

I AM THE DOORWAY

Richard and I sat on my porch, looking out over the dunes to the Gulf. The smoke from his cigar drifted mellowly in the air, keeping the mosquitoes at a safe distance. The water was a cool aqua, the sky a deeper, truer blue. It was a pleasant combination.

'You are the doorway,' Richard repeated thoughtfully. 'You are sure you killed the boy - you didn't just dream it?'

'I didn't dream it. And I didn't kill him, either - I told you that. They did. I am the doorway.'

Richard sighed. 'You buried him?'

'Yes.'

'You remember where?'

'Yes.' I reached into my breast pocket and got a cigarette. My hands were awkward with their covering of bandages. They itched abominably. 'If you want to see it, you'll have to get the dune buggy. You can't roll this - ' I indicated my wheelchair - 'through the sand.' Richard's dune buggy was a 1959 VW with pillow-sized tyres. He collected driftwood in it. Ever since he retired from the real estate business in Maryland he had been living on Key Caroline and building driftwood sculptures which he sold to the winter tourists at shameless prices.

He puffed his cigar and looked out at the Gulf. 'Not yet. Will you tell me once more?'

I sighed and tried to light my cigarette. He took the matches away from me and did it himself. I puffed twice, dragging deep. The itch in my fingers was maddening.

'All right,' I said. 'Last night at seven I was out here, looking at the Gulf and smoking, just like now, and J..'

'Go further back,' he invited.

'Further?'

'Tell me about the flight.'

I shook my head. 'Richard, we've been through it and through it. There's nothing -'

The seamed and fissured face was as enigmatic as one of his own driftwood sculptures. 'You may remember,' he said. 'Now you may remember.'

'Do you think so?'

'Possibly. And when you're through, we can look for the grave.'

'The grave,' I said. It had a hollow, horrible ring, darker than anything, darker even than all that terrible ocean Cory and I had sailed through five years ago. Dark, dark, dark.

Beneath the bandages, my new eyes stared blindly into the darkness the bandages forced on them. They itched.

Cory and I were boosted into orbit by the Saturn 16, the one all the commentators called the Empire State Building booster. It was a big beast, all right. It made the old Saturn 1-B look like a Redstone,

and it took off from a bunker two hundred feet deep - it had to, to keep from taking half of Cape Kennedy with it.

We swung around the earth, verifying all our systems, and then did our inject. Headed out for Venus. We left a Senate fighting over an appropriations bill for further deep-space exploration, and a bunch of NASA people praying that we would find something, anything.

'It don't matter what,' Don Lovinger, Project Zeus's private whiz kid, was very fond of saying when he'd had a few. 'You got all the gadgets, plus five souped-up TV cameras and a nifty little telescope with a zillion lenses and filters. Find some gold or platinum. Better yet, find some nice, dumb little blue men for us to study and exploit and feel superior to. Anything. Even the ghost of Howdy Doody would be a start.'

Cory and I were anxious enough to oblige, if we could. Nothing had worked for the deep-space programme. From Borman, Anders, and Lovell, who orbited the moon in '6~ and found an empty, forbidding world that looked like dirty beach sand, to Markhan and Jacks, who touched down on Mars eleven years later to find an arid wasteland of frozen sand and a few struggling lichens, the deep-space programme had been an expensive bust. And there had been casualties - Pederson and Lederer, eternally circling the sun when all at once nothing worked on the second-to-last Apollo flight. John Davis, whose little orbiting observatory was holed by a meteoroid in a one-in-a-thousand fluke. No, the space programme was hardly swinging along. The way things looked, the Venus orbit might be our last chance to say we told you so.

It was sixteen days out - we ate a lot of concentrates, played a lot of gin, and swapped a cold back and forth - and from the tech side it was a milk run. We lost an air-moisture converter on the third day out, went to backup, and that was all, except for flits and nats, until re-entry. We watched Venus grow from a star to a quarter to a milky crystal ball, swapped jokes with Huntsville Control, listened to tapes of Wagner and the Beatles, tended to automated experiments which had to do with everything from measurements of the solar wind to deep-space navigation. We did two midcourse corrections, both of them infinitesimal, and nine days into the flight Cory went outside and banged on the retractable DESA until it decided to operate. There was nothing else out of the ordinary until.

'DESA,' Richard said. 'What's that?'

'An experiment that didn't pan out. NASA-ese for Deep Space Antenna - we were broadcasting pi in high-frequency pulses for anyone who cared to listen.' I rubbed my fingers against my pants, but it was no good; if anything, it made it worse. 'Same idea as that radio telescope in West Virginia - you know, the one that listens to the stars. Only instead of listening, we were transmitting, primarily to the deeper space planets - Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus. If there's any intelligent life out there, it was taking a nap.'

'Only Cory went out?'

'Yes. And if he brought in any interstellar plague, the telemetry didn't show it.'

'Still -'

'It doesn't matter,' I said crossly. 'Only the here and now matters. They killed the boy last night, Richard. It wasn't a nice thing to watch - or feel. His head. . . it exploded. As if someone had scooped out his brains and put a hand grenade in his skull.'

'Finish the story,' he said.

I laughed hollowly. 'What's to tell?'

We went into an eccentric orbit around the planet. It was radical and deteriorating, three twenty by seventy-six miles. That was on the first swing. The second swing our apogee was even higher, the

perigree lower. We had a max of four orbits. We made all four. We got a good look at the planet. Also over six hundred stills and God knows how many feet of film.

The cloud cover is equal parts methane, ammonia, dust, and flying shit. The whole planet looks like the Grand Canyon in a wind tunnel. Cory estimated windspeed at about 600mph near the surface. Our probe beeped all the way down and then went out with a squawk. We saw no vegetation and no sign of life. Spectroscope indicated only traces of the valuable minerals. And that was Venus. Nothing but nothing - except it scared me. It was like circling a haunted house in the middle of deep space. I know how unscientific that sounds, but I was scared gutless until we got out of there. I think if our rockets hadn't gone off, I would have cut my throat on the way down. It's not like the moon. The moon is desolate but somehow antiseptic. That world we saw was utterly unlike anything that anyone has ever seen. Maybe it's a good thing that cloud cover is there. It was like a skull that's been picked clean -that's the closest I can get.

On the way back we heard the Senate had voted to halve space-exploration funds. Cory said something like 'looks like we're back in the weather-satellite business, Artie.' But I was almost glad. Maybe we don't belong out there.

Twelve days later Cory was dead and I was crippled for life. We bought all our trouble on the way down. The chute was fouled. How's that for life's little ironies? We'd been in space for over a month, gone further than any humans had ever gone, and it all ended the way it did because some guy was in a hurry for his coffee break and let a few lines get fouled.

We came down hard. A guy that was in one of the copters said it looked like a gigantic baby falling out of the sky, with the placenta trailing after it. I lost consciousness when we hit.

I came to when they were taking me across the deck of the *Portland*. They hadn't even had a chance to roll up the red carpet we were supposed to've walked on. I was bleeding. Bleeding and being hustled up to the infirmary over a red carpet that didn't look anywhere near as red as I did...

I was in Bethesda for two years. They gave me the Medal of Honor and a lot of money and this wheelchair. I came down here the next year. I like to watch the rockets take off.'

'I know,' Richard said. He paused. 'Show me your hands.'

'No.' It came out very quickly and sharply. 'I can't let them see. I've told you that.'

'It's been five years,' Richard said. 'Why now, Arthur? Can you tell me that?'

'I don't know. I don't know! Maybe whatever it is has a long gestation period. Or who's to say I even got it out there? Whatever it was might have entered me in Fort Lauderdale. Or right here on this porch, for all I know.'

Richard sighed and looked out over the water, now reddish with the late-evening sun. 'I'm trying. Arthur, I don't want to think that you are losing your mind.'

'If I have to, I'll show you my hands,' I said. It cost me an effort to say it. 'But only if I have to.'

Richard stood up and found his cane. He looked old and frail. 'I'll get the dune buggy. We'll look for the boy.'

'Thank you, Richard.'

He walked out towards the rutted dirt track that led to his cabin - I could just see the roof of it over the Big Dune, the one that runs almost the whole length of Key Caroline. Over the water towards the Cape, the sky had gone an ugly plum colour, and the sound of thunder came faintly to my ears.

I didn't know the boy's name but I saw him every now and again, walking along the beach at sunset, with his sieve under his arm. He was tanned almost black by the sun, and all he was ever clad in was a frayed pair of denim cutoffs. On the far side of Key Caroline there is a public beach, and an enterprising young man can make perhaps as much as five dollars on a good day, patiently sieving the sand for buried quarters or dimes. Every now and then I would wave to him and he would wave back, both of us non-committal, strangers yet brothers, year-round dwellers set against a sea of money spending, Cadillac-driving, loud-mouthed tourists. I imagine he lived in the small village clustered around the post office about a half mile further down.

When he passed by that evening I had already been on the porch for an hour, immobile, watching. I had taken off the bandages earlier. The itching had been intolerable, and it was always better when they could look through their eyes.

It was a feeling like no other in the world - as if I were a portal just slightly ajar through which they were peeking at a world which they hated and feared. But the worst part was that I could see, too, in a way. Imagine your mind transported into a body of a housefly, a housefly looking into your own face with a thousand eyes. Then perhaps you can begin to see why I kept my hands bandaged even when there was no one around to see them.

It began in Miami. I had business there with a man named Cresswell, an investigator from the Navy Department. He checks up on me once a year - for a while I was as close as anyone ever gets to the classified stuff our space programme has. I don't know just what it is he looks for; a shifty gleam in the eye, maybe, or maybe a scarlet letter on my forehead. God knows why. My pension is large enough to be almost embarrassing.

Cresswell and I were sitting on the terrace of his hotel room, sipping drinks and discussing the future of the US space programme. It was about three-fifteen. My fingers began to itch. It wasn't a bit gradual. It was switched on like electric current. I mentioned it to Cresswell.

'So you picked up some poison ivy on that scrofulous little island,' he said, grinning.

'The only foliage on Key Caroline is a little palmetto scrub,' I said. 'Maybe it's the seven-year itch.' I looked down at my hands. Perfectly ordinary hands. But itchy.

Later in the afternoon I signed the same old paper ('I do solemnly swear that I have neither received nor disclosed and divulged information which would . . .') and drove myself back to the Key. I've got an old Ford, equipped with hand-operated brake and accelerator. I love it - it makes me feel self-sufficient.

It's a long drive back, down Route 1, and by the time I got off the big road and on to the Key Caroline exit ramp, I was nearly out of my mind. My hands itched maddeningly. If you have ever suffered through the healing of a deep cut or a surgical incision, you may have some idea of the kind of itch I mean. Live things seemed to be crawling and boring in my flesh.

The sun was almost down and I looked at my hands carefully in the glow of the dash lights. The tips of them were red now, red in tiny, perfect circlets, just above the pad where the fingerprint is, where you get calluses if you play guitar. There were also red circles of infection on the space between the first and second joint of each thumb and finger, and on the skin between the second joint and the knuckle. I pressed my right fingers to my lips and withdrew them quickly, with a sudden loathing. A feeling of dumb horror had risen in my throat, woollen and choking. The flesh where the red spots had appeared was hot, feverish, and the flesh was soft and gelid, like the flesh of an apple gone rotten.

I drove the rest of the way trying to persuade myself that I had indeed caught poison ivy somehow. But in the back of my mind there was another ugly thought. I had an aunt, back in my childhood, who lived the last ten years of her life closed off from the world in an upstairs room. My mother took her meals up, and her name was a forbidden topic. I found out later that she had Hansen's disease -leprosy.

When I got home I called Dr Flanders on the mainland. I got his answering service instead. Dr Flanders was on a fishing cruise, but if it was urgent, Dr Ballanger - 'When will Dr Flanders be back?'

'Tomorrow afternoon at the latest. Would that -' 'Sure.'

I hung up slowly, then dialled Richard. I let it ring a dozen times before hanging up. After that I sat indecisive for a while. The itching had deepened. It seemed to emanate from the flesh itself.

I rolled my wheelchair over to the bookcase and pulled down the battered medical encyclopedia that I'd had for years. The book was maddeningly vague. It could have been anything, or nothing.

I leaned back and closed my eyes. I could hear the old ship's clock ticking on the shelf across the room. There was the high, thin drone of a jet on its way to Miami. There was the soft whisper of my own breath.

I was still looking at the book.

The realization crept on me, then sank home with a frightening rush. My eyes were closed, but I was still looking at the book. What I was seeing was smeary and monstrous, the distorted, fourth-dimensional counterpart of a book, yet unmistakable for all that.

And I was not the only one watching.

I snapped my eyes open, feeling the constriction of my heart. The sensation subsided a little, but not entirely. I was looking at the book, seeing the print and diagrams with my own eyes, perfectly normal everyday experience, and I was also seeing it from a different, lower angle and seeing it with other eyes. Seeing not a book but an alien thing, something of monstrous shape and ominous intent.

I raised my hands slowly to my face, catching an eerie vision of my living room turned into a horror house.

I screamed.

There were eyes peering up at me through splits in the flesh of my fingers. And even as I watched the flesh was dilating, retreating, as they pushed their mindless way up to the surface.

But that was not what made me scream. I had looked into my own face and seen a monster.

The dune buggy nosed over the hill and Richard brought it to a halt next to the porch. The motor gunned and roared choppily. I rolled my wheelchair down the inclined plane to the right of the regular steps and Richard helped me in.

'All right, Arthur,' he said. 'It's your party. Where to?'

I pointed down towards the water, where the Big Dune family begins to peter out. Richard nodded. The rear wheels spun sand and we were off. I usually found time to rib Richard about his driving, but I didn't bother tonight. There was too much else to think about - and to feel: they didn't want the dark, and I could feel them straining to see through the bandages, willing me to take them off.

The dune buggy bounced and roared through the sand towards the water, seeming almost to take flight from the tops of the small dunes. To the left the sun was going down in bloody glory. Straight ahead and across the water, the thunderclouds were beating their way towards us. Lightning forked at the water.

'Off to your right,' I said. 'By that lean-to.'

Richard brought the dune buggy to a sand-spraying halt beside the rotted remains of the lean-to, reached into the back, and brought out a spade. I winced when I saw it. 'Where?' Richard asked expressionlessly.

'Right there.' I pointed to the place.

He got out and walked slowly through the sand to the spot, hesitated for a second, then plunged the shovel into the sand. It seemed that he dug for a very long time. The sand he was throwing back over his shoulder looked damp and moist. The thunderheads were darker, higher, and the water looked angry and implacable under their shadow and the reflected glow of the sunset.

I knew long before he stopped digging that he was not going to find the boy. They had moved him. I hadn't bandaged my hands last night, so they could see - and act. If they had been able to use me to kill the boy, they could use me to move him, even while I slept.

'There's no boy, Arthur.' He threw the dirty shovel into the dune buggy and sat tiredly on the seat. The coming storm cast marching, crescent-shaped shadows along the sand. The rising breeze rattled sand against the buggy's rusted body. My fingers itched.

'They used me to move him,' I said dully. 'They're getting the upper hand, Richard. They're forcing their doorway open, a little at a time. A hundred times a day I find myself standing in front of some perfectly familiar object - a spatula, a picture, even a can of beans - with no idea how I got there, holding my hands out, showing it to them, seeing it as they do, as an obscenity, something twisted and grotesque - 'Arthur,' he said. 'Arthur, don't. Don't.' In the failing light his face was wan with compassion. *'Standing in front of something, you said. Moving the boy's body, you said': But you can't walk, Arthur. You're dead from the waist down.'*

I touched the dashboard of the dune buggy. 'This is dead, too. But when you enter it, you can make it go. You could make it kill. It couldn't stop you even if it wanted to.' I could hear my voice rising hysterically. 'I am the doorway, can't you understand that? They killed the boy, Richard! They moved the body!'

'I think you'd better see a medical man,' he said quietly. 'Let's go back. Let's -',

'Check! Check on the boy, then! find out -'

'You said you didn't even know his name.'

'He must have been from the village. It's a small village. Ask -'

'I talked to Maud Harrington on the phone when I got the dune buggy. If anyone in the state has a longer nose, I've not come across her. I asked if she'd heard of anyone's boy not coming home last night. She said she hadn't.'

'But he's a local! He has to be!'

He reached for the ignition switch but I stopped him. He turned to look at me and I began to unwrap my hands.

From the Gulf, thunder muttered and growled.

I didn't go to the doctor and I didn't call Richard back. I spent three weeks with my hands bandaged every time I went out. Three weeks just blindly hoping it would go away. It wasn't a rational act; I can admit that. If I had been a whole man who didn't need a wheelchair for legs or who had spent a normal life in a normal occupation, I might have gone to Doc Flanders or to Richard. I still might have, if it hadn't been for the memory of my aunt, shunned, virtually a prisoner, being eaten alive by her own ailing flesh. So I kept a desperate silence and prayed that I would wake up some morning and find it had been an evil dream.

And little by little, I felt them. Them. An anonymous intelligence. I never really wondered what they looked like or where they had come from. It was moot. I was their doorway, and their window on the

world. I got enough feedback from them to feel their revulsion and horror, to know that our world was very different from theirs. Enough feedback to feel their blind hate. But still they watched. Their flesh was embedded in my own. I began to realize that they were using me, actually manipulating me.

When the boy passed, raising one hand in his usual noncommittal salute, I had just about decided to get in touch with Cresswell at his Navy Department number. Richard had been right about one thing - I was certain that whatever had got hold of me had done it in deep space or in that weird orbit around Venus. The Navy would study me, but they would not freakify me. I wouldn't have to wake up any more into the creaking darkness and stifle a scream as I felt them watching, watching, watching.

My hands went out towards the boy and I realized that I had not bandaged them. I could see the eyes in the dying light, watching silently. They were large, dilated, goldenirised. I had poked one of them against the tip of a pencil once, and had felt excruciating agony slam up my arm. The eye seemed to glare at me with a chained hatred that was worse than physical pain. I did not poke again.

And now they were watching the boy. I felt my mind sideslip. A moment later my control was gone. The door was open. I lurched across the sand towards him, legs scissoring nervelessly, so much driven deadwood. My own eyes seemed to close and I saw only with those alien eyes -saw a monstrous alabaster seascape overtopped with a sky like a great purple way, saw a leaning, eroded shack that might have been the carcas of some unknown, fleshdevouring creature, saw an abominated creature that moved and respired and carried a device of wood and wire under its arm, a device constructed of geometrically impossible right angles.

I wonder what he thought, that wretched, unnamed boy with his sieve under his arm and his pockets bulging with an odd conglomerate of sandy tourist coins, what he thought when he saw me lurching at him like a blind conductor stretching out his hands over a lunatic orchestra, what he thought as the last of the light fell across my hands, red and split and shining with their burden of eyes, what he thought when the hands made that sudden, flailing gesture in the air, just before his head burst.

I know what I thought.

I thought I had peeked over the rim of the universe and into the fires of hell itself.

The wind pulled at the bandages and made them into tiny, whipping streamers as I unwrapped them. The clouds had blottered the red remnants of the sunset, and the dunes were dark and shadow-cast. The clouds raced and boiled above us.

'You must promise me one thing, Richard,' I said over the rising wind. 'You must run if it seems I might try. . . to hurt you. Do you understand that?'

'Yes.' He open-throated shirt whipped and rippled with the wind. His face was set, his own eyes little more than sockets in early dark.

The last of the bandages fell away.

I looked at Richard and they looked at Richard. I saw a face I had known for five years and come to love. They saw a distorted, living monolith.

'You see them,' I said. hoarsely. 'Now you see them.'

He took an involuntary step backwards. His face became stained with a sudden unbelieving terror. Lightning slashed out of the sky. Thunder walked in the clouds and the water had gone black as the river Styx.

'Arthur -'

How hideous he was! How could I have lived near him, spoken with him? He was not a creature, but mute pestilence. He was -'Run! Run, Richard!' And he did run. He ran in huge, bounding leaps. He became a scaffold against the looming sky. My hands flew up, flew over my head in a screaming, orlesque gesture, the fingers reaching to the only familiar thing in this nightmare world - reaching to the clouds.

And the clouds answered. There was a huge, blue-white streak of lightning that seemed like the end of the world. It struck Richard, it enveloped him. The last thing ~ remember is the electric stench of ozone and burnt flesh.

When I awoke I was sitting calmly on my porch, looking out towards the Big Dune. The storm had passed and the air was pleasantly cool. There was a tiny sliver of moon. The sand was virginal - no sign of Richard or of the dune buggy.

I looked down at my hands. The eyes were open but glazed. They had exhausted themselves. They dozed.

I knew well enough what had to be done. Before the door could be wedged open any further, it had to be locked. For ever. Already I could notice the first signs of structural change in the hands themselves. The fingers were begin-ning to shorten. . . and to change.

There was a small hearth in the living room, and in season I had been in the habit of lighting a fire against the damp Florida cold. I lit one now, moving with haste. I had no idea when they might wake up to what I was doing.

When it was burning well I went out back to the kerosene drum and soaked both hands. They came awake immediately, screaming with agony. I almost didn't make it back to the living room, and to the fire.

But I did make it.

That was all seven years ago. I'm still here, still watching the rockets take off. There have been more of them lately. This is a space-minded administration. There has even been talk of another series of manned Venus probes.

I found out the boy's name, not that it matters. He was from the village, just as I thought. But his mother had expected him to stay with a friend on the mainland that night, and the alarm was not raised until the following Monday. Richard - well, everyone thought Richard was an odd duck, anyway. They suspect he may have gone back to Maryland or taken up with some woman.

As for me, I'm tolerated, although I have quite a reputation for eccentricity myself. After all, how many ex-astronauts regularly write their elected Washington officials with the idea that space-exploration money could be better spent elsewhere?

I get along just fine with these hooks. There was terrible pain for the first year or so, but the human body can adjust to almost anything. I shave with them and even tie my own shoelaces. And as you can see, my typing is nice and even. I don't expect to have any trouble putting the shotgun into my mouth or pulling the trigger. It started again three weeks ago, you see.

There is a perfect circle of twelve golden eyes on my chest.