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Yes, I love to tend the Meat Box.

It is like a little grinning city, this one is, with dials and buttons set in all its towers and electricity moving up and down its streets. Sometimes I imagine that it is a real city, like the ones Out Down, on Earth, and I pretend that I'm looking on it and all the people look up at my big face and are afraid. At first. Then they are real happy because they know that I won't hurt them.

Real and true.

My job is just to make sure the meat comes out all right, and to make sure there's enough K-Tol running from the vat to the nutrient bath. But I really do more than that; more than smooth a flank and make sure it doesn't get hooked on a platen-roller, more than fill the feed tray with K-Tol when the dial goes down near 2 or 3, more than fold the marbled sheets of meat when they come churning red-brown from the Meat Box.

The whole hospital depends on me. This is my job and the whole hospital knows I do it. Chuckie from H-Ward told me this once: he said, "Neil, you sure do make the meat good."

I do. I make it the best it *can* be made.

I say prayers over the Meat Box, when Dick isn't around to razz me about it, and that's what makes it so good. The meat from a Meat Box doesn't taste at all like killed meat, because the K-Tol solution swishes up near the starter-cells and makes it taste real chem. But I say over it like the Galilean Rabbi, I say, "*Baruch atah adoni, elohanu melach ha'olam,*" which is old talk of the Jews that means *Blessed art thou, O Lord Our God, King of the Universe*. I learned it from an article called *Judaism and the Jewish People* in the encyclopedia at Yorb-9. Volume J.

You could look it up there yourself, but I know I got it right.

The tat on my arm says YORBITON-5 HOSPITAL WARD H, which is what almost everything here says or has stamped on it. The smocks, the 'forms, the bowls, the crap-paper rollers. When I went to see Dr. Pash up on B-Ward for a skin infection, I had to wait in the commute-way for about twenty minutes and I got to see the skips coming in and unloading more patients. On the sides of the skips it says

YORBITON-5 HOSPITAL FOR THE MENTALLY AFFECTED, right below the fuel tanks.

I don't know what kind of skip they brought me in.

But the tat on my arm is special because it says YORBITON-5 HOSPITAL, but it also says WARD-H. And when I take the first letter from each word (and you don't count the 5 because it's not a letter, but a number) it spells Y H W H, which is the unpronounceable word, which is the holiest of holies, which is my father's name.

When I figured this out, I told Chuckie from H-Ward about it, and he scrunched up his face and looked at his own tat. He said, "Yahweh?" Then he grinned and yelled right out, "Yahoo! Yahoo!"

Yorb-9 is one of the thirteen orbital colonies that link up in a circle to make the Lesser Catena, and the Greater Catena links up twenty-nine and makes a loop around that. It's like two big strings of hollow sausages, one inside the other, orbiting the sun.

I would have been a New Apostles priest on Yorb-9—almost was—except that I took a skip and headed for the Out Down, and the Church thought I was crazy to want to go in the sixteenth year of the war Out Down, so they got on a comm and waved the Military Technologists—the Empties—who grounded me before I even made the outside loop. I had dreams.

Go forth unto the wastelands and tarry not, for you are of both Me and the Flesh. Bring forth a dove in the Time of the Raven and you shall be named as the Blessed One, for my Kingdom is Mighty and soon at hand.

I was afraid.

When the Empties grounded me I was afraid; not for me, but afraid I'd never get to Earth, afraid for you and you and you, afraid for all those little grinning cities—those that might still be standing—for they are filled with hedonists and barbs and nobody's told them that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

I was afraid so I took a tangle with the Empties and they broke my arm real quick.

I was delivered here at Yorb-5. I sat in the detention hold, my right arm in a healer and my eyes still burning from the sleep they sprayed on me in the tangle. Chuckie was a trustee then, just made, and he came in and handed me some forms to sign.

I signed with my left.

"Real and true," said Chuckie, "I'd give my right arm to be am-

bidextrous," and I looked up, and there was the sloppiest of Chuckie-grins you could ever imagine; all crooked teeth spread out under that big pelican nose.

Things would be all right, and I knew it right then.

And sometimes at night now, when I'm bunked and thinking about the war Out Down, I still see that Chuckie-grin like stained glass with the stars coming through it, and I smash my head into my pillow so that I don't scream out his name and wake the ward.

I signed and played with the pen and looked around the room, but there was nothing to look at except for Chuckie. He was a real and true roly-poly, you don't see many on the Yorbs; there hasn't been much import for sixteen years, and you don't get pudged on Meat Box meat.

"What do you like to do, Neil?" said Chuckie.

"I have to go Out Down," I said.

Chuckie let out a long whistle and nodded.

"Earth," I said again.

"Yeah," said Chuckie.

We looked around some more and then he took me to H-Ward and signed me a bunk and some toothstrippers and some chocolate. He said that not everybody got chocolate, but that sometimes it made the sleep wear off quicker.

"Why do you want to go Out Down?" he said when I was in the headroom, scrubbing at my eyes with my left hand. He sat on the crapper like it was a chair, and watched me.

I didn't say about the dreams. "Now when the Queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to test him with hard questions."

"Real and true," said Chuckie, nodding. I looked at him, and he at me, and we were real serious for a second both, sizing each other up, and then we broke out—broke out laughing with soap all over my face and him on the crapper, and there was something real and true between us and we didn't even have to ask what it was.

I met some of the other guys on H-Ward, and Chuckie met me to Old Crane, who Chuckie said was a *special* friend. Old Crane could have been over a hundred years, and he'd been at Yorb-5 longer than anybody remembered.

He scared me.

Old Crane seemed to look right through you—not like you weren't there, he didn't pretend that—but like you were standing in the way

of something, something real max that was happening just behind your back, but if you turned to see what Old Crane saw, you knew you'd be dead or sorry.

"Neil wants to go Out Down," Chuckie said to Old Crane.

Old Crane studied me like all my dreams were in his notebook and that lying to him would only make me look like a real stoop.

"Which Catena?" said Old Crane.

I waited a minute. I didn't know if I was supposed to answer right away or not. I looked over to Chuckie.

"Neil's from the Lesser. Nine. Right, Neil?"

"Nine." I nodded a whole bunch of times.

"Neil was going to be a priest on Nine. He borrowed a skip and got grounded, so now he's here. Right, Neil?"

I noticed that Chuckie said *borrowed*, not *stole*. He understood. "Now I'm here," I said.

"Why?" said Old Crane, and I knew he meant the same thing that Chuckie had asked me, that the Empties had asked me, that I had asked myself—but I also knew I couldn't say the thing about Solomon.

"The Kingdom of God is at hand," I said. "I want to tell them that, that it's at hand." It didn't sound right.

"You gonna stop the war?" said Old Crane.

"I—"

"God gonna stop the war?"

"I just want to tell them—"

"Nobody goes Out Down," said Old Crane.

I swallowed real hard. "Traders go sometimes." Chuckie shifted around and looked away. I said the wrong thing.

"You a trader?"

"No." I looked at my feet.

"Nobody goes Out Down," said Old Crane. "Nobody."

At mess the first night we got fed meat.

It tasted so bad. Meat Box meat always tastes chem and is real mealy and grainy, but this was worse. Probably old Boxes; the starter-cells have to be real bovy, but if you don't change them every thousand cycles or so, you can taste it.

"Mind?" said Chuckie, looking at my meat. I nodded and he forked at it, over to his own tray. He gobbled on it. "New Apostles eat meat. Real and true?"

"I just don't like it is all."

"Yeah. Tastes pretty bad." Chuckie crosshatched his pud and gar with his fork, but left it sitting all yellow in his tray. He lit up a ciggy. "Smoke? Greater Twenty-one."

"Uh-uh."

"What's wrong with the meat," said Chuckie, a big cloud of blue ciggy smoke drifting out over the table, "is that it has no soul. It's born without a soul. Do you think?"

I told him I'd never really thought about it.

"Real and true. No soul. Cow's got a soul. You think?"

"Sure," I said.

"So there. No soul in a Meat Box. I'm a trustee, Neil."

"You told me that."

"And, Neil, I could get you a job at the Meat Box."

"I don't think I'd like that."

"You're a priest, Neil. Give the meat some soul. You know, you could do that. Whatever you do to your congregation, you know, whatever gives them their souls, you could do that to the meat."

"I'm not a priest," I told Chuckie. I saw Old Crane sitting at a table back there and across the aisle, watching us.

"If you're not a priest, Neil, what are you?" Chuckie looked at me like the question made sense. "Now I'm a mechanic, but just because I don't get to mechanic *here* doesn't change that I'm still a mechanic. I can fix anything."

"I guess . . ."

"I could swing you that job. It's not very max if you do like the other tenders do. But now, if you could give it . . . *soul* . . ." Chuckie leaned back and stared off into space—not real space; there isn't a clear-panel or egress-hatch below E-Ward—but into the drifting layers of blue smoke.

Old Crane kept watching us.

"Could we go now?" I said.

"Soul, Neil." Chuckie winked at me.

The next day I started working at the Meat Box.

The Meat Room doesn't smell bad, like some of the wards or the mess; it just smells like K-Tol. Everything on J-Ward smells like K-Tol. The K-Tol fills from the vat and swims around the starter-cells. The starter-cells are real bovy protein, from the Out Down, so I

have to add a lump of fat every cycle so that the meat comes out marbled.

I marble the meat and hang it up and add the K-Tol if it gets too low and say the prayers.

Nobody else says the prayers. I do.

When Dick came around and told me to go off shift early, I thought maybe I did something wrong. Dick is real max, but he wouldn't look right at me, just told me to wash and go back to my ward.

I got an Empty to tube me to H-Ward, but Chuckie wasn't there. Two orderlies were waiting for me in the day room.

"I went to see Dr. Pash," I said, "about a skin infection. This afternoon; but I didn't do anything wrong."

One orderly put his hand around my arm, not squeezing, but I knew he could. I followed them without a tangle.

We took a tube up to C-Ward. The tube runs the length of the Yorb, a little capsule riding on hot air pumped from the machines. All the machines in a Yorb vent through the tube, even the Meat Box. At C-Ward we took a roller, and I noticed that all along the commute-way there were no clear-panels or egress-hatches. Just like the patient wards, which was strange, because all the wards above E-Ward are supposed to have them.

The room they took me to was pretty nice; it had softies on the floor and some real plants hanging under UV-lights. There was a guy sitting at a big L-bent desk. He didn't have a regular 'form, just a jumper and a head-scarf, like they wear on 12 and 13.

"Welcome. I'm Dr. Dennis." He smiled and showed me lots of nice teeth. "You've been assigned to me for therapy. Sit down." He nodded at the orderlies, and they left. I looked around the room.

"What happened to Dr. Sheldon?" I said.

"Dr. Sheldon thought that perhaps you and I could have a talk." Dr. Dennis tapped some papers on his desk. "He didn't feel as though you and he were making much progress."

"Who's behind the mirror?"

Dr. Dennis glanced over his shoulder at the big wall mirror, then turned back and smiled. "You're not new to therapy then. No one's behind the mirror today, Neil. Sometimes we use this room for observation. Ciggy?"

"Why didn't Dr. Sheldon tell me?"

"Neil, let's get to know each other a bit better, shall we? These re-

ports tell me something of you, but a man is more than a bundle of reports, do you think?"

If anyone else had said it, I would think. But his voice was so warm I shuddered; warm like a tube vent, not real and true.

"It says here you were a . . . No, I'm sorry, that you were *studying* for the priesthood on Yorbiton-9, that you didn't seem to be having any particular problems there, you got along well, and then, inexplicably, you stole a skip to—"

"Thou shalt not steal," I said. "I borrowed the skip."

"Borrowed, yes. I'm sorry. You *borrowed* this skip and were intercepted near the Greater Catena. You told the Military Technologists you were going to Earth."

I never heard anyone but an Empty call them *Military Technologists*. I looked over at the mirror again.

"I want to go Out Down. Have to, I mean."

"Yes, I see that here. Neil, do you think you would be able to pilot a skip to Earth?"

I moved around in my chair. "Suppose."

"Entering a gravity well, computing complex trajectories for rotating objects—this is all a great deal different than skipping about in free space. It requires technical training which my notes don't indicate you've received."

"Oh."

"The Military Technologists saved your life, Neil. Is it possible that you didn't *want* to make it Out Down?"

"I wanted to."

"Were you happy, Neil? In the priesthood, I mean?"

"I was happy," I said. "I was okay."

"And you had dreams. Revelations?"

"Dreams is okay."

"Dreams then. God told you to st . . . *borrow* a skip and go to Earth. Is that right?"

It sounded so stoop. "I guess."

"Why would God want you to go Out Down, Neil?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Why would He want me to stay here?" I said. My stop was coming un. "In mysterious ways doth He move, yet the left hand doth question the right." I was getting confused; that wasn't correct.

"Indeed." Dr. Dennis made a note on the report. "Neil, I'd like to

work with these dreams. I'd like you to dream for me. Would that be okay?"

"Max," I said.

Dr. Dennis chuckled and got up to get the orderlies. I stood up and glanced over at my report. He'd written *SUICIDAL* on about the third line. The orderlies came in with a cart.

They lifted me up on the cart and Dr. Dennis gave me a little spray of sleep, not enough to konk me, but I drowsed. We went rolling down the commute-way, into another room; the orderlies were rubbing my forehead and neck with plasty, and strapping my arms to the cart. They put needles into my forehead and neck, but the plasty wouldn't let me bleed. I saw wires connected to the needles, but they ran back behind me—too far, too far away.

Suicidal. But why. . . .

"Neil, can you hear me?" Then softly: "Am I hooked in? Can he hear me?" Some voices.

The room had a clear-panel on the wall to my right. I could see the Out Down, see . . . but it was April. Orion. You can't see Orion in April from the Lesser . . . but. . . .

A holo. I breathed quietly.

"Neil, I'm going to ask you a question and I want you to think about it for me. Can you do that?"

I didn't answer him.

"Neil, why do you *really* want to go Out Down?"

"Because . . ." and a shock hit me so hard that my head felt like it was ripped open, my neck twisted backward. I began to dream.

"Because . . ." *I was Out Down. I was standing in a city on Earth; tall towers all around me and the sky a surreal blue—no stars. People were running by me, knocking and shoving me, with sticks in their hands. They were chanting something, then yelling and screaming, and then—the sky blazed white!*

"Because . . ." *The city was in ruins. A hot rain began to fall and pattered on the bodies lying at my feet. Little particles of ash and soot floated in the air, falling driftly, and I couldn't breathe. Fire smoldered in the slag heaps of broken towers, and my skin felt tingly.*

"Because . . ." *Hordes of soldiers came flying over the hill, skipping over the bodies. They looked like giant insects in their radiation suits. They were pointing at me, calling . . .*

"Because . . ." *I cried to the soldiers for help. I said, "I am the Son, please do not forsake me!" but they didn't understand. They*

pointed with their weapons and shook their heads. I tried it in Click, in English, in Esperanto . . . they didn't know my name, they didn't remember!

"Because . . ." *They bound me to a charred, twisted tree, and the bindings cut into my hands. They retreated a few meters, then aimed their weapons. The sky was thick with swirling particles, clogging my eyes and nose. "My God," I screamed, "why have you for—"*

"Because . . ." *I was alone.*

"Because . . ." *I was alone.*

"Because . . ." *Beneath the grey sky, I was alone. Nothing moved about me. No surge of life, no trickle. I put my hands to my eyes and cried, "No!" but the answer was "Yes" and the Earth was dead.*

"No!"

"Because . . ."

"Shhh." Chuckie was in my bunk with me. I opened my eyes. The ward was dark, a single light in the headroom.

"Neil?"

In the dream I had been Out Down. It must have been . . . there were blue skies. No place on Yorh. I wanted to vomit.

"Neil?"

Chuckie was rubbing my stomach. I could feel that he didn't have a 'form on, his hairy belly up against my side. I was naked.

"Neil, are you okay? You're okay. They said you went out during therapy and that you were screaming stuff. They brought you in. I've been with you all night. Are you okay?"

"Yes," I whispered to Chuckie. My voice, even in a whisper, sounded so old, so withered and dried.

Chuckie began to rub my legs, twisting on his side to reach them. "Neil, I've been thinking about something. I think we could get Out Down."

"No," I said. *I put my hands to my eyes and cried, "No!" but the answer was "Yes" and the Earth was dead.*

"How come? You always said, and we could go together."

"Chuckie," I whispered.

"You could be a priest, and me a carpenter or engineer or something. You could be a real priest, Neil, I wouldn't tell anyone that you're not."

"Chuckie."

"It's a war, but there's got to be some safe. Isn't New York a safe? Did you hear that? You wouldn't have to be scared because we'd be together."

"Chuckie," I said, my voice so flat, so old, "Earth is dead."

"What, Neil?"

"I feel sick."

"But about Out Down?"

"I dreamed it."

Chuckie relaxed beside me. He rubbed his face against my arms and kissed me on the shoulder. I felt warm, real and true, lying there. I began to cry.

He let me cry with my face in his hair, his chin in the crook of my neck, me whimpering like a floppy-eared pupper, hoping that nobody else on the ward could hear me.

Beneath the grey sky, I was alone. Nothing moved about me.

I hugged him so tight.

"Are you okay?" he asked me afterward.

"I'm okay," I said.

The next day I was tending at the Meat Box and Chuckie came down to see me. I had seven sheets hanging in back of the Box, ready for the cryo. I had a cycle down to six days—lowest anybody's ever done—and everyone said my meat tasted best.

Chuckie glanced around the Meat Room.

"Dick gone?"

I nodded. Chuckie came over and stood by the Meat Box, ran his fingers over the metal edges, studied his tat. I kept my eyes fixed on the K-Tol dial.

"How do you feel after last night?" Chuckie said finally.

"About going Out Down?"

"Well, yeah." He didn't mean that. He meant about sexing with him.

"I feel better, Chuckie. I hurt a lot last night and you made me feel better." Chuckie looked up and grinned.

"Did you ever sex before?"

"No," I said. I wished he'd shut up about it now.

"I used to," said Chuckie. "Old Crane."

I wanted him to go away, and I wanted him to hold me. I wanted to be back on Yorb-9, reading from *The Book Of His Many Faces* or lighting a Sabbath candle. I wanted to be dreaming of a free-space

carnival, acrobats and zg-jugglers, not about the Out Down—I didn't want to think.

Beneath a grey sky, I was alone. Nothing moved about me . . .

"We could go, Neil. Old Crane's got a keycard."

"To open egress-hatches?"

"And call a tube and flight a skip. He's been here a long time. Says he could have done it himself a million times, except. . . ."

"Except what?"

"If you get grounded . . . well, but they wouldn't do much to you, Neil, since you just came and they figure you're sick anyhow. They'd probably just take your job away and put you on T-Ward. Need a new tat." He grinned.

"You? What would they do to you, you think?"

Chuckie looked up, his eyelashes blinking and he bit his lip. "I'd get hatched. I'm a trustee so I'd get hatched. That's why Old Crane's never done it, he doesn't want to chance getting hatched."

I thought of Chuckie's old roly-poly body going *wooshoot!* out a hatch, one tenth of a second of horror in his eyes before they squirted out of the sockets like foam-jelly and his lungs collapsed, his body a drifting prune with a million crystals all over it.

"Just for trying to get out they'd hatch you?"

"We'd have to steal a skip," he said.

"Borrow. It's not so bad."

"And maybe kill someone."

I hesitated. "Thou shalt not kill." I shook my head. "Who?"

"Well, I mean if someone got in our way, we'd have to do *something*. Like an Empty or someone."

"I couldn't do that, Chuckie." I checked the K-Tol dial.

"I would take care of it, Neil. It's just, do you want to go? With me?"

"No."

"How come?" Chuckie was pleading.

"I can't let someone get killed," I said.

He wiped his forehead; the Meat Room gets pretty hot in mid-cycle. "We wouldn't have to. I just thought about it and we wouldn't. We could spray sleep at them maybe."

"Where will you get sleep?"

"I don't know. I can. Just, *do you want to go with me?*"

I looked at the man I had sexed with. He had listened to me, even

when I didn't know what I was saying. He took care of me when I hurt so bad from the dreams. He let me cry in his hair.

"I would go," I said. "If you go."

"Okay." Chuckie breathed a big sigh. I began to turn away, but he reached over the Meat Box and held my chin, gently.

"Yahoo," he said softly. "Yahoo, yahoo."

"I dreamed that Earth was dead. That the war was over."

Dr. Dennis stood, studying a holo-panel, his face turned away from me. The panel hadn't been there before. Still, the Out Down, Orion. April.

"And how did that make you feel, Earth dead?"

"What kind of question is that?" I said.

"A direct question, a simple question. How did you *feel*?"

I thought about it. "Awful, I guess. Dreggy."

"Nothing else?"

"How would *you* feel?" I said. Hold the stop, I thought.

He whirled around and stared at me. "Goddamnit, Neill I'm not asking how *I'd* feel. Don't ask me how *I'd* feel." He sat down and fiddled with some papers on his desk. "Okay?"

"Okay."

He looked so haggard. Whatever was keeping him up nights was all right with me. I didn't mind.

"Now, in the dream, Neil, you saw soldiers."

"Yeah."

"In radiation suits, you said. What color were the suits?"

"White. Kind of."

"And they spoke to you?"

"Maybe. I didn't understand. They had helmets."

"What kind of helmets?"

"Big ones."

"And they said?"

"I didn't understand."

"What did it sound like?"

"I don't know."

"Which city were you in?"

"I don't know."

"Tokyo? New York?"

"Could have been."

"Which?"

"Either."

"And there was nothing around you?"

"There was something."

"What?"

"Ruins."

"Of what?"

"Of the city."

"Which city?"

"I don't know."

"And the Earth was dead?"

"The Earth was dead."

"Nothing alive?"

"Nothing alive."

"How did you know?"

"I just knew."

"How far did you walk?"

"I didn't walk."

"Then *how* can you tell?"

"I could tell."

"Why did you think there was nothing alive?"

"Why did you write *suicidal* on my report?"

"Because we—" He stopped, looked confused, then glared at me. There was a bump from behind the mirror. The sound hung there in the air between us.

"Because we what?"

"Neil, I—"

"Why are you doing this to me? All these questions about the dream? It was a dream, a *dream!*" I took a deep breath, held my stop. "Or was it?"

When they talk about seconds that last all eternity, this is what they mean: I stared at Dr. Dennis and he stared at me, and we were suspended there, motionless, in time and space, staring.

Without taking his eyes from me, he stabbed a button on his comm.

The orderlies came running in and he told them, "Neil will be staying on C-Ward tonight."

I didn't scream when he put his hand over my mouth. I knew it was Chuckie's hand.

The little cell they put me in on C-Ward didn't even have a light

in the headroom, but I could smell him, feel him, leaning over me in my bunk. He put his mouth so close to my ear that I could feel his tongue, hear his teeth touch as he whispered, "Quiet. In the commute."

I nodded.

As I rose from my bunk and followed him into the commute-way I noticed that he was naked, a sloppy fat silhouette against the dim lights. As soon as I stepped out he pulled me to the wall.

"Take off your clothes," he whispered.

"Why?"

"They maybe can sensor them."

I was only wearing tie-bottoms, so I slipped the string and left them at the doorstep.

"Maybe auds in your room," said Chuckie. "What did you do, Neil?"

"How did you find me?"

"Old Crane's got ears all over. What have they got you here for?"

"Dreaming," I said. Chuckie shrugged.

"Don't step on a roller. Start one up and they'll track it. You got to walk right along the edge here, hug the wall. Watch me."

Chuckie began to move down the commute-way, belly to the wall. He carefully avoided stepping onto the wide row of rollers, which were now silent and still, waiting only for the pressure of a footstep to start moving again. He slid real well, considering his size, and I watched until I realized he was about six meters down and not looking back.

I caught up to him by the tube.

"Chuckie, we have to talk."

"Not here."

"Here."

"About what? You said you wanted to go." He reached between his legs and pulled a keycard from between his butt-cheeks. "I got it here, Neil."

"I know, but—"

"All we've got to do is tube up to A-Ward, flight a skip and hatch it. We're going Out Down."

"Chuckie, I dreamed Earth was dead. Real and true. I mean *everything* gone."

"Yeah, but, Neil—"

"But they're really interested. There's something about the dream

that they keep asking questions. Chuckie, I'm up on C-Ward! They've got me on C-Ward! They watch me through mirrors, wrote suicidal on my report! If they kill me the records'll show that—"

"Don't get so excited." He looked around the commute. "So?"

"Chuckie, think on this thing. What if Earth is dead?"

"Neil, I saw a news—"

"They can *fake the goddamned news!*" Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. Never mind. "Chuckie, what if Earth's been dead for sixteen years? What if the war *ended* already? How would we know?"

"Traders go," said Chuckie.

"Govy traders. It would look real and true. Why did they get jumpish when I wanted to go? Why not just let me go?"

Chuckie looked kind of worried, hugging to the metal wall, his giant butt hanging right out over the rollers.

"Okay, Neil. Maybe. *Maybe*. But why wouldn't they tell us? Why keep it all mummied?"

I stared out into the commute-way.

I'd spent the whole night figuring out *how*. It's like lying in a dark room, but still you know where everything is. Or you *think* you know. And after a million times of sleeping in that room and waking up and finding everything where you thought it was, you start to believe it's all there—real and true—even in the dark.

But one night it could change.

The Yorbiton orbit isn't synched at all with the Out Down. Sometimes it looks close enough to spit, other times like a little bright star, and getting waves back and forth is expensive and sometimes impossible. There's never been such a thing as a private comm; you used to be able to patch through the govy's system when these circles were first settled, but even that ended sixteen years ago. Most traders went out of business with the Out Down War; the govy took on a few.

We get *told* about the Out Down, but who do you know that's ever *heard*?

That's a max reason why my dream bothered them so much. I was waking up and noticing that the bunk had been moved.

But Chuckie was right. I never figured *why*.

"I don't know," I said.

"I do," said Chuckie. "The govy's been nose-clean for sixteen years, Neil. It wouldn't take much to get the Yorbs involved in the

war Out Down. Govy lets a screw-head preacher go Out Down to yap up his God and Salvation and Kingdom-at-Hand and next you know they say the Yorbs are interfering or taking up sides or sending these no-wits to spy on this flag or that. The Yorbs are sitting scared and just out of sight and damn if we need a screw-head Out Down to bring the attention back here! They find something new to laze at, you think that would be max?"

I stared at Chuckie in the silence.

A screw-head preacher. He called me that.

There in the commute-way.

"I'm sorry, Neil." He reached for me, but I pulled away. He looked so scared, turning his head every minute looking down the commute. "Look, it's just that of all the times for you to start talking this stuff, it had to be now? I've got a *keycard*. I could get *hatched* if an Empty comes rolling down this commute. We can talk about this all later, okay?"

A screw-head preacher. He called me that. There in the commute-way.

I guess he was right.

"Okay," I said.

Chuckie and me edged a few meters to the tube. He slipped the keycard into the call-slot and we waited there, hanging on the wall.

"Can't track the tube?"

"I don't think," said Chuckie. "I used to build them."

The tube arrived and the door opened. We clambered and strapped in. Chuckie carded for A-Ward.

We slowed and unstrapped. The display said A-WARD, and the door opened.

I didn't even have to think. You wonder sometimes how much the genies are right, how much a man is nothing but an instinctive killing machine, and all these thoughts and feelings are just to keep the mind busy when it's got nothing to kill.

When I saw Dr. Dennis, I jumped him.

He was standing in front of the tube door, looking a little preoccupied, obviously waiting for the tube to arrive. Chuckie just froze when he saw him. So did Dr. Dennis.

I leapt at his throat.

I put my hands to my eyes and cried, "No!" but the answer was "Yes" and the Earth was dead.

I jammed my hand into his mouth, I felt teeth give. He bit down

hard as we rolled over and over, I could feel blood running down my wrist, but he wasn't making noise. I hooked my left arm around his neck and squeezed.

The bite loosened.

Beneath the grey sky, I was alone. Nothing moved about me, no surge of life, no trickle.

So slow. I could see Chuckie still standing in the tube, his face just blanked, just staring. I could see Dr. Dennis's foot come up, and smash down on my knee. I could feel something shatter. I heard the gurgle and saw his spit spray as I squeezed tighter, the tops of his ears purple.

. . . but the answer was "Yes" and the Earth was dead.

I hugged him so tight.

I felt it go . . . felt it go.

I think I kept hugging him, even long when he was dead, just squeezing at his neck from in back, his body spread out on top of me, so still. Chuckie was pulling at my arm, trying to unclamp it.

"Neil for God'sakes, *let go!*"

I think it was the hardest thing I ever did: letting go.

Chuckie rolled the body off me and helped me to my feet. I leaned on him. Dr. Dennis's eyes were bulged out of their sockets, his throat bright red and wrinkled like an old 'form where I'd held him.

"Your hand is bleeding," said Chuckie.

I killed a man. I killed a man. I killed a man. Write one thousand times: *I killed a man*. Not enough. Write again.

"I killed a man," I said.

"An Empty. Okay. We've got to go quick, Neil. Grab my waist, there. The skip-port is down the end of the commute. C'mon."

I leaned on Chuckie and we wobbled, naked, blood-smeared, like a broken machine, down the commute. There was no way to hug the walls; the rollers whirred beneath us, jetting us forward.

"Damn," said Chuckie. He fiddled with the keycard in the skip-port slot. I leaned against the wall, looked back, could still see Dr. Dennis lying by the tube door, arms twisted backwards at strange angles.

I killed a man. Write ten thousand times. Not enough. Again!

"Won't open. We're tracked."

I closed my eyes and thought of the time I'd spent here on Yorbs. I'd murdered a man; not with a removed consent, or through negli-

gence, but with my fingers, my muscles—I couldn't let go. I'd met Chuckie here. I'd never had a friend like Chuckie before, no one ever held me . . . or touched me like that. And I had a job, I made the meat. Got the cycle down to six days once, lower than anybody, and I could've done five if they'd have replaced. . . .

—ing moved about me. No surge of life, no trickle.

—the starter-cells. The—

—lone. Nothing moved about me, no sur—

—starter-cells, replaced the—

“Chuckie.”

“Listen, we'll get the tube and go up to above A-Ward, where the main gyros are. I've worked on them before. We can break down over the skip-port, if we suit up, break down and flight one, if you—”

“It's the starter-cells.”

“C'mon, Neil.” He half-dragged, half-carried me down the commute-way, my leg a limp stick trailing behind me. The rollers whined.

“The starter-cells. They have to be replaced.”

“Don't worry about the fucking starter-cells!” He pulled at my waist.

“Real bovy. Dick told me. Nothing else works. The meat tastes so bad because the starters are old, over a thousand cycles. Another two hundred—maybe four years—and they'll be gone!”

“We'll be Out Down, if you hurry.”

“No,” I said. “We won't.”

He stopped and leaned me up against the wall by the tube-door. Dr. Dennis still lay on the floor, looking up on forever. Chuckie carded the tube. I heard sirens, maybe two wards down, screaming.

“C'mon, you damned tube.” Chuckie was sweating heavy.

“It's the why,” I said.

“Get straight, Neil!”

“The cells. No cows, no bovy starters. The boxes will die.” I was shouting—so strange, I felt *gleeful*! The pieces falling together, like little letters come tumbling down on the page, arranging themselves into words—and *the Word was Death. And I felt joy!*

Chuckie wasn't listening. My leg was hanging there, like a wet rag, but I didn't feel it—not a thing.

“The Meat Boxes, the Kelp Boxes, they'll die. No starters and you can't clone a clone—mutation over generations, two cycles and it

wouldn't be meat. In four years there won't be any food on the Yorbs. We don't grow, we *generate*, but no cows Out Down, no—”

“Neil, help me pull this door. The tube's stuck.”

“That's why they're mumming it, Chuckie, we're all going to die because the Out Down's dead.”

A blast of hot, fetid air almost hurled me to the ground. I clutched the wall. Chuckie had opened the tube-shaft, but there wasn't any car.

He braced himself against the sides of the open door and peered down the shaft, his hair blowing straight up. His face began to blister and peel. “It's stopped down maybe ten wards. They've jammed it.”

An orbiting crypt, a spinning tomb, a mausoleum of rotting bodies turning tricks around the sun, skip-ports ravaged, skips fleeing to nowhere.

“C'mon, Neil, we have to jump.”

“Jump,” I said. Not like a question.

“Into the shaft. The air'll take us up—hot, it'll burn, but we only need to go one ward. We come out near the gyros and break down. If the tube's jammed they can't get to us too quick.”

Chuckie pulled me toward the shaft. I felt the heat; from a half meter I could smell my hair singeing, my face baking, brutal heat.

“Just ride it up.”

I remember those words: *Just ride it up. Write one trillion times, Just ride it up. Never enough! Again!*

Chuckie edged to the open shaft, looked over at me—just once—and jumped. He floated there for one horrible second, like crap-paper caught in the draft-vent of a head, his chub legs kicking at air.

Then he began to fall.

Down. Throughout the known universe, the word *down* means a number of things. It can mean *away from heaven* or *feeling sorta dreggy, toward the center* or *nearer to thy feet*. On a Yorb, it means whatever the gyros want it to mean. Gravity is the whim of a machine.

In Chuckie's case, it meant *toward J-Ward*.

I stumbled into the shaft, grabbing at him as he hung.

The look in his eyes as he fell: he'd do a spin, his huge body smacking against the sides of the hot shaft, stare up at me—not angry, almost frightened, mostly perplexed—buoy for a second,

clutch at the blistering sides of the shaft, scramble, tumble, sink, blister.

Aerodynamics. I looked it up later. Volume A.

The car seals the shaft, builds pressure under the floor plate and rides. Water-skips in the Out Down do it. Scrambling people in the water bob, up, one second, down. Mostly down.

I didn't thrash; flew straight, pretty much. I felt a peculiar calm, shooting through the air-sea. When my hand touched the side of the shaft, my skin bubbled, but I did not cry. I'd get lifted by a draft, but I wouldn't tumble.

Chuckie tumbled. Over and over, smashing the sides of the shaft, leaving little splotches of crisp skin and fluid, which I saw as I fell past them. After a while in that endless fall, he didn't even have his eyes open anymore.

I came back with a cart.

I'd left him lying on the roof of the jammed car, stalled about a meter above J-Ward. I half-crutched on the cart, my knee was shattered; my blisters had started to pus, but where Chuckie was lying on the hot ceiling of the car his skin was carbon black.

His chest was caved. I'd fallen on him.

I hauled him out of the shaft, leaving most of the skin from his back stuck to the car. It felt like his arms would any minute pull from the sockets, easy like well-cooked flesh. I could only load him halfway on the cart, his chest down on the platform, his butt and legs jutting over the sides.

I wheeled. I let the rollers wheel, too.

I wheeled him into the Meat Room.

The sirens were loud now, like the shrieks of condemned men waiting to be hatched. The Meat Room was dark—but even in the dark you know where things are, you come to believe.

"Baruch atah adoni, elohanu melach ha'olam."

I lifted the lid on the K-Tol vat, wheeled the cart real close.

It was the easiest thing I'd ever done.

Chuckie fell in with a *plop*, sank quietly, quickly, without bubbles. It would be days before the K-Tol ate him up, before it returned him to ashes or quarks or whatever, before it swished him up near the starter-cells, before it played him out as a sheet of marbled meat.

It would be days. Three days. Eons.

And a funny thought occurred to me then. Funny thoughts. Volume F.

The Yorbs would never starve.

Days? Eons? Before they used their own cells as starters, before the Meat Boxes were churning out sheets of white, pale meat?

I heard footsteps down the commute-way, the rollers turning at high speed, carrying the footsteps toward the Meat Room. I sank down and leaned with my back against the Meat Box. It felt cool, good to my skin.

And I laughed.

Laughed—as I was grabbed, battered, beaten, thrown against the Meat Room floor.

I laughed.

"Yahoo!" I said as I swallowed my teeth. "Yahoo! Yahoo!"