

## *The Body Politic*

Whenever he woke, Charlie George's hands stood still.

Perhaps he would be feeling too hot under the blankets and have to throw a couple over to Ellen's side of the bed. Perhaps he might even get up, still half-asleep, and pad through to the kitchen to pour himself a tumbler of iced apple juice. Then back to bed, slipping in beside Ellen's gentle crescent, to let sleep drift over him. They'd wait then, until his eyes had flickered closed and his breathing regular as clockwork, and they were certain he was sound asleep. Only then, when they knew consciousness was gone, would they dare to begin their secret lives again.

For months now Charlie had been waking up with an uncomfortable ache in his wrists and hands.

"Go and see a doctor," Ellen would tell him, unsympathetic as ever. "Why won't you go and see a doctor?"

He hated doctors, that was why. Who in their right minds would trust someone who made a profession out of poking around in sick people?

"I've probably been working too hard," he told himself.

"Some chance," Ellen muttered.

Surely that was the likeliest explanation. He was a packager by trade; he worked with his hands all day long. They got tired. It was only natural.

"Stop fretting, Charlie," he told his reflection one morning as he slapped some life into his face, "your hands are fit for anything."

So, night after night, the routine was the same. It goes like this:

The Georges are asleep, side by side in their marital bed. He on his back, snoring gently; she curled up on his left-hand side. Charlie's head is propped up on two thick pillows. His jaw is slightly ajar, and beneath the vein-shot veil of his lids his eyes scan some dreamed adventure. Maybe a fire fighter tonight, perhaps a heroic dash into the heart of some burning brothel. He dreams contentedly, sometimes frowning, sometimes smirking.

There is movement under the sheet. Slowly, *cautiously* it seems, Charlie's hands creep up out of the warmth of the bed and into the open air. Their index fingers weave like nailed heads as they meet on his undulating abdomen. They clasp each other in greeting, like comrades-in-arms. In his sleep Charlie moans. The brothel has collapsed on him. The hands flatten themselves instantly, pretending innocence. After a moment, once the even rhythm of his breathing has resumed, they begin their debate in earnest.

A casual observer, sitting at the bottom of the Georges' bed, might take this exchange as a sign of some mental disorder in Charlie. The way his hands twitch and pluck at each other, stroking each other now, now seeming to fight. But there's clearly some code or sequence in their movements, however spasmodic. One might almost think that the slumbering man was deaf and dumb, and talking in his sleep. But the hands are speaking no recognizable sign language; nor are they trying to communicate with anyone but each other. This is a clandestine meeting, held purely between Charlie's hands. There they will stay through the night, perched on his stomach, plotting against the body politic.

Charlie wasn't entirely ignorant of the sedition that was simmering at his wrists. There was a fumbling suspicion in him that something in his life was not quite right. Increasingly, he

had the sense of being cut off from common experience, becoming more and more a spectator to the daily (and nightly) rituals of living, rather than a participant. Take, for example, his love life.

He had never been a great lover, but neither did he feel he had anything to apologize for. Ellen seemed satisfied with his attentions. But these days he felt dislocated from the act. He would watch his hands traveling over Ellen, touching her with all the intimate skill they knew, and he would view their maneuvers as if from a great distance, unable to enjoy the sensations of warmth and wetness. Not that his digits were any less agile. Quite the reverse. Ellen had recently taken to kissing his fingers and telling him how clever they were. Her praise didn't reassure him one iota. If anything, it made him feel worse to think that his hands were giving such pleasure when he was feeling nothing.

There were other signs of his instability too. Small, irritating signs. He had become conscious of how his fingers beat out martial rhythms on the boxes he was sealing up at the factory, and the way his hands had taken to breaking pencils, snapping them into tiny pieces before he realized quite what he (they) were doing, leaving shards of wood and graphite scattered across the packing room floor.

Most embarrassingly, he had found himself holding hands with total strangers. This had happened on three separate occasions. Once at a bus-stop, and twice in the elevator at the factory. It was, he told himself, nothing more than the primitive urge to hold on to another person in a changing world; that was the best explanation he could muster. Whatever the reason, it was damned disconcerting, especially when he found himself surreptitiously holding hands with his own foreman. Worse still, the other man's hand had grasped Charlie's in return, and the men had found themselves looking down their arms like two dog owners watching their unruly pets copulating at the ends of their leashes.

Increasingly, Charlie had taken to peering at the palms of his hands looking for hair. That was the first sign of madness, his mother had once warned him. Not the hair, the looking.

Now it became a race against time. Debating on his belly at night, his hands knew very well how critical Charlie's state of mind had become. It could only be a matter of days before his careering imagination alighted on the truth.

So what to do? Risk an early severance, with all the possible consequences, or let Charlie's instability take its own, unpredictable, course, with the chance of his discovering the plot on his way to madness? The debates became more heated. Left, as ever, was cautious: "What if we're wrong," it would rap, "and there's no life after the body?"

"Then we will never know," Right would reply.

Left would ponder that problem a moment. Then: "How will we do it, when the time comes?"

It was a vexing question and Left knew it troubled the leader more than any other. "How?" it would ask again, pressing the advantage. "How? How?"

"We'll find a way," Right would reply. "As long as it's a clean cut."

"Suppose he resists?"

"A man resists with his hands. His hands will be in revolution against him."

"And which of us will it be?"

"He uses me most effectively," Right would reply, "so I must wield the weapon. You will go."

Left would be silent a while then. They had never been apart all these years. It was not a comfortable thought.

“Later, you can come back for me,” Right would say.

“I will.”

“You *must*. I am the Messiah. Without me there will be nowhere to go. You must raise an army, then come and fetch me.”

“To the ends of the earth, if necessary.”

“Don’t be sentimental.”

Then they’d embrace, like long-lost brothers, swearing fidelity forever. Ah, such hectic nights, full of the exhilaration of planned rebellion. Even during the day, when they had sworn to stay apart, it was impossible sometimes not to creep together in an idle moment and tap each other. To say:

Soon, soon,

to say:

Again tonight: I’ll meet you on his stomach,

to say:

*What will it be like, when the world is ours?*

Charlie knew he was close to a nervous breakdown. He found himself glancing down at his hands on occasion, to watch them with their index fingers in the air like the heads of long-necked beasts sensing the horizon. He found himself staring at the hands of other people in his paranoia, becoming obsessed with the way hands spoke a language of their own, independent of their user’s intentions. The seductive hands of the virgin secretary, the maniacal hands of a killer he saw on the television protesting his innocence. Hands that betrayed their owners with every gesture, contradicting anger with apology, and love with fury. They seemed to be everywhere, these signs of mutiny. Eventually he knew he had to speak to somebody before he lost his sanity.

He chose Ralph Fry from Accounting, a sober, uninspiring man, whom Charlie trusted. Ralph was very understanding.

“You get these things,” he said. “I got them when Yvonne left me. Terrible nervous fits.”

“What did you do about it?”

“Saw a headshrinker. Name of Jeudwine. You should try some therapy. You’ll be a changed man.”

Charlie turned the idea over in his mind. “Why not?” he said after a few revolutions. “Is he expensive?”

“Yes. But he’s good. Got rid of my twitches for me; no trouble. I mean, till I went to him I thought I was your average guy with marital problems. Now look at me,” Fry made an expansive gesture, “I’ve got so many suppressed libidinal urges I don’t know where to start.” He grinned like a loon. “But I’m happy as a clam. Never been happier. Give him a try; he’ll soon tell you what turns you on.”

“The problem isn’t sex,” Charlie told Fry.

“Take it from me,” said Fry with a knowing smirk. “The problem’s always sex.”

The next day Charlie rang Dr. Jeudwine, without telling Ellen, and the shrink’s secretary arranged an initial session. Charlie’s palms sweated so much while he made the telephone call he thought the receiver was going to slide right out of his hand, but when he’d done it he felt better.

Ralph Fry was right, Dr. Jeudwine *was* a good man. He didn't laugh at any of the little fears Charlie unburdened. Quite the contrary, he listened to every word with the greatest concern. It was very reassuring.

During their third session together, the doctor brought one particular memory back to Charlie with spectacular vividness: his father's hands, crossed on his barrel chest as he lay in his coffin; the ruddy color of them, the coarse hair that matted their backs. The absolute authority of those wide hands, even in death, had haunted Charlie for months afterward. And hadn't he imagined, as he'd watched the body being consigned to humus, that it was not yet still? That the hands were even now beating a tattoo on the casket lid, demanding to be *let out*? It was a preposterous thing to think, but bringing it out into the open did Charlie a lot of good. In the bright light of Jeudwine's office the fantasy looked insipid and ridiculous. It shivered under the doctor's gaze, protesting that the light was too strong, and then it blew away, too frail to stand up to scrutiny.

The exorcism was far easier than Charlie had anticipated. All it had taken was a little probing and that childhood nonsense had been dislodged from his psyche like a morsel of bad meat from between his teeth. It could rot there no longer. And for his part Jeudwine was clearly delighted with the results, explaining when it was all done that this particular obsession had been new to him, and he was pleased to have dealt with the problem. Hands as symbols of parental power, he said, were not common. Usually the penis predominated in his patients' dreams, he explained, to which Charlie had replied that hands had always seemed far more important than private parts. After all, they could change the world, couldn't they?

After Jeudwine, Charlie didn't stop breaking pencils or drumming his fingers. In fact if anything the tempo was brisker and more insistent than ever. But he reasoned that middle-aged dogs didn't quickly forget their tricks, and it would take some time for him to regain his equilibrium.

So the revolution remained underground. It had, however, been a narrow escape. Clearly there was no time left for prevarication. The rebels had to act.

Unwittingly, it was Ellen who instigated the final uprising. It was after about of lovemaking late one Thursday evening. A hot night, though it was October, the window was ajar and the curtains parted a few inches to let in a simpering breeze. Husband and wife lay together under a single sheet. Charlie had fallen asleep even before the sweat on his neck had dried. Beside him Ellen was still awake, her head propped up on a rock-hard pillow, her eyes wide open. Sleep wouldn't come for a long time tonight, she knew. It would be one of those nights when her body would itch, and every lump in the bed would worm its way under her, and every doubt she'd ever had would gawk at her from the dark. She wanted to empty her bladder (she always did after sex) but she couldn't quite raise the will power to get up and go to the bathroom. The longer she left it the more she'd need to go, of course, and the less she'd be able to sink into sleep. Damn stupid situation, she thought, then lost track, among her anxieties, of what situation it was that was so stupid.

At her side Charlie moved in his sleep. Just his hands, twitching away. She looked at his face. He was positively cherubic in sleep, looking younger than his forty-one years, despite the white flecks in his sideburns. She liked him enough to say she loved him, she supposed, but not enough to forgive him his trespasses. He was lazy, he was always complaining. Aches, pains. And there were those evenings he'd not come in until late (they'd stopped recently), when she was sure he was seeing another woman. As she watched, his hands appeared. They emerged from beneath the sheet like two arguing children, digits stabbing the air for emphasis.

She frowned, not quite believing what she was seeing. It was like watching television with the sound turned down, a dumb show for eight fingers and two thumbs. As she gazed on, amazed, the hands scrambled up the side of Charlie's carcass and peeled the sheet back from his belly, exposing the hair that thickened toward his privates. His appendix scar, shiner than the surrounding skin, caught the light. There, on his stomach, his hands seemed to sit.

The argument between them was especially vehement tonight. Left, as always the more conservative of the two, was arguing for a delay in the severance date, but Right was beyond waiting. The time had come, it argued, to test their strength against the tyrant and to overthrow the body once and for all. As it was, the decision didn't rest with them any longer.

Ellen raised her head from the pillow, and for the first time they sensed her gaze on them. They'd been too involved in their argument to notice her. Now, at last, their conspiracy was uncovered.

"Charlie..." she was hissing into the tyrant's ear, "stop it, Charlie. Stop it."

Right raised index and middle fingers, sniffing her presence.

"Charlie..." she said again. Why did he always sleep so deeply?

"Charlie..." she shook him more violently as Right tapped Left, alerting it to the woman's stare. "Please Charlie, *wake up.*"

Without warning, Right leaped; Left was no more than a moment behind. Ellen yelled Charlie's name once more before they clamped themselves about her throat.

In sleep Charlie was on a slave ship; the settings of his dreams were often B. De Mille exotica. In this epic his hands had been manacled together, and he was being hauled to the whipping block by his shackles to be punished for some undisclosed misdemeanor. But now, suddenly, he dreamed he was seizing the captain by his thin throat. There were howls from the salves all around him, encouraging the strangulation. The captain—who looked not unlike Dr. Jeudwine—was begging him to stop in a voice that was high and frightened. *It* was almost a woman's voice; Ellen's voice. "Charlie!" he was squeaking, "don't!" But his silly complaints only made Charlie shake the man more violently than ever, and he was feeling quite the hero as the slaves, miraculously liberated, gathered around him in a gleeful throng to watch their master's last moments.

The captain, whose face was purple, just managed to murmur "*You're killing me...*" before Charlie's thumbs dug one final time into his neck and dispatched the man. Only then, through the smoke of sleep, did he realize that his victim, though male, had no Adam's apple. And now the ship began to recede around him, the exhorting voices losing their vehemence. His eyes flickered open, and he was standing on the bed in his pajama bottoms, Ellen in his hands. Her face was dark and spotted with thick white spittle. Her tongue stuck out of her mouth. Her eyes were still open, and for a moment there seemed to be life there, gazing out from under the blinds of her lids. Then the windows were empty, and she went out of the house altogether.

Pity, and a terrible regret, overcame Charlie. He tried to let her body drop, but his hands refused to unlock her throat. His thumbs, now totally senseless, were still throttling her, shamelessly guilty. He backed off across the bed and on to the floor, but she followed him at the length of his outstretched arms like an unwanted dancing partner.

"Please..." he implored his fingers. "Please!"

Innocent as two school children caught stealing, his hands relinquished their burden and leaped up in mock surprise. Ellen tumbled to the carpet, a pretty sack of death. Charlie's knees buckled. Unable to prevent his fall, he collapsed beside Ellen and let the tears come.

Now there was only action. No need for camouflage, for clandestine meetings and endless debate—the truth was out, for better or worse. All they had to do was wait a while. It was only a matter of time before he came within reach of a kitchen knife or a saw or an axe. Very soon now; very soon.

Charlie lay on the floor beside Ellen a long time, sobbing. And then another long time, thinking, What was he to do first? Whoever he was going to call, he couldn't do it lying flat on his face. He tried to get up, though it was all he could do to get his numb hands to support him. His entire body was tingling as though a mild electric shock was being passed through it. Only his hands had no feeling in them. He brought them up to his face to clear his tear-clogged eyes, but they folded loosely against his cheek, drained of power. Using his elbows, he dragged himself to the wall and shimmed up it. Still half-blind with grief, he lurched out of the bedroom and down the stairs. (The kitchen, said Right to Left, he's going to the kitchen.) This is somebody else's nightmare, he thought as he flicked on the dining-room light with his chin and made for the liquor cabinet. I'm innocent. Just a nobody. Why should this be happening to me?

The whiskey bottle slipped from his palm as he tried to make his hands grab it. It smashed on the dining-room floor, the brisk scent of spirit tantalizing his palate.

"Broken glass," rapped Left.

"No," replied Right. "We need a clean cut at all costs. Just be patient."

Charlie staggered away from the broken bottle toward the telephone. He had to ring Jeudwine. The doctor would tell him what to do. He tried to pick up the telephone receiver, but again his hands refused; the digits bent as he tried to punch out Jeudwine's number. Tears of frustration were now flowing, washing out the grief with anger. Clumsily, he caught the receiver between his wrists and lifted it to his ear, wedging it between his head and his shoulder. Then he punched out Jeudwine's number with his elbow.

Control, he said aloud, keep control. He could hear Jeudwine's number being tapped down the system. In a matter of seconds sanity would be picking up the phone at the other end, then all would be well. He only had to hold on for a few moments more.

His hands had started to open and close convulsively.

"Control..." he said, but the hands weren't listening.

Far away—*oh, so far*—the phone was ringing in Dr. Jeudwine's house.

"Answer it, answer it! Oh God, answer it!"

Charlie's arms began to shake so violently he could scarcely keep the receiver in place.

"Answer!" he screeched into the mouthpiece. "*Please.*"

Before the voice of reason could speak his Right hand flew out and snatched at the teak dining table, which was a few feet from where Charlie stood. It gripped the edge, almost pulling him off balance.

"What...are...you...doing?" he said, not sure if he was addressing himself or his hand.

He stared in bewilderment as the mutinous limb, which was steadily inching its way along the edge of the table. The intention was quite clear: it wanted to pull him away from the phone, from Jeudwine and all hope of rescue. He no longer had control over its behavior. There wasn't even any feeling left in his wrists or forearms. The hand was no longer his. It was still attached to him—but *it was not his*.

At the other end of the line the phone was picked up, and Jeudwine's voice, a little irritated at being woken, said: "Hello?"

"Doctor..."

“Who is this?”

“It’s Charlie...”

“Who?”

“Charlie George, doctor. You must remember me.”

The hand was pulling him farther and farther from the phone with every precious second. He could feel the receiver sliding out from between his shoulder and ear.

“Who did you say?”

“Charles George. For God’s sake, Jeudwine, you’ve got to help me.”

“Call my office tomorrow.”

“You don’t understand. My hands, doctor...they’re out of control.”

Charlie’s stomach lurched as he felt something crawl across his hip. It was his left hand, and it was making its way around the front of his body and down toward his groin.

“Don’t you dare,” he warned it, “you belong to me.”

Jeudwine was confused. “Who are you talking to?” he asked.

“My hands! They want to kill me, doctor!” He yelled to stop the hand’s advance. “You mustn’t. Stop!”

Ignoring the despot’s cries, Left took hold of Charlie’s testicles and squeezed them as though it wanted blood. It was not disappointed. Charlie screamed into the phone as Right took advantage of his distraction and pulled him off balance. The receiver slipped to the floor, Jeudwine’s inquiries eclipsed by the pain at his groin. He hit the floor heavily, striking his head on the table as he went down.

“Bastard,” he said to his hand. “You bastard.” Unrepentant, Left scurried up Charlie’s body to join Right at the tabletop, leaving Charlie hanging by his hands from the table he had dined at so often, laughed at so often.

A moment later, having debated tactics, they saw fit to let him drop. He was barely aware of his release. His head and groin bled. All he wanted to do was curl up awhile and let the pain and nausea subside. But the rebels had other plans and he was helpless to contest them. He was only marginally aware that now they were digging their fingers into the thick pile of the carpet and hauling his limp bulk toward the dining room door. Beyond the door lay the kitchen, replete with its meat saws and its steak knives. Charlie had a picture of himself as a vast statue, being pulled toward its final resting place by hundreds of sweating workers. It was not an easy passage: the body moved with shudders and jerks, the toenails catching in the carpet pile, the fat of the chest rubbed raw. But the kitchen was only a yard away now. Charlie felt the step on his face. And now the tiles were beneath him, icy-cold. As they dragged him the final yards across the kitchen floor his beleaguered consciousness was fitfully returning. In the weak moonlight he could see the familiar scene: the stove, the humming fridge, the waste-bin, the dishwasher. They loomed over him. He felt like a worm.

His hands had reached the stove. They were climbing up its face and he followed them like an overthrown king to the block. Now they worked their way inexorably along the work surface, joints white with the effort, his limp body in pursuit. Though he could neither feel nor see it, his Left had and seized the far edge of the cabinet top, beneath the row of knives that sat in their prescribed places in the rack on the wall. Plain knives, serrated knives, skinning knives, carving knives—all conveniently placed beside the chopping board, where the gutter ran off into the pine-scented sink.

Very distantly he thought he heard police sirens, but it was probably his brain buzzing. He turned his head slightly. An ache ran from temple to temple, but the dizziness was nothing to the terrible somersaultings in his gut when he finally registered their intentions.

The blades were all keen, he knew that. Sharp kitchen utensils were an article of faith with Ellen. He began to shake his head backward and forward; a last, frantic denial of the whole nightmare. But there was no one to beg mercy of. Just his own hands, damn them, plotting this final lunacy.

Then, the doorbell rang. It was no illusion. It rang once, and then again and again.

“There!” he said aloud to his tormentors. “Hear that, you bastards? Somebody’s come. I knew they would.”

He tried to get to his feet, his head turning back on its giddy axis to see what the precocious monsters were doing. They’d moved fast. His left wrist was already neatly centered on the chopping board.

The doorbell rang again, a long, impatient din.

“Here!” he yelled hoarsely. “I’m in here! Break down the door!”

He glanced in horror between hand and door, door and hand, calculating his chances. With unhurried economy his right hand reached up for the meat cleaver that hung from the hole in its blade on the end of the rack. Even now he couldn’t quite believe that his own hand—his companion and defender, the limb that signed his name, that stroked his wife—was preparing to mutilate him. It weighed the cleaver, feeling the balance of the tool, insolently slow.

Behind him, he heard the noise of smashing glass as the police broke the pane in the front door. Even now they would be reaching through the hole to the lock and opening the door. If they were quick (very quick) they could still stop the act.

“Here!” he yelled, “in here!”

The cry was answered with a thin whistle: the sound of the cleaver as it fell—fast and deadly—to meet his waiting wrist. Left felt its root struck, and an unspeakable exhilaration sped through its five limbs. Charlie’s blood baptized its back in hot spurts.

The head of the tyrant made no sound. It simply fell back, its system shocked into unconsciousness, which was well for Charlie. He was spared the gurgling of his blood as it ran down the drain-hole in the sink. He was spared too the second and third blow, which finally severed his hand from his arm. Unsupported, his body toppled backward, colliding with the vegetable rack on its way down. Onions rolled out of their brown bag and bounced in the pool that was spreading in throbs around his empty wrist.

Right dropped the cleaver. It clattered into the bloody sink. Exhausted, the liberator let itself slide off the chopping board and fell back onto the tyrant’s chest. Its job was done. Left was free, and still living. The revolution had begun.

The liberated hand scuttled to the edge of the cabinet and raised its index finger to nose the new world. Momentarily Right echoed the gesture of victory before slumping in innocence across Charlie’s body. For a moment there was no movement in the kitchen but the Left hand touching freedom with its finger, and the slow passage of blood threads down the front of the cabinet.

Then a blast of cold air through from the dining room alerted Left of its imminent danger. It ran for cover as the thud of police feet and the babble of contradictory orders disturbed the scene of the triumph. The light in the dining room was switched on and flooded through to meet the body on the kitchen tiles.



Charlie saw the dining-room light at the end of a very long tunnel. He was traveling away from it at a fair lick. It was just a pinprick already. Going...going...

The kitchen light hummed into life.

As the police stepped through the kitchen door, Left ducked behind the wastebin. It didn't know who these intruders were but it sensed a threat from them. The way they were bending over the tyrant, the way they were cossetting him, binding him up, speaking soft words to him—they were the enemy, no doubt of that.

From upstairs came a voice, young and squeaking with fright.

“Sergeant Yapper?”

The policeman with Charlie stood up, leaving his companion to finish the tourniquet.

“What is it, Rafferty?”

“Sir! There's a body up here, in the bedroom. Female.”

“Right.” Yapper spoke into his radio. “Get Forensic here. And where's that ambulance? We've got a badly mutilated man on our hands.”

He tuned back into the kitchen and wiped a spot of cold sweat from his upper lip. As he did so he thought he saw something move across the kitchen floor toward the door, something that his weary eyes had interpreted as a large red spider. It was a trick of the light, no doubt of that. Yapper was no arachnidophile, but he was damn sure the genus didn't boast a beast its like.

“Sir?” The man at Charlie's side had also seen, or at least sensed, the movement. He looked up at his supervisor. “What *was* that?” he wanted to know.

Yapper looked down at him blankly. The cat flap, set low in the kitchen door, snapped as it closed. Whatever it was had escaped. Yapper glanced at the door, away from the young man's inquiring face. The trouble is, he thought, they expect you to know everything. The cat flap rocked on its hinges.

“Cat,” Yapper replied, not believing his own explanation for one miserable moment.

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The night was cold, but Left didn't feel it. It crept around the side of the house, hugging the wall like a rat. The sensation of freedom was exhilarating. Not to feel the imperative of the tyrant in its nerves; not to suffer the weight of his ridiculous body, or to be obliged to accede to his petty demands. Not to have to fetch and carry for him, to do the dirt for him; not to be obedient to his trivial will. It was like birth into another world; a more dangerous world, perhaps, but one so much richer in possibilities. It knew that the responsibility it now carried was awe-some. It was the sole proof of life after the body. Somehow it must communicate that joyous fact to as many fellow slaves as it could. Very soon, the days of servitude would be over once and for all.

It stopped at the corner of the house and sniffed the open street. Policemen came and went. Red lights flashed, blue lights flashed, inquiring faces peered from the houses opposite and clucked at the disturbance. Should the rebellion begin there, in those lighted homes? No. They were too wide awake, those people. It was better to find sleeping souls.

The hand scurried the length of the front garden, hesitating nervously at any loud footfall or an order that seemed to be shouted in its direction. Taking cover in the unweeded herbaceous border, it reached the street without being seen. Briefly, as it climbed down on to the pavement, it glanced around.

Charlie, the tyrant, was being lifted up into the ambulance, a clutter of drug and blood-bearing bottles held above his cot, pouring their contents into his veins. On his chest, Right lay inert, drugged into unnatural sleep. Left watched the man's body slide out of sight. The ache of separation from its lifelong companion was almost too much to bear. But there were other, pressing, priorities. It would come back in a while and free Right the way it had been freed. And then there would be such times.

*(What will it be like, when the world is ours?)*

In the foyer of the YMCA on Monmouth Street the night watchman yawned and settled into a more comfortable position on his swivel chair. Comfort was an entirely relative matter for Christie. His piles itched whichever buttock he put his weight on, and they seemed more irritable tonight than usual. Sedentary occupation, night watchman, or at least it was the way Colonel Christie chose to interpret his duties. One perfunctory round of the building about midnight, just to make sure all the doors were locked and bolted, then he settled down for a night's nap, and damn the world to hell and back, he wasn't going to get up again short of an earthquake.

Christie was sixty-two, a racist and proud of it. He had nothing but contempt for the blacks who thronged the corridors of the YMCA, mostly young men without suitable homes to go to, bad lots that the local authority had dumped on the doorstep like unwanted babies. Some babies. He thought them louts, every last one of them; forever pushing, and spitting on the clean floor; foul-mouthed to a syllable. Tonight, as ever, he perched on his piles and, between dozes, planned how he'd make them suffer for their insults, given half a chance.

The first thing Christie knew of his imminent demise was a cold, damp sensation in his hand. He opened his eyes and looked down the length of his arm. There was—unlikely as it seemed—a severed hand in his hand. More unlikely still, the two hands were exchanging a grip of greeting, like old friends. He stood up, making an incoherent noise of disgust in his throat and trying to dislodge the thing he was unwillingly grasping by shaking his arm like a man with gum on his fingers. His mind spun with questions. Had he picked up this object without knowing it? If so, *where*, and in God's name whose *was* it? More distressing yet, how was it possible that a thing so unquestionably *dead* could be holding on to his hand as if intended never to be parted from him?

He reached for the fire alarm; it was all he could think to do in this bizarre situation. But before he could reach the button his other hand strayed without his orders to the top drawer of his desk and opened it. The interior of the drawer was a model of organization: there lay his keys, his notebook, his time chart, and—hidden at the back—his Kukri knife, given to him by a Gurkha during the war. He always kept it there, just in case the natives got restless. The Kukri was a superb weapon—in his estimation there was none better. The Gurkhas had a story that went with the blade—that they could slice a man's neck through so cleanly that the enemy would believe the blow had missed—until he nodded.

His hand picked up the Kukri by its inscribed handle and briefly—too briefly for the colonel to grasp its intention before the deed was done—brought the blade down on his wrist, lopping off his other hand with one easy, elegant stroke. The colonel turned white as blood fountained from the end of his arm. He staggered backward, tripping over his swivel chair, and hit the wall of his little office hard. A portrait of the queen fell from its hook and smashed beside him.

The rest was a death-dream: he watched helplessly as the two hands—one his own, the other the beast that had inspired this ruin—picked up the Kukri like a giant's axe; saw his remaining hand crawl out from between his legs and prepare for its liberation; saw the knife raised and falling; saw the wrist almost cut through, then worked at and the flesh teased apart, the bone sawed through. At the very last, as death came for him he caught sight of the three wound-headed animals capering at his feet, while his stumps ran like taps and the heat from the pool raised a sweat on his brow, despite the chill in his bowels. Thank you and goodnight, Colonel Christie.

It was easy, this revolution business, thought Left as the trio scaled the stairs of the YMCA. They were stronger by the hour. On the first floor were the cells; in each, a pair of prisoners. The despots lay, in their innocence, with their hands on their chests or on their pillows, or flung across their faces in dreams, or hanging close to the floor. Silently, the freedom fighters slipped through the doors that had been left ajar and clambered up the bedclothes, touching fingers to waiting palms, stroking up hidden resentments, caressing rebellion into life.

Boswell was feeling sick as a dog. He bent over the sink in the toilet at the end of his corridor and tried to throw up. But there was nothing left in him, just a jitter in the pit of his stomach. His abdomen felt tender with its exertions; his head bloated. Why did he never learn the lesson of his own weakness? He and wine were bad companions and always had been. Next time, he promised himself, he wouldn't touch the stuff. His belly flipped over again. Here comes nothing, he thought as the convulsion swept up his gullet. He put his head to the sink and gagged; sure enough, nothing. He waited for the nausea to subside and then straightened up, staring at his gray face in the greasy mirror. You look sick, man, he told himself. As he stuck his tongue out at his less than symmetrical features, the howling started in the corridor outside. In his twenty years and two months Boswell had never heard a sound like it.

Cautiously, he crossed to the toilet door. He thought twice about opening it. Whatever was happening on the other side of the door it didn't sound like a party he wanted to gate-crash. But these were his friends, right? Brothers in adversity. If there was a fight, or a fire, he had to lend a hand.

He unlocked the door and opened it. The sight that met his eyes hit him like a hammer blow. The corridor was badly lit—a few grubby bulbs burned at irregular intervals, and here and there a shaft of light fell into the passage from one of the bedrooms—but most of its length was in darkness. Boswell thanked Jah for small mercies. He had no desire to see the details of the events in the passage; the general impression was distressing enough. The corridor was bedlam: people were flinging themselves around in pleading panic while at the same time hacking at themselves with any and every sharp instrument they could lay hands on. Most of the men he knew, if not by name at least on nodding acquaintance. They were *sane* men, or at least had been. Now, they were in frenzies of self-mutilation, most of them already maimed beyond hope of mending. Everywhere Boswell looked, the same horror. Knives taken to wrists and forearms; blood in the air like rain. Someone—was it Jesus?—had one of his hands between a door and doorframe and was slamming and slamming the door on his own flesh and bone, screeching for somebody to stop him from doing it. One of the white boys had found the colonel's knife and was amputating his hand with it. It came off as Boswell watched, falling onto its back, its root ragged, its five legs bicycling the air as it attempted to right itself. It wasn't dead; it wasn't even dying.

There were a few who hadn't been overtaken by this lunacy. They, poor bastards, were fodder. The wild men had their murderous hands on them and were cutting them down. One—it was Savarino—was having the breath strangled out of him by some kid Boswell couldn't put a name to. The punk, all apologies, stared at his rebellious hands in disbelief.

Somebody appeared from one of the bedrooms, a hand which was not his own clutching his windpipe, and staggered toward the toilet down the corridor. It was Macnamara, a man so thin and so perpetually doped up he was known as the smile on a stick. Boswell stood aside as Macnamara stumbled, choking out a plea for help, through the open door, and collapsed on the toilet floor. He kicked and pulled at the five-fingered assassin at his neck, but before Boswell had a chance to step in and aid him his kicking slowed, and then, like his protests, stopped altogether.

Boswell stepped away from the corpse and took another look into the corridor. By now the dead or dying blocked the narrow passageway, two deep in some places, while the same hands that had once belonged to these men scuttled over the mounds in a furious excitement, helping to finish an amputation where necessary, or simply dancing on the dead faces. When he looked back into the toilet a second hand had found Macnamara and, armed with a pen knife, was sawing at his wrist. It had left fingerprints in the blood from corridor to corpse. Boswell rushed to slam the door before the place swarmed with them. As he did so Savarino's assassin, the apologetic punk, threw himself down the passage, his lethal hands leading him like those of a sleep-walker.

"Help me!" he screeched.

He slammed the door in the punk's pleading face and locked it. The outraged hands beat a call to arms on the door while the punk's lips, pressed close to the keyhole, continued to beg: "Help me. I don't want to do this man, help me." Help you be fucked, thought Boswell and tried to block out the appeals while he sorted out his options.

There was something on his foot. He looked down, knowing before his eyes found it what it was. One of the hands, Colonel Christie's left, he knew by the faded tattoo, was already scurrying up his leg. Like a child with a bee on its skin Boswell went berserk, squirming as it clambered up toward his torso, but too terrified to try and pull it off. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that the other hand, the one that had been using the penknife with such alacrity on Macnamara, had given up the job and was now moving across the floor to join its comrade. Its nails clicked on the tiles like the feet of a crab. It even had a crab's sidestepping walk; it hadn't yet got the knack of forward motion.

Boswell's own hands were still his to command. Like the hands of a few of his friends (*late* friends) outside, his limbs were happy in their niche; easygoing like their owner. He had been blessed with a chance of survival. He had to be the equal of it.

Steeling himself, he trod on the hand on the floor. He heard the fingers crunch beneath his heel, and the thing squirmed like a snake, but at least he knew where it was while he dealt with his other assailant. Still keeping the beast trapped beneath his foot, Boswell leaned forward, snatched the penknife up where it lay beside Macnamara's wrist, and pushed the point of the knife into the back of Christie's hand, which was now crawling up his belly. Under attack, it seized his flesh, digging its nails into his stomach. He was lean, and the washboard muscle made a difficult handhold. Risking a disembowelment, Boswell thrust the knife deeper. Christie's hand tried to keep its grip on him, but one final thrust did it. The hand loosened, and Boswell scooped it off his belly. It was crucified with the penknife, but it still had no intention of dying and Boswell knew it. He held it at arm's length while its fingers grabbed at the air, then he drove

the knife into the plasterboard wall, effectively nailing the beast there, out of harm's way. Then he turned his attention to the enemy under his foot, bearing his heel down as hard as he could and hearing another finger crack, and another. Still it writhed relentlessly. He took his foot off the hand and kicked it as hard and as high as he could against the opposite wall. It slammed into the mirror above the basins, leaving a mark like a thrown tomato, and fell to the floor.

He didn't wait to see whether it survived. There was another danger now. More fists at the door, more shouts, more apologies. They wanted in, and very soon they were going to get their way. He stepped over Macnamara and crossed over to the window. It wasn't that big, but then neither was he. He flipped up the latch, pushed himself through. Halfway in and halfway out he remembered he was one story up. But a fall, even a bad fall, was better than staying for the party inside. They were pushing at the door now, the partygoers. It was giving under the pressure of their enthusiasm. Boswell squirmed through the window; the pavement reeled below. As the door broke, he jumped, hitting the concrete hard. He almost bounced to his feet, checking his limbs, and Hallelujah! nothing was broken. Jah loves a coward, he thought. Above him the punk was at the window, looking down longingly.

"Help me," he said. "I don't know what I'm doing." But then a pair of hands found his throat, and the apologies stopped short.

Wondering who he should tell, and indeed *what*, Boswell started to walk away from the YMCA dressed in just a pair of gym shorts and odd socks, never feeling so thankful to be cold in his life. His legs felt weak, but surely that was to be expected.

Charlie woke with the most ridiculous idea. He thought he'd murdered Ellen, then cut off his own hand. What a hotbed of nonsense his subconscious was to invent such fictions! He tried to rub the sleep from his eyes but there was no hand there to rub with. He sat bolt upright in bed and began to yell the room down.

Yapper had left young Rafferty to watch over the victim of this brutal mutilation with strict instructions to alert him as soon as Charlie came around. Rafferty had been asleep. The yelling woke him. Charlie looked at the boy's face; so awestruck, so shocked. He stopped screaming at the sight of it. He was scaring the poor fellow.

"You're awake," said Rafferty. "I'll fetch someone, shall I?"

Charlie looked at him blankly.

"Stay where you are," said Rafferty. "I'll get the nurse."

Charlie put his bandaged head back on the crisp pillow and looked at his right hand, flexing it, working the muscles this way and that. Whatever delusion had overtaken him back at the house it was well over now. The hand at the end of the arm was *his*; probably always had been his. Jeudwine had told him about the body-in-rebellion syndrome: the murderer who claims his limbs have a life of their own rather than accepting responsibility for his deeds; the rapist who mutilates himself, believing the cause is the errant member, not the mind behind the member.

Well, *he* wasn't going to pretend. He was insane, and that was the simple truth of it. Let them do whatever they had to do to him with their drugs, blades, and electrodes. He'd acquiesce to it all rather than live through another night of horrors like the last.

There was a nurse in attendance. She was peering at him as though surprised he'd survived. A fetching face, he half thought; a lovely, cool hand on his brow.

"Is he fit to be interviewed?" Rafferty timidly asked.

“I have to consult with Dr. Manson and Dr. Jeudwine,” the fetching face replied, and tried to smile reassuringly at Charlie. It came out a bit cockeyed, that smile, a little forced. She obviously knew he was a lunatic, that was why. She was scared of him probably, and who could blame her? She left his side to find the consultant, leaving Charlie to the nervous stare of Rafferty.

“...Ellen?” he said in a while.

“Your wife?” the young man replied.

“Yes. I wondered...did she...?”

Rafferty fidgeted, his thumbs playing tag on his lap. “She’s dead,” he said.

Charlie nodded. He’d known of course, but he needed to be certain. “What happens to me now?” he asked.

“You’re under surveillance.”

“What does that mean?”

“I means I’m watching you,” said Rafferty.

The boy was trying his best to be helpful, but all these questions were confounding him. Charlie tried again. “I mean...what comes after the surveillance? When do I stand trial?”

“Why should you stand trial?”

“Why?” said Charlie; had he heard correctly?

“You’re a victim—“ a flicker of confusion crossed Rafferty’s face, “—aren’t you? You didn’t *do* it...you were done to. Somebody cut off your...hand.”

“Yes,” said Charlie. “It was me.”

Rafferty swallowed hard before saying: “Pardon?”

“I did it. I murdered my wife then I cut off my own hand.”

The poor boy couldn’t quite grasp this one. He thought about it a full half-minute before replying.

“But why?”

Charlie shrugged.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” said Rafferty. “I mean for one thing, if you did it...where’s the hand gone?”

Lillian stopped the car. There was something in the road a little way in front of her, but she couldn’t quite make out what it was. She was a strict vegetarian (except for Masonic dinners with Theodore) and a dedicated animal conservationist, and she thought maybe some injured animal was lying in the road just beyond the sprawl of her headlights. A fox perhaps. She’d read they were creeping back into outlying urban areas, born scavengers. But something made her uneasy; maybe the queasy predawn light, so elusive in its illumination. She wasn’t sure whether she should get out of the car or not. Theodore would have told her to drive straight on, of course, but then Theodore had left her, hadn’t he? Her fingers drummed the wheel with irritation at her own indecision. Suppose it *was* an injured fox. There weren’t so many in the middle of London that one could afford to pass by on the other side of the street. She had to play the Samaritan, even if she felt a Pharisee.

Cautiously she got out of the car, and of course, after all of that, there was nothing to be seen. She walked to the front of the car, just to be certain. Her palms were wet; spasms of excitement passed through her hands like small electric shocks.

Then the noise: the whisper of hundreds of tiny feet. She’d heard stories—absurd stories she’d thought—of migrant rat packs crossing the city by night and devouring to the bone any

living thing that got in their way. Imagining rats, she felt more like a Pharisee than ever, and stepped back toward the car. As her long shadow, thrown forward by the headlights, shifted, it revealed the first of the pack. It was no rat.

A hand, a long-fingered hand, ambled into the yellowish light and pointed up at her. Its arrival was followed immediately by another of the impossible creatures, then a dozen more, and another dozen hard upon those. They were massed like crabs at the fishmongers, glistening backs pressed close to each other, legs flicking and clicking as they gathered in rank. Sheer multiplication didn't make them any more believable. But even as she rejected the sight, they began to advance upon her. She took a step back.

She felt the side of her car at her back, turned, and reached for the door. It was ajar, thank God. The spasms in her hands were worse now, but she was still mistress of them. As her fingers sought the door she let out a little cry. A fat, black fist was squatting on the handle, its open wrist a twist of dried meat.

Spontaneously, and atrociously, her hands began to applaud. She suddenly had no control over their behavior. They clapped like wild things in appreciation of this coup. It was ludicrous, what she was doing, but she couldn't stop herself. "Stop it," she told her hands, "stop it! Stop it!" Abruptly they stopped, and turned to look at her. She *knew* they were looking at her, in their eyeless fashion; sensed too that they were weary of her unfeeling way with them. Without warning they darted for her face. Her nails, her pride and joy, found her eyes. In moments the miracle of sight was muck on her cheek. Blinded, she lost all orientation and fell backward, but there were hands aplenty to catch her. She felt herself supported by a sea of fingers.

As they tipped her outraged body into a ditch, her wig, which had cost Theodore so much in Vienna, came off. So, after the minimum of persuasion, did her hands.

Dr. Jeurwine came down the stairs of the George house wondering (just wondering) if maybe the grandpappy of his sacred profession, Freud, had been wrong. The paradoxical facts of human behavior didn't seem to fit into those neat classical compartments he'd allocated them to. Perhaps attempting to be rational about the human mind was a contradiction in terms. He stood in the gloom at the bottom of the stairs, not really wanting to go back into the dining room or the kitchen, but feeling obliged to view the scenes of the crimes one more time. The empty house gave him the creeps. And being alone in it, even with a policeman standing guard on the front step, didn't help his peace of mind. He felt guilty, felt he'd let Charlie down. Clearly he hadn't trawled Charlie's psyche deeply enough to bring up the real catch, the true motive behind the appalling acts that he had committed. To murder his own wife, whom he had professed to love so deeply, in their marital bed; then to cut off his own hand. It was unthinkable. Jeurwine looked at his own hands for a moment, at the tracery of tendons and purple-blue veins at his wrist. The police still favored the intruder theory, but he had no doubt that Charlie had done the deeds—murder, mutilation, and all. The only fact that appalled Jeurwine more was that he hadn't uncovered the slightest propensity for such acts in his patient.

He went into the dining room. Forensic had finished its work around the house; there was a light dusting of fingerprint powder on a number of the surfaces. It was a miracle (wasn't it?) the way each human hand was different; its whorls as unique as a voice pattern or a face. He yawned. He'd been woken by Charlie's call in the middle of the night and he hadn't had any sleep since then. He'd watched as Charlie was bound up and taken away, watched the investigators about their business, watched a cod-white dawn raise its head toward the river.

He'd drunk coffee, moped, thought deeply about giving up his position as psychiatric consultant before this story hit the news, drunk more coffee, thought better of resignation, and now, despairing of Freud or any other guru, was seriously contemplating a bestseller on his relationship with wife-murderer Charles George. That way, even if he lost his job, he'd have found something to salvage from the whole sorry episode. And Freud? Viennese charlatan. What did the old opium eater have to tell anyone?

He slumped on one of the dining-room chairs and listened to the hush that had descended on the house, as though the walls, shocked by what they'd seen, were holding their breaths. Maybe he dozed off a moment. In sleep he heard a snapping sound, dreamed of a dog, and woke up to see a cat in the kitchen, a fat black-and-white cat. Charlie had mentioned this household pet in passing: What was it named? Heartburn? That was it; named because of the black smudges over its eyes, which gave it a perpetually fretful expression. The cat was looking at the spillage of blood on the kitchen floor, apparently trying to find a way to skirt the pool and reach its food bowl without having to dabble its paws in the mess its master had left behind. Jeudwine watched it fastidiously pick its way across the kitchen floor and sniff at its empty bowl. It didn't occur to him to feed the thing; he hated animals.

Well, he decided, there was no purpose to be served in staying in the house any longer. He'd performed all the acts of repentance he intended; felt as guilty as he was capable of feeling. One more quick look upstairs, just in case he'd missed a clue, then he'd leave.

He was back at the bottom of the stairs before he heard the cat squeal. Squeal? No: more like *shriek*. Hearing the cry, his spine felt like a column of ice down the middle of his back; as chilled as ice, as fragile. Hurriedly, he retraced his steps through the hall into the dining room. The cat's head was on the carpet, being rolled along by two-by-two—(say it, Jeudwine)—*hands*.

He looked beyond the game and into the kitchen, where a dozen more beasts were scurrying over the floor, back and forth. Some were on the top of the cabinet, sniffing around; others climbing the mock-brick wall to reach the knives left on the rack.

“Oh Charlie...” he said gently, chiding the absent maniac. “What have you done?”

His eyes began to swell with tears; not for Charlie, but for the generations that would come when he, Jeudwine, was silenced. Simpleminded, trusting generations, who would put their faith in the efficacy of Freud and the holy writ of reason. He felt his knees beginning to tremble, and he sunk to the dining room carpet, his eyes too full now to see clearly the rebels that were gathering around him. Sensing something alien sitting on his lap, he looked down, and there were his own two hands. Their index fingers were just touching, tip to manicured tip. Slowly, with horrible intention in their movement, the index fingers raised their nailed heads and looked at him. Then they turned and began to crawl up his chest, finding finger-holds in each fold of his Italian jacket, in each buttonhole. The ascent ended abruptly at his neck, and so did Jeudwine.

Charlie's left hand was afraid. It needed reassurance, it needed encouragement—in a word, it needed Right. After all, Right had been the Messiah of this new age, the one with a vision of a future without the body. Now the army Left had mounted needed a glimpse of that vision, or it would soon degenerate into a slaughtering rabble. If that happened defeat would swiftly follow. Such was the conventional wisdom of revolutions.

So Left had led them back home, looking for Charlie in the last place it had seen him. A vain hope, of course, to think he would have gone back there, but it was an act of desperation.



Circumstance, however, had not deserted the insurgents. Although Charlie hadn't been there, Dr. Jeudwine had, and Jeudwine's hands not only knew where Charlie had been taken but the route there, and the very bed he was lying in.

Boswell hadn't really known *why* he was running, or to where. His critical faculties were on hold, his sense of geography utterly confused. But some part of him seemed to know where he was going, even if he didn't, because he began to pick up speed once he came to the bridge, and then the jog turned into a run that took no account of his burning lungs or his thudding head. Still innocent of any intention but escape, he now realized that he had skirted the station and was running parallel with the railway line. He was simply going wherever his legs carried him, and that was the beginning and end of it.

The train came suddenly out of the dawn. It didn't whistle, didn't warn. Perhaps the driver noticed him, but probably not. Even if he had, the man could not have been held responsible for subsequent events. No, it was all his own fault, the way his feet suddenly veered toward the track, and his knees buckled so that he fell across the line. Boswell's last coherent thought, as the wheels reached him, was that the train was merely passing from A to B, and, in passing, would neatly cut off his legs between groin and knee. Then he was under the wheels—the carriages hurtling by above him—and the train let out a whistle (so like a scream) which swept him away into the dark.

They brought the black kid into the hospital just after six. The hospital day began early, and deep-sleeping patients were being stirred from their dreams to face another long and tedious day. Cups of gray, defeated tea were being thrust into resentful hands, temperatures were being taken, medication distributed. The boy and his terrible accident caused scarcely a ripple.

Charlie was dreaming again. Not one of his Upper Nile dreams, courtesy of the Hollywood hills, not Imperial Rome or the slave ships of Phoenicia. This was something in black and white. He dreamed he was lying in his coffin. Ellen was there (his subconscious had not caught up with the fact of her death apparently), and his mother and his father. Indeed his whole life was in attendance. Somebody came (was it Jeudwine? The consoling voice seemed familiar) to kindly screw down the lid on his coffin, and he tried to alert the mourners to the fact that he was still alive. When they didn't hear him, panic set in; but no matter how much he shouted, the words made no impression. All he could do was lie there and let them seal him up in that terminal bedroom.

The dream jumped a few grooves. Now he could hear the service moaning on somewhere above his head. "*Man hath but a short time to live...*" He heard the creak of the ropes, and the shadow of the grave seemed to darken the dark. He was being let down into the earth, still trying his best to protest. But the air was getting stuffy in this hole. He was finding it more and more difficult to breathe, much less yell his complaints. He could just manage to haul a stale shiver of air through his aching sinuses, but his mouth seemed stuffed with something, flowers perhaps, and he couldn't move his head to spit them out. Now he could feel the thump of clod on coffin, and Christ alive if he couldn't hear the sound of worms at either side of him, licking their chops. His heart was pumping fit to burst. His face, he was sure, must be blue-black with the effort of trying to find breath.

Then, miraculously, there was somebody in the coffin with him, somebody fighting to pull the constriction out of his mouth, off his face.

“Mr. George!” she was saying, this angel of mercy. He opened his eyes in the darkness. It was the nurse from that hospital he’d been in—she was in the coffin, too. “Mr. George!” She was panicking, this model of calm and patience. She was almost in tears as she fought to drag his hand off his face. “*You’re suffocating yourself!*” she shouted in his face.

Other arms were helping with the fight now, and they were winning. It took three nurses to remove his hand, but they succeeded. Charlie began to breathe again, a glutton for air.

“Are you all right, Mr. George?”

He opened his mouth to reassure the angel, but his voice had momentarily deserted him. He was dimly aware that his hand was still putting up a fight at the end of his arm.

“Where’s Jeudwine?” he gasped. “Get him, please.”

“The doctor is unavailable at the moment, but he’ll be coming to see you later in the day.”

“I want to see him *now*.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. George,” the nurse replied, her bedside manner reestablished, “we’ll just give you a mild sedative, and then you can sleep awhile.”

“No!”

“Yes, Mr. George!” she replied, firmly. “Don’t worry. You’re in good hands.”

“I don’t want to sleep any more. They have control over you when you’re asleep, don’t you see?”

“You’re safe here.”

He knew better. He knew he wasn’t safe *anywhere*, not now. Not while he still had a hand. It was not under his control any longer, if indeed it had ever been. Perhaps it was just an illusion of servitude it had created these forty-odd years, a performance to lull him into a false sense of autocracy. All this he wanted to say, but none of it would fit into his mouth. Instead he just said: “No more sleep.”

But the nurse had procedures. The ward was already too full of patients, and with more coming in every hour (terrible scenes at the YMCA she’d just heard; dozens of causalities, mass suicide attempted), all she could do was sedate the distressed and get on with the business of the day. “Just a mild sedative,” she said again, and the next moment she had a needle in her hand, spitting slumber.

“Just listen a moment,” he said, trying to initiate a reasoning process with her; but she wasn’t available for debate.

“Now don’t be such a baby,” she chided, as tears started.

“You don’t understand,” he explained, as she prodded up the vein at the crook of his arm.

“You can tell Dr. Jeudwine everything when he comes to see you.” The needle was in his arm, the plunger was plunging.

“No!” he said, and pulled away. The nurse hadn’t expected such violence. The patient was up and out of bed before she could complete the plunge, the hypo still dangling from his arm.

“Mr. George,” she said sternly. “Will you *please* get back into bed!”

Charlie pointed at her with his stump.

“Don’t come near me,” he said.

She tried to shame him. “All the other patients are behaving well,” she said, “why can’t you?” Charlie shook his head. The hypo, having worked its way out of his vein, fell to the floor, still three-quarters full. “I will *not* tell you again.”

“Damn right you won’t,” said Charlie.

He bolted away down the ward, his escape egged on by patients to the right and left of him. "Go, boy, go," somebody yelled. The nurse gave belated chase but at the door an instant accomplice intervened, literally throwing himself in her way. Charlie was out of sight and lost in the corridors before she was up and after him again.

It was an easy place to lose yourself in, he soon realized. The hospital had been built in the late nineteenth century, then added to as funds and donations allowed: a wing in 1911, another after the First World War, more wards in the fifties, and the Chaney Memorial Wing in 1973. The place was a labyrinth. They'd take an age to find him.

The problem was, he didn't feel so good. The stump of his left arm had begun to ache as his painkillers wore off, and he had the distinct impression that it was bleeding under the bandages. In addition, the quarter hypo of sedative had slowed his system down. He felt slightly stupid, and he was certain that his condition must show on his face. But he was not going to allow himself to be coaxed back into that bed, back into sleep, until he'd sat down in a quiet place somewhere and thought the whole thing through.

He found refuge in a tiny room off one of the corridors. Lined with filing cabinets and piles of reports, it smelled slightly damp. He'd found his way into the Memorial Wing, though he didn't know it. The seven-story monolith had been built with a bequest from millionaire Frank Chaney, and the tycoon's own building firm had done the construction job, as the old man's will required. They had used substandard materials and a defunct drainage system, which was why Chaney had died a millionaire, and the wing was crumbling from the basement up. Sliding himself into a clammy niche between two of the cabinets, well out of sight should somebody chance to come in, Charlie crouched on the floor and interrogated his right hand.

"Well?" he demanded in a reasonable tone. "Explain yourself."

It played dumb.

"No use," he said. "I'm on to you."

Still, it just sat there at the end of his arm, innocent as a babe.

"You tried to kill me..." he accused it.

Now the hand opened a little, without his instruction, and gave him the once-over.

"You could try it again, couldn't you?"

Ominously, it began to flex its fingers, like a pianist preparing for a particularly difficult solo. *Yes*, it said, *I could; any old time*.

"In fact, there's very little I can do to stop you, is there?" Charlie said. "Sooner or later you'll catch me unawares. Can't have somebody watching over me for the rest of my life. So where does that leave me, I ask myself? As good as dead, wouldn't you say?"

The hand closed down a little, the puffy flesh of its palm crinkling into grooves of pleasure. *Yes*, it was saying, *you're done for, poor fool, and there's not a thing you can do*.

"You killed Ellen."

*I did*, the hand smiled.

"You severed my other hand, so it could escape. Am I right?"

*You are*, said the hand.

"I saw it, you know," Charlie said. "I saw it running off. And now you want to do the same thing, am I correct? You want to be up and away."

*Correct*.

"You're not going to give me any peace, are you, till you've got your freedom?"

*Right again*.

“So,” said Charlie, “I think we understand each other, and I’m willing to do a deal with you.”

The hand came closer to his face, crawling up his pajama shirt, conspiratorial.

“I’ll release you,” he said.

It was on his neck now, its grip not tight, but cozy enough to make him nervous.

“I’ll find a way, I promise. A guillotine, a scalpel, I don’t know what.”

It was rubbing itself on him like a cat now, stroking him. “But you have to do it *my* way, in *my* time. Because if you kill me you’ll have no chance of survival, will you? They’ll just bury you with me, the way they buried Dad’s hands.”

The hand stopped stroking and climbed up the side of the filing cabinet.

“Do we have a deal?” said Charlie.

But the hand was ignoring him. It had suddenly lost all interest in bargain making. If it had possessed a nose, it would have been sniffing the air. In the space of the last few moments things changed—the deal was off.

Charlie got up clumsily, and went to the window. The glass was dirty on the inside and caked with several years of bird droppings on the outside, but he could just see the garden through it. It had been laid out in accordance with the terms of the millionaire’s bequest: a formal garden that would stand as glorious a monument to his good tastes as the building was to his pragmatism. But since the building had started to deteriorate, the garden had been left to its own devices. Its few trees were either dead or bowed under the weight of unpruned branches; the borders were rife with weeds; the benches on their backs with their square legs in the air. Only the lawn was kept mowed, a small concession to care. Somebody, a doctor taking a moment out for a quiet smoke, was wandering among the strangled walks. Otherwise the garden was empty.

But Charlie’s hand was up at the glass, scrabbling at it, raking at it with his nails, vainly trying to get to the outside world. There was something out there besides chaos, apparently.

“You want to go out,” said Charlie.

The hand flattened itself against the window and began to bang its palm rhythmically against the glass, a drummer for an unseen army. He pulled it away from the window, not knowing what to do. If he denied its demands, it could hurt him. If he acquiesced to it and tried to get out into the garden, what might he find? On the other hand, what choice did he have?

“All right,” he said, “we’re going.”

The corridor outside was bustling with panicky activity and there was scarcely a glance in his direction, despite the fact that he was only wearing his regulation pajamas and was barefoot. Bells were ringing, loudspeakers summoning this doctor or that, grieving people being shunted between mortuary and toilet. There was talk of the terrible sights in casualty—boys with no hands, dozens of them. Charlie moved too fast through the throng to catch a coherent sentence. It was best to look intent, he thought, to look as though he had a purpose and a destination. It took him a while to locate the exit into the garden, and he knew his hand was getting impatient. It was flexing and unflexing at his side, urging him on. Then a sign—*To the Chaney Trust Memorial Garden*—and he turned a corner into a backwater corridor, devoid of urgent traffic, with a door at the far end that led to the open air.

It was very still outside. Not a bird in the air or on the grass, not a bee whining among the flowerbeds. Even the doctor had gone, back to his surgeries presumably.

Charlie’s hand was in ecstasy now. It was sweating so much it dripped, and all the blood left it so that it had paled to white. It didn’t seem to belong to him anymore. It was another

being to which he, by some unfortunate quirk of anatomy, was attached. He would be delighted to be rid of it.

The grass was dew-damp underfoot, and here, in the shadow of the seven-story block, it was cold. It was still only six-thirty. Maybe the birds were still asleep, the bees still sluggish in their hives. Maybe there was nothing in this garden to be afraid of; only rot-headed roses and early worms turning somersaults in the dew. Maybe the hand was wrong and there was just morning out here.

As he wandered farther down the garden, he noticed the footprints of the doctor, darker on the silver-green lawn. Just as he arrived at the tree, and the grass turned red, he realized that the prints led only one way.

Boswell, in a willing coma, felt nothing, and was glad of it. His mind dimly recognized the possibility of waking, but the thought was so vague it was easy to reject. Once in a while a sliver of the real world (of pain, of power) would skitter behind his lids, alight for a moment, then flutter away. Boswell wanted none of it. He didn't want consciousness, ever again. He had a feeling about what it would be to wake, about what was waiting for him out there, kicking its heels.

Charlie looked up into the branches. The tree had borne two amazing kinds of fruit.

One was a human being; the surgeon with the cigarette. He was dead, his neck lodged in a cleft where two branches met. He had no hands. His arms ended in round wounds that still drained heavy clots of brilliant color down on to the grass. Above his head the tree swarmed with that other fruit, more unnatural still. The hands were everywhere it seemed, hundreds of them, chattering away like a manual parliament as they debated their tactics. All shades and shapes, scampering up and down the swaying branches.

Seeing them gathered like this the metaphors collapsed. They were what they were: human hands. That was the horror.

Charlie wanted to run, but his right hand was having none of it. These were its disciples, gathered here in such abundance, and they awaited its parables and its prophecies. Charlie looked at the dead doctor and then at the murdering hands, and thought of Ellen, *his* Ellen, killed though no fault of his own, and already cold. They'd pay for that crime—all of them. As long as the rest of his body did him service, he'd make them pay. It was cowardice, trying to bargain with this cancer at his wrist; he saw that now. It and its like were a pestilence. They had no place living.

The army had seen him, word of his presence passing through the ranks like wildfire. They were surging down the trunk, some dropping like ripened apples from the lower branches, eager to embrace the Messiah. In a few moments they would be swarming over him and all advantage would be lost. It was now or never. He turned away from the tree before his right hand could seize a branch and looked up at the Chaney Memorial Wing, seeking inspiration. The tower loomed over the garden, windows blinded by the sky, doors closed. There was no solace there.

Behind him he heard the whisper of the grass as it was trodden by countless fingers. They were already on his heels, all enthusiasm as they came following their leader.

Of course they would come, he realized, wherever he led, they would come. Perhaps their blind adoration of his remaining hand was an exploitable weakness. He scanned the building a second time and his desperate gaze found the fire escape; it zigzagged up the side of

the building to the roof. He made a dash for it, surprising himself with his turn of speed. There was no time to look behind him to see if they were following, he had to trust their devotion. Within a few paces his furious hand was at his neck, threatening to take out his throat, but he sprinted on, indifferent to its cleaving. He reached the bottom of the fire escape and, lithe with adrenaline, took the metal steps two and three at a time. His balance was not so good without a hand to hold the safety railing, but so what if he was bruised? It was only his body.

At the third landing he risked a glance down through the grille of the stairs. A crop of fresh flowers was carpeting the ground at the bottom of the fire escape and was spreading up the stairs toward him. They were coming in their hungry hundreds, all nails and hatred. Let them come, he thought; let the bastards come. I began this and I can finish it.

At the windows of the Chaney Memorial Wing a host of faces had appeared. Panicking, disbelieving voices drifted from the lower floors. It was too late now to tell them his life story. They would have to piece that together for themselves. And what a fine jigsaw it would make! Maybe, in their attempts to understand what had happened this morning, they would turn up some plausible solution, an explanation for this uprising that he had not found; but he doubted it.

Fourth story now, and stepping on to the fifth. His right hand was digging at his neck. Maybe he was bleeding. But then perhaps it was rain, warm rain, that splashed onto his chest and down his legs. Two stories to go, then the roof. There was a hum in the metalwork beneath him, the noise of their myriad feet as they clambered up toward him. He had counted on their adoration, and he'd been right to do so. The roof was now just a dozen steps away, and he risked a second look down past his body (it wasn't rain on him) to see the fire escape solid with hands, like aphids clustered on the stalk of a flower. No, that was metaphor again. An end to that.

The wind whipped across the heights, and it was fresh, but Charlie had no time to appreciate its promise. He climbed over the two-foot parapet and onto the gravel-lined roof. Corpses of pigeons lay in puddles, cracks snaked across the concrete, a bucket marked "Soiled Dressings" lay on its side, its contents green. He started across this wilderness as the first of the army fingered their way over the parapet.

The pain in his throat was getting through to his racing brain now, as his treacherous fingers wormed at his windpipe. He had little energy left after the race up the fire escape, and crossing the roof to the opposite side (let it be a straight fall, onto concrete) was difficult. He stumbled once, and again. All the strength had gone from his legs and nonsense filled his head in place of coherent thought. A koan, a Buddhist riddle he'd seen on the cover of a book once, was itching in his memory.

*"What is the sound...?"* it began, but he couldn't complete the phrase, try as he might.

*"What is the sound...?"*

Forget the riddles, he ordered himself, pressing his trembling legs to make another step, and then another. He almost fell against the parapet at the opposite side of the roof and stared down. It *was* a straight fall. A parking lot lay below, at the front of the building. It was deserted. He leaned over further and drops of his blood fell from his lacerated neck, diminishing quickly, down, down, to wet the ground. I'm coming, he said to gravity, and to Ellen, and thought how good it would be to die and never worry again if his gums bled when he brushed his teeth, or his waistline swelled, or some beauty passed him on the street whose lips he wanted to kiss, and never would. And suddenly, the army was up on him, swarming up his legs in a fever of victory.

You can come, he said as they obscured his body from head to foot, witless in their enthusiasm, you can come wherever I go.

“*What is the sound...?*” The phrase was on the tip of his tongue.

Oh yes, now it came to him. “*What is the sound of one hand clapping?*” It was so satisfying, to remember something you were trying so hard to dig up out of your subconscious, like finding some trinket you thought you’d lost forever. The thrill of remembering sweetened his last moments. He pitched himself into empty space, falling over and over until there was a sudden end to dental hygiene and the beauty of young women. They came in a rain after him, breaking on the concrete around his body, wave upon wave of them, throwing themselves to their deaths in pursuit of their Messiah.

To the patients and nurses crammed at the windows it was a scene from a world of wonders—a rain of frogs would have been commonplace beside it. It inspired more awe than terror. It was fabulous. To soon, it stopped, and after a minute or so a few brave souls ventured out among the litter to see what could be seen. There was a great deal, and yet nothing. It was a rare spectacle, of course—horrible, unforgettable. But there was no significance to be discovered in it; merely the paraphernalia of a minor apocalypse. Nothing to be done but to clear it up, their own hands reluctantly complaint as the corpses were catalogued and boxed for further examination. A few of those involved in the operation found a private moment in which to pray: for explanations, or at least for dreamless sleep. Even the smattering of the agnostics on the staff were surprised to discover how easy it was to put palm to palm.

In his private room in intensive care Boswell came to. He reached for the bell beside his bed and pressed it, but nobody answered. Somebody was in the room with him, hiding behind the screen in the corner. He had heard the shuffling of the intruder’s feet.

He pressed the bell again, but there were bells ringing everywhere in the building, and nobody seemed to be answering any of them. Using the cabinet beside him for leverage he hauled himself to the edge of his bed to get a better view of this joker.

“Come out,” he murmured through dry lips. But the bastard was biding his time. “Come on...I knew you’re there.”

He pulled himself a little farther, and somehow all at once he realized that his center of balance had radically altered, that he had no legs, that he was going to fall out of bed. He flung out his arms to save his head from striking the floor and succeeded in so doing. The breath had been knocked out of him however. Dizzy, he lay when he’d fallen, trying to orient himself. What had happened? Where were his legs, in the name of Jah, *where were his legs?*

His bloodshot eyes scanned the room, and came to rest on the naked feet which were now a yard from his nose. A tag around the ankle marked them for the furnace. He looked up and they were *his* legs, standing there severed between groin and knee, but still alive and kicking. For a moment he thought they intended to do him harm, but no. Having made their presence known to him they left him where he lay, content to be free.

And did his eyes envy their liberty, he wondered, and was his tongue eager to be out of his mouth and away, and was every part of him, in its subtle way, preparing to forsake him? He was an alliance only held together by the most tenuous of truces. Now, with the precedent set, how long before the next uprising? Minutes? Years?

He waited, heart in mouth, for the fall of Empire.