no hope of getting a necessary spare part before the morning, and he had to be in London for an urgent appointment at ten next day. You found him very congenial and charming. You put him up in your flat; you had dinner together and talked until 4 A.M. about what has now taken concrete form here in this room. You talked about the Cooper Effect.”

I felt incredibly cold, as though a finger of that bleak November night had reached through the window and traced a cold smear down my spine. I said, “Then, that very night, I mentioned to him that I only saw one way of doing the necessary experiments. I said I'd have to find a village somewhere, without outside distractions, with no telephone or newspapers, without even a radio. A place where living was so cheap that I could devote myself for two or three years to my work and not have to worry about earning my living.”

*My God!* I put my hand to my forehead. It was as if memory was reemerging like invisible ink exposed to a fire.

“That's right,” Naomi nodded with an air of satisfaction. “And the second and only other time you met this delightful Roger Gurney was the weekend you were celebrating your small win on the football pools. Two thousand one hundred and four pounds, seventeen shillings, and a penny. And he told you of a certain small Spanish village, named Santadora, where the conditions for your research were perfectly fulfilled. He said he had visited some friends here, named Conrad and Ella Williams. The possibility of turning your dreams into facts had barely occurred to you, but by the time you'd had a few drinks with Gurney, it seemed strange that you hadn't already laid your plans.”

I slammed my glass down so hard it might have broken. I said harshly, “Who are you? What game are you playing with me?”

“No game, Derek.” She was leaning forward now, her blue jewel-hard eyes fixed on my face. “A very serious business. And one in which you also have a stake. Can you honestly say that but for meeting Roger Gurney, but for winning this modest sum of money, you would be here—or anywhere—with the Cooper Effect translated into reality?”

I said after a long moment in which I reviewed one whole year of my life, "No. No, I must be honest. I can't."

"Then there's your answer to the question you put a few moments ago." She laid her glass on the table, and took out a small cigarette case from the pocket of her tight pants. "I am the only person in the world who wanted to have and use the Cooper Effect. Nobody else was eager enough to bring it about—even Derek Cooper. Take one of these cigarettes."

She held out the case; the mere opening of it had filled the air with a fragrance I found startling. There was no name on the cigarette I took, the only clue to its origin being a faint striping of the paper, but when I drew the first smoke I knew that this, like the wine, was the best in the world.

She watched my reaction with amusement. I relaxed fractionally—smiling made her seem familiar. How many times had I seen her smile like that, here, or much more often at Tim's or at Conrad's?

"I wanted the Cooper Effect," she repeated. "And now I've got it."

I said, "Just a moment! I—"

"Then I want to rent it." She shrugged as though the matter were basically a trifling one. "After I've rented it, it is and will be forever yours. You have conceded yourself that but for—certain key interventions, let's call them—but for *me*, it would be a mere theory. An intellectual toy. I will not, even so, ask you to consider that a fair rental for it. For the use of your machine for one very specific purpose, I will pay you so much that for the rest of your life you may have anything *at all* your fancy turns to. Here!"

She tossed something—I didn't know where she had been hiding it—and I caught it reflexively. It was a long narrow wallet of soft, supple leather, zipped round the edge.

"Open it."

I obeyed. Inside I discovered one—two—three credit cards made out in my name, and a check book with my name printed ready on the checks. On each of the cards there was something I had never seen before: a single word overprinted in red. The word was UNLIMITED.

I put them back in the wallet. It had occurred to me to doubt that what she said was true, but the doubt had faded at once. Yes, Santadora had been created in order to permit me to work under ideal conditions. Yes, she had done it. After what she had said about Roger Gurney, I didn't have room to disbelieve.

Consequently I could go to Madrid, walk into a salesroom, and come out driving a Rolls-Royce; in it, I could drive to a bank and write the sum of one

million pesetas on the first of those checks and receive it—if the bank had that much in cash.

Still looking at the wallet, zipping and unzipping it mechanically, I said, “All right. You’re the person who wanted the Effect. Who are you?”

“The person who could get it.” She gave a little dry laugh and shook her head. Her hair waved around her face like wings. “Don’t trouble me with more inquiries, Derek. I won’t answer them because the answers would mean nothing.”

I was silent for a little while. Then, finally, because I had no other comment to make, I said, “At least you must say why you wanted what I could give you. After all, I’m still the only person in the world who understands it.”

“Yes.” She studied me. “Yes, that is true. Pour more wine for us; I think you like it.”

While I was doing so, and while I was feeling my body grow calm after the shock and storm of the past ten minutes, she said, looking at the air, “You *are* unique, you know. A genius without equal in your single field. That’s why you’re here, why I went to a little trouble for you. I can get everything I want, but for certain things. I’m inevitably dependent on the *one* person who can provide them.”

Her eyes roved to my new, ramshackle—but functioning—machine.

“I wanted that machine to get me back a man,” she said. “He has been dead for three years.”

The world seemed to stop in its tracks. I had been blind, ever since the vision of unlimited money dazzled me. I had accepted that because Naomi could get everything she knew what it was she was getting. And, of course, she didn’t.

A little imaginary pageant played itself out in my mind, in which faceless dolls moved in a world of shifting, rosy clouds. A doll clothed in black, with long pale hair, said, “He’s dead. I want him back. Don’t argue. Find me a way.”

The other dolls bowed and went away. Eventually one doll came back and said, “There is a man called Derek Cooper who has some unorthodox ideas. Nobody else in all the world is thinking about this problem at all.”

“See that he gets what he needs,” said the doll with pale hair.

I put down the bottle of wine. I hesitated—yes, I still did, I was still dazzled. But then I took up the soft leather wallet and tossed it into Naomi’s lap. I said, “You’ve cheated yourself.”

"What?" She didn't believe it. The wallet which had fallen in her lap was an apparition; she did not move to pick it up, as though touching it would turn it from a bad dream to a harsh fact.

I said, very thoughtfully because I was working out in my mind how it must be, "You talked about wanting my machine for a particular job. I was too dazed to wonder what the job might be—there *are* jobs which can be done with it, so I let it slide by. You are very rich, Naomi. You have been so rich all your life that you don't know about the one other thing that stands between the formulation of a problem and its solution. That's *time*, Naomi!"

I tapped the top of the machine. I was still proud of it. I had every right to be.

"You are like—like an empress of ancient China. Maybe she existed, I don't know. Imagine that one day she said, 'It has been revealed to me that my ancestors dwell in the moon. I wish to go there and pay the respects of a dutiful daughter. Find me a way.' So they hunted through the length and breadth of the empire, and one day a courtier came in with a poor and ragged man, and said to the empress, 'This man has invented a rocket.'

"Good," said the empress. "Perfect it so that I may go to the moon."

I had intended to tell the fable in a bantering tone—to laugh at the end of it. But I turned to glance at Naomi, and my laughter died.

Her face was as pale and still as a marble statue's, her lips a little parted, her eyes wide. On one cheek, like a diamond, glittered a tear.

All my levity evaporated. I had the sudden horrible impression that I had kicked at what seemed a stone and shattered a priceless bowl.

"No, Derek," she said after a while. "You don't have to tell me about time." She stirred, half turned in her chair, and looked at the table beside her. "Is this glass mine?" she added in a lighter tone, putting out her slim and beautiful hand to point. She did not wipe the tear; it remained on her cheek for some time until the hot dry air of the night kissed it away.

Taking the glass at my nod, she stood up and came across to look at my machine. She regarded it without comment, then said, "I hadn't meant to tell you what I wanted. Time drove me to it."

She drank deeply. "Now," she went on, "I want to know exactly what your pilot model *can* do."

I hesitated. So much of it was not yet in words; I had kept my word-thinking separate from my work-thinking all during the past year, and lately I had talked of nothing except commonplaces when I relaxed in the company of my friends.

The closer I came to success, the more superstitious I had grown about mentioning the purpose of this project.

And—height of absurdity—now that I knew what she wanted, I was faintly ashamed that my triumph reduced on close examination to such a little thing.

Sensing my mood, she glanced at me and gave a faint smile. “Yes, Mr. Faraday’—or was it Humphry Davy?—‘but what is it *good* for?’ I’m sorry.”

A newborn baby. Well enough. Somehow the phrase hit me—reached me emotionally—and I was suddenly not ashamed at all of anything; I was as proud as any father and much more so.

I pushed aside a stack of rough schematics on the corner of the table nearest the machine and perched where it had been. I held my glass between my palms, and it was so quiet I fancied I could hear the bubbles bursting as they surfaced in the wine.

I said, “It wasn’t putting money in my way, or anything like that, which I owe you a debt of gratitude for. It was sending that persuasive and charming Roger Gurney after me. I had never met anyone else who was prepared to take my ideas except as an amusing talking point. I’d kicked the concept around with some of the finest intellects I know—people I knew at university, for instance, who’ve left me a long way behind since then.” I hadn’t thought of this before. I hadn’t thought of a lot of things, apparently.

“But he could talk them real. What I said to him was much the same as what I’d said to others before then. I’d talked about the—the space a living organism defines around itself, by behaving as it does. A mobile does it. That’s why I have one over there.” I pointed, raising my arm, and as though by command a breeze came through the open window and stirred hanging metal panels in the half-shadowed far corner of the room. They squeaked a little as they turned; I’d been too busy to drop oil on the bearings lately.

I was frowning, and the frown was knotting my forehead muscles, and it was going to make my head ache, but I couldn’t prevent myself.

“There must be a total interrelationship between the organism and its environment, including and especially its fellow organisms. Self-recognition was one of the first things they stumbled across in building mechanical simulacra of living creatures. They didn’t plan for it—they built mechanical tortoises with little lights on top and a simple light-seeking urge, and if you showed this beast to a mirror, it would seem to recognize itself.... This is the path, not the deliberate step-by-step piecing together of a man but the attempt to define the same shape as that which man himself defines in reacting with other people.

"Plain enough, that. But are you to process a trillion bits of information, store them, label them in time, translate them back for reproduction as—well, as what? I can't think of anything. What you want is..."

I shrugged, emptied my glass, and stood up. "You want the Cooper Effect," I finished. "Here—take this."

From the little rack on top of my machine I took a flat translucent disk about the size of a penny but thicker. To handle it I used a key which plugged into a hole in the center so accurately that it held the weight by simple friction. I held it out to Naomi.

My voice shook, because this was the first random test I had ever made.

"Take hold of this. Handle it—rub your fingers over it, squeeze it gently on the flat sides, close your hand on it."

She obeyed. While it was in her hand, she looked at me.

"What is it?"

"It's an artificial piezoelectric crystal. All right, that should be enough. Put it back on the key—I don't want to confuse the readings by touching it myself."

It wasn't easy to slip the disk back on the key, and she made two false attempts before catching my hand to steady it. I felt a vibration coming through her fingers, as though her whole body were singing like a musical instrument.

"There," she said neutrally.

I carried the disk back to the machine. Gingerly I transferred it from the key to the little post on the top of the reader. It slid down like a record dropping to a turntable. A moment or two during which I didn't breathe. Then there was the reaction.

I studied the readings on the dials carefully. Not perfect. I was a little disappointed—I'd hoped for a perfect run this first time. Nonetheless it was extraordinarily close, considering she had handled the disk for a bare ten seconds.

I said, "The machine tells me that you are female, slim, fair-haired and probably blue-eyed, potentially artistic, unaccustomed to manual labor, IQ in the range 120-140, under intense emotional stress—"

Her voice cut across mine like the lash of a whip. "How? How do I know the machine tells you this, not your own eyes?"

I didn't look up. I said, "The machine is telling me what changes were brought about in that little crystal disk when you touched it. I'm reading it as a kind of graph, if you like—looking across the pattern of the dials and interpreting them into words."

"Does it tell you anything else?"

"Yes—but it must be in error somewhere, I'm afraid. The calibration has been rather makeshift, and would have to be completed with a proper statistical sample of say a thousand people from all walks of life." I forced a laugh as I turned away from the machine. "You see, it says that you're forty-eight to fifty years old, and this is ridiculous on the face of it."

She sat very still. I had moved all the way to the table beside her, intending to refill my glass, before I realized how still. My hand on the bottle's neck, I stared at her.

"Is something wrong?"

She shook herself and came back to life instantly. She said lightly, "No. No, nothing at all. Derek, you are the most amazing man in the world. I shall be fifty years old next week."

"You're joking." I licked my lips. "I'd have said...oh, thirty-five and childless and extremely careful of her looks. But not more. Not a day more."

A trace of bitterness crossed her face as she nodded. "It's true. I wanted to be beautiful—I don't think I have to explain why. I wanted to go on being beautiful, because it was the only gift I could give to someone who had, as I have, everything he could conceivably want. So I—I saw to it."

"What happened to him?"

"I would prefer you not to know." The answer was cool and final. She relaxed deliberately, stretching her legs out before her, and gave a lazy smile. Her foot touched something on the floor as she moved, and she glanced down.

"What—? Oh, that!" She reached for the soft leather wallet, which had fallen from her lap when she stood up after I had tossed it back at her. Holding it out, she said, "Take it, Derek. I know you've already earned it. By accident—by mistake—whatever you call it, you've proved that you can do what I was hoping for."

I did take it. But I didn't pocket it at first; I kept it in my hands, absently turning it over.

I said, "I'm not so sure, Naomi. Listen." I picked up my newly filled glass and returned to the chair facing her. "What I ultimately envisage is being able to deduce the individual from the traces he makes. You know that; that was the dream I told to Roger Gurney. But between now and then, between the simple superficial analysis of a specially prepared material and going over, piece by piece, ten thousand objects affected not merely by the individual in question but by many others, some of whom probably cannot be found, in order to identify

and rule out their extraneous influence—and *then* processing the results to make a coherent whole—there may be years, decades, of work and study, a thousand false trails, a thousand preliminary experiments with animals.... Whole new techniques will have to be invented in order to employ the data produced! Assuming you have your—your analogue of a man: what are you going to do with it? Are you going to try and *make* a man, artificially, that fits the specifications?"

"Yes."

The simple word left me literally gasping; it was like a blow to the stomach, driving my breath away. She bent her brilliant gaze on me and once more smiled faintly.

"Don't worry, Derek. That's not your job. Work has been going on in many places for a long time—they tell me—on that problem. What nobody except yourself was doing was struggling with the problem of the total person."

I couldn't reply. She filled her own glass again before continuing, in a tenser voice.

"There's a question I've got to put to you, Derek. It's so crucial I'm afraid to hear the answer. But I can't endure to wait any longer, either. I want to know how long you think it will be before I can have what I want. Assume—remember that you've *got* to assume—the best men in the world can be set to work on the subsidiary problems; they'll probably make their reputations, they'll certainly make their fortunes. I want to hear what you think."

I said thickly, "Well, I find that pretty difficult! I've already mentioned the problem of isolating the traces from—"

"This man lived a different kind of existence from you, Derek. If you'd stop and think for a second, you'd guess that. I can take you to a place that was uniquely *his*, where his personality formed and molded and affected every grain of dust. Not a city where a million people have walked, not a house where a dozen families have lived."

It had to be true, incredible though I would have thought it a scant hour ago. I nodded.

"That's good. Well, I shall also have to work out ways of handling unprepared materials—calibrate the properties of every single substance. And there's the risk that the passage of time will have overlaid the traces with molecular noise and random movement. Moreover, the testing itself, before the actual readings, might disturb the traces."

"You are to assume"—she forced patience on the repetition—"that the best men in the world are going to tackle the side issues."

"It isn't a side issue, Naomi." I wished I didn't have to be honest. She was hurt by my insistence, and I was beginning to think that, for all the things one might envy her, she had been hurt very badly already. "It's simply a fact one has to face."

She drank down her wine and replaced the glass on the table. Musingly she said, "I guess it would be true to say that the—the object which a person affects most, and most directly, is his or her own body. If just handling your little disk reveals so much, how much more must be revealed by the hands themselves, the lips, the eyes!"

I said uncomfortably, "Yes, of course. But it's hardly practicable to process a human body."

She said, "I have his body."

This silence was a dreadful one. A stupid beetle, fat as a bullet, was battering its head on the shade of the lamp in the porch, and other insects were droning, too, and there was the sea distantly heard. The silence, nonetheless, was graveyard-deep.

But she went on at last. "Everything that could possibly be preserved is preserved, by every means that could be found. I had—" Her voice broke for a second. "I had it prepared. Only the thing which is *he*, the web in the brain, the little currents died. Curious that a person is so fragile." Briskening, she launched her question anew.

"Derek, how long?"

I bit my lip and stared down at the floor by my feet. My mind churned as it considered, discarded relevant factors, envisaged problems, assumed them to be soluble, fined down everything to the simple irreducible of *time*. I might have said ten years and felt that I was being stupidly optimistic.

But in the end, I said nothing at all.

She waited. Then, quite unexpectedly, she gave a bright laugh and jumped to her feet. "Derek, it isn't fair!" she said. "You've achieved something fantastic, you want and deserve to relax and celebrate, and here I am plaguing you with questions and wanting answers out of the air. I know perfectly well that you're too honest to give me an estimate without time to think, maybe do a few calculations. And I'm keeping you shut up in your crowded room when probably what you most want is to get out of it for a while. Am I right?"

She put her hand out, her arm quite straight, as if to pull me from my chair. Her face was alight with what seemed pure pleasure, and to see it was to

experience again the shock of hearing her say she was fifty years old. She looked—I can only say transformed. She looked like a girl at her first party.

But it lasted only a moment, this transformation. Her expression became grave and calm. She said, "I am sorry, Derek. I—I hate one thing about love. Have you ever thought how selfish it can make you?"

We wandered out of the house hand in hand, into the summer dark. There was a narrow slice of moon and the stars were like fierce hard lanterns. For the more than hundredth time I walked down the narrow ill-paved street leading from my temporary home towards the harbor; there was Conrad's house, and there was the grocery and wine shop; there was the church, its roof silvered by the moon; there were the little cottages all in a row, facing the sea, where the families of fisherfolk lived. And here, abandoned, was the detritus of two hundred and seventy lives which had never actually existed—conjured up to order.

I said, when we had walked all the way to the quay, "Naomi, it's beyond belief, even though I know it's true. This village wasn't a sham, a showplace. It was real. I *know* it."

She looked around her. "Yes. It was intended to be real. But all it takes is thought and patience."

"What did you say? Did you tell—whoever it was—'Go and build a real village?'"

"I didn't have to. They knew. Does it interest you, how it was done?" She turned a curious face to me, which I could barely see in the thin light.

"Of course," I said. "My God! To create real people and a real place—when I'm ordered to re-create a real person—should I not be interested?"

"If it were as easy to re-create as it is to create," she said emptily, "I would not be...lonely."

We stopped, close by the low stone wall which ran from the quay to the sharp rocks of the little headland sheltering the beach, and leaned on it. At our backs, the row of little houses; before us, nothing but the sea. She was resting on both her elbows, staring over the water. At less than arm's reach, I leaned on one elbow, my hands clasped before me, studying her as though I had never seen her before tonight. Of course, I hadn't.

I said, "Are you afraid of not being beautiful? Something is troubling you."

She shrugged. "There is no such word as 'forever'—is there?"

"You make it seem as though there were."

"No, no." She chuckled. "Thank you for saying it, Derek. Even if I know—even if I can see in the mirror—that I am still so, it's delightful to be reassured."

How had she achieved it, anyway? I wanted, and yet didn't want, to ask. Perhaps she didn't know; she had just said she wanted it so, and it was. So I asked a different question.

"Because it's—the thing that is most *yours*?"

Her eyes came back from the sea, rested on me, returned. "Yes. The *only* thing that is mine. You're a rare person; you have compassion. Thank you."

"How do you live?" I said. I fumbled out cigarettes from my pocket, rather crumpled; she refused one with a headshake, but I lit one for myself.

"How do I live?" she echoed. "Oh—many ways. As various people, of course, with various names. You see, I haven't even a name to call my own. Two women who look exactly like me exist for me, so that when I wish I can take their places in Switzerland or in Sweden or in South America. I borrow their lives, use them a while, give them back. I have seen them grow old, changed them for replacements—made into duplicates of me. But those are not persons; they are masks. I live behind masks. I suppose that's what you'd say."

"You can't do anything else," I said.

"No. No, of course I can't. And until this overtook me, I'd never conceived that I might want to."

I felt that I understood that. I tapped the first ash off my cigarette down towards the sea. Glancing around, I said irrelevantly, "You know, it seems like a shame to dismantle Santadora. It could be a charming little village. A real one, not a stage set."

"No," she said. And then, as she straightened and whirled around, "No! Look!" She ran wildly into the middle of the narrow street and pointed at the cobbles. "Don't you see? Already stones which weren't cracked are cracked! And the houses!" She flung up her arm and ran forward to the door of the nearest house. "The wood is warping! And that shutter—hanging loose on the hinges! And the step!" She dropped to her knees, felt along the low stone step giving directly on the street.

I was coming after her now, startled by her passion.

"Feel!" she commanded. "Feel it! It's been worn by people walking on it. And even the wall—don't you see the crack from the corner of the window is getting wider?" Again she was on her feet, running her hand over the rough wall. "Time is gnawing at it, like a dog at a bone. God, no, Derek! Am I to leave it and know that time is breaking it, breaking, *breaking* it?"

I couldn't find words.

"Listen!" she said. "Oh God! Listen!" She had tensed like a frightened deer, head cocked.

"I don't hear anything," I said. I had to swallow hard.

"Like nails being driven into a coffin," she said. She was at the house door, battering on it, pushing at it. "You *must* hear it!"

Now I did. From within the house there was a ticking noise—a huge, majestic, slow rhythm, so faint I had not noticed it until she commanded me to strain my ears. A clock. Just a clock.

Alarmed at her frenzy, I caught her by the shoulder. She turned and clung to me like a tearful child, burying her head against my chest. "I can't stand it," she said, her teeth set. I could feel her trembling.

"Come away," I murmured. "If it hurts you so much, come away."

"No, that isn't what I want. I'd go on hearing it—don't you understand?" She drew back a little and looked up at me. "I'd go on hearing it!" Her eyes grew veiled, her whole attention focusing towards the clock inside the house. "Tick-tick-tick—God, it's like being buried alive!"

I hesitated a moment. Then I said, "All right, I'll fix it. Stand back."

She obeyed. I raised my foot and stamped it, sole and heel together, on the door. Something cracked; my leg stung all the way to the thigh with the impact. I did it again, and the jamb split. The door flew open. At once the ticking was loud and clear.

And visible in a shaft of moonlight opposite the door was the clock itself: a tall old grandfather, bigger than me, its pendulum glinting on every ponderous swing.

A snatch of an ancient and macabre Negro spiritual came to my mind:

*The hammer keeps ringing on somebody's coffin....*

Abruptly it was as doom-laden for me as for Naomi. I strode across the room, tugged open the glass door of the clock, and stopped the pendulum with a quick finger. The silence was a relief like cold water after long thirst.

She came warily into the room after me, staring at the face of the clock as though hypnotized. It struck me that she was not wearing a watch, and I had never seen her wear one.

"Get rid of it," she said. She was still trembling. "Please, Derek—get rid of it."

I whistled, taking another look at the old monster. I said, "That's not going to be so easy! These clocks are heavy!"

"Please, Derek!" The urgency in her voice was frightening. She turned her back, staring into a corner of the room. Like all these cramped, imitation-antique houses, this one had a mere three rooms, and the room we were in was crowded with furniture—a big bed, a table, chairs, a chest. But for that, I felt she would have run to the corner to hide.

Well, I could try.

I studied the problem and came to the conclusion that it would be best to take it in parts.

"Is there a lamp?" I said. "I'd work better if I could see."

She murmured something inaudible; then there was the sound of a lighter, and a yellow flicker grew to a steady glow which illumined the room. The smell of kerosene reached my nostrils. She put the lamp on a table where its light fell past me on the clock.

I unhitched the weights and pocketed them; then I unclipped a screwdriver from my breast pocket and attacked the screws at the corners of the face. As I had hoped, with those gone, it was possible to lift out the whole works, the chains following like umbilical cords, making little scraping sounds as they were dragged over the wooden ledge the movement had rested on.

"Here!" Naomi whispered, and snatched it from me. It was a surprisingly small proportion of the weight of the whole clock. She dashed out of the house and across the street. A moment, and there was a splash.

I felt a spasm of regret. And then was angry with myself. Quite likely this was no rare specimen of antique craftsmanship, but a fake. Like the whole village. I hugged the case to me and began to walk it on its front corners towards the door. I had been working with my cigarette in my mouth; now the smoke began to tease my eyes, and I spat it to the floor and ground it out.

Somehow I got the case out of the house, across the road, up on the seawall. I rested there for a second, wiping the sweat from my face, then got behind the thing and gave it the most violent push I could manage. It went over the wall, twisting once in the air, and splashed.

I looked down, and instantly wished that I hadn't. It looked exactly like a dark coffin floating off on the sea.

But I stayed there for a minute or so, unable to withdraw my gaze, because of an overwhelming impression that I had done some symbolic act, possessed of a meaning which could not be defined in logical terms, yet heavy, solid—real as that mass of wood drifting away.

I came back slowly, shaking my head, and found myself in the door of the house before I paid attention again to what was before my eyes. Then I stopped

dead, one foot on the step which Naomi had cursed for being worn by passing feet. The flame of the yellow lamp was wavering a little in the wind, and it was too high—the smell of its smoke was strong, and the chimney was darkening.

Slowly, as though relishing each single movement, Naomi was unbuttoning the black shirt she wore, looking towards the lamp. She tugged it out of the waist of her pants and slipped it off. The brassiere she wore under it was black, too. I saw she had kicked away her espadrilles.

“Call it an act of defiance,” she said in a musing tone—speaking more to herself, I thought, than to me. “I shall put off my mourning clothes.” She unzipped her pants and let them fall. Her briefs also were black.

“Now I’m through with mourning. I believe it will done. It will be done soon enough. Oh yes! Soon enough.” Her slim golden arms reached up behind her back. She dropped the brassiere to the floor, but the last garment she caught up in her hand and hurled at the wall. For a moment she stood still; then seemed to become aware of my presence for the first time and turned slowly towards me.

“Am I beautiful?” she said.

My throat was very dry. I said, “God, yes. You’re one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever seen.”

She leaned over the lamp and blew it out. In the instant of falling darkness she said, “Show me.”

And, a little later on the rough blanket of the bed, when I had said twice or three times, “Naomi—Naomi!” she spoke again. Her voice was cold and far away.

“I didn’t mean to call myself Naomi. What I had in mind was Niobe, but I couldn’t remember it.”

And very much later, when she had drawn herself so close to me that it seemed she was clinging to comfort, to existence itself, with her arms around me and her legs locked with mine, under the blanket now because the night was chill, I felt her lips move against my ear.

“How long, Derek?”

I was almost lost; I had never before been so drained of myself, as though I had been cork-tossed on a stormy ocean and battered limp by rocks, I could barely open my eyes. I said in a blurred voice, “What?”

“How long?”

I fought a last statement from my wearying mind, neither knowing nor caring what it was. “With luck,” I muttered, “it might not take ten years. Naomi, I

don't know—" And in a burst of absolute effort, finished, "My God, you do this to me and expect me to be able to think afterwards?"

But that was the extraordinary thing. I had imagined myself about to go down into blackness, into coma to sleep like a corpse. Instead, while my body rested, my mind rose to the pitch beyond consciousness—to a vantage point where it could survey the future. I was aware of the thing I had done. From my crude, experimental machine, I knew, would come a second and a third, and the third would be sufficient for the task. I saw and recognized the associated problems, and knew them to be soluble. I conceived names of men I wanted to work on those problems—some who were known to me and who, given the chance I had been given, could create in their various fields such new techniques as I had created. Meshing like hand-matched cogs, the parts blended into the whole.

A calendar and a clock were in my mind all this while.

Not all of this was a dream; much of it was of the nature of inspiration, with the sole difference that I could feel it happening and that it was right. But towards the very end, I did have a dream—not in visual images but in a kind of emotional aura. I had a completely satisfying sensation which derived from the fact that I was about to meet for the first time a man who was already my closest friend, whom I knew as minutely as any human being had ever known another.

I was waking. For a little while longer I wanted to bask in that fantastic warmth of emotion; I struggled not to wake while feeling that I was smiling and had been smiling for so long that my cheek muscles were cramped.

Also I had been crying, so that the pillow was damp.

I turned on my side and reached out gently for Naomi, already phrasing the wonderful gift-words I had for her. "Naomi! I know how long it will take now. It needn't take more than three years, perhaps as little as two and a half."

My hand, meeting nothing but the rough cloth, sought further. Then I opened my eyes and sat up with a start.

I was alone. Full daylight was pouring into the room; it was bright and sunny and very warm. Where was she? I must go in search of her and tell her the wonderful news.

My clothes were on the floor by the bed; I pulled them on, thrust my feet in my sandals, and padded to the door, pausing with one hand on the split jamb to accustom my eyes to the glare.

Just across the narrow street, leaning his elbows on the stone wall, was a man with his back to me. He gave not the slightest hint that he was aware of

being watched. It was a man I knew at once, even though I'd met him no more than twice in my life. He called himself Roger Gurney.

I spoke his name, and he didn't turn around. He lifted one arm and made a kind of beckoning motion. I was sure then what had happened, but I walked forward to stand beside him, waiting for him to tell me.

Still he didn't look at me. He merely gestured towards the sharp rocks with which the end of the wall united. He said, "She came out at dawn and went up there. To the top. She was carrying her clothes in her hand. She threw them one by one into the sea. And then—" He turned his hand over, palm down, as though pouring away a little pile of sand.

I tried to say something, but my throat was choked.

"She couldn't swim," Gurney added after a moment. "Of course."

Now I could speak. I said, "But my God! Did you see it happen?"

He nodded.

"Didn't you go after her? Didn't you rescue her?"

"We recovered her body."

"Then—artificial respiration! You must have been able to do something!"

"She lost her race against time," Gurney said after a pause. "She had admitted it."

"I—" I checked myself. It was becoming so clear that I cursed myself for a fool. Slowly I went on, "How much longer would she have been beautiful?"

"Yes." He expressed the word with form. "That was the thing she was running from. She wanted *him* to return and find her still lovely, and no one in the world would promise her more than another three years. After that, the doctors say, she would have—" He made an empty gesture. "Crumbled."

"She would always have been beautiful," I said. "My God! Even looking her real age, she'd have been beautiful!"

"We think so," Gurney said.

"And so stupid, so futile!" I slammed my fist into my palm. "You too, Gurney—do you realize what you've *done*, you fool?" My voice shook with anger, and for the first time he faced me.

"Why in hell didn't you revive her and send for me? It needn't have taken more than three years! Last night she demanded an answer and I told her ten, but it came clear to me during the night how it could be done in less than three!"

“I thought that was how it must have been.” His face was white, but the tips of his ears were—absurdly—brilliant pink. “If you hadn’t said that, Cooper; if you hadn’t said that.”

And then (I was still that wave-tossed cork, up one moment, down the next, up again the next) it came to me what my inspiration of the night really implied. I clapped my hand to my forehead.

“Idiot!” I said “I don’t know what I’m doing yet! Look, you have her body! Get it to—to wherever it is, with the other one, *quick*. What the hell else have I been doing but working to re-create a human being? And now I’ve seen how it can be done, I can do it—I can re-create her as well as him!” I was in a fever of excitement, having darted forward in my mind to that strange future I had visited in my sleep, and my barely visualized theories were solid fact.

He was regarding me strangely. I thought he hadn’t understood, and went on, “What are you standing there for? I can do it, I tell, you—I’ve seen how it can be done. It’s going to take men and money, but those can be got.”

“No,” Gurney said.

“What?” I let my arms fall to my sides, blinking in the sunlight.

“No,” he repeated. He stood up, stretching arms cramped by long resting on the rough top of the wall. “You see, it isn’t hers any longer. Now she’s dead, it belongs to somebody else.”

Dazed, I drew back a pace. I said, “Who?”

“How can I tell you? And what would it mean to you if I did? You ought by now to know what kind of people you’re dealing with.”

I put my hand in my pocket, feeling for my cigarettes. I was trying to make it come clear to myself: now Naomi was dead she no longer controlled the resources which could bring her back. So my dream was—a dream. Oh, God!

I was staring stupidly at the thing which had met my hand; it wasn’t my pack of cigarettes but the leather wallet she had given me.

“You can keep that,” Gurney said. “I was told you could keep it.”

I looked at him. And I *knew*.

Very slowly, I unzipped the wallet. I took out the three cards. They were sealed in plastic. I folded them in half, and the plastic cracked. I tore them across and let them fall to the ground. Then, one by one, I ripped the checks out of the book and let them drift confetti-wise over the wall, down to the sea.

He watched me, the color coming to his face until at last he was flushing red—with guilt, shame, I don’t know. When I had finished, he said in a voice

that was still level, "You're a fool, Cooper. You could still have bought your dreams with those."

I threw the wallet in his face and turned away. I had gone ten steps, blind with anger and sorrow, when I heard him speak my name and looked back. He was holding the wallet in both hands, and his mouth was working.

He said, "Damn you, Cooper. Oh, damn you to hell! I—I told myself I loved her, and I couldn't have done that. Why do you want to make me feel so *dirty*?"

"Because you are," I said. "And now you know it."

Three men I hadn't seen before came into my house as I was crating the machine. Silent as ghosts, impersonal as robots, they helped me put my belongings in my car. I welcomed their aid simply because I wanted to get the hell out of this mock village as fast as possible. I told them to throw the things I wanted to take with me in the passenger seats and the luggage compartment, without bothering to pack cases. While I was at it, I saw Gurney come to the side of the house and stand by the car as though trying to pluck up courage to speak to me again, but I ignored him, and when I went out he had gone. I didn't find the wallet until I was in Barcelona sorting through the jumbled belongings. It held, this time, thirty-five thousand pesetas in new notes. He had just thrown it on the back seat under a pile of clothes.

Listen. It wasn't a *long* span of time which defeated Naomi. It wasn't three years or ten years or any number of years. I worked it out later—too late. (So time defeated me, too, as it always defeats us.)

I don't know how her man died. But I'm sure I know why she wanted him back. Not because she loved him, as she herself believed. But because he loved her. And without him, she was afraid. It didn't need three years to re-create her. It didn't even need three hours. It needed *three words*.

And Gurney, the bastard, could have spoken them, long before I could—so long before that there was still time. He could have said, "I love you."

These are the totally rich. They inhabit the same planet, breathe the same air. But they are becoming, little by little a different species, because what was most human in them is—well, this is my opinion—dead.

They keep apart, as I mentioned. And God! God! Aren't you grateful?