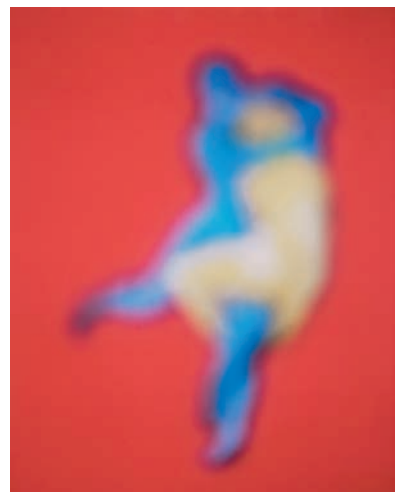
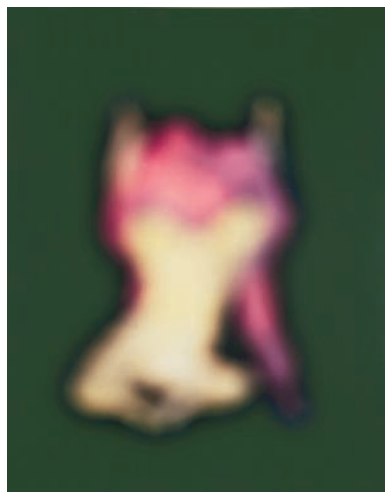
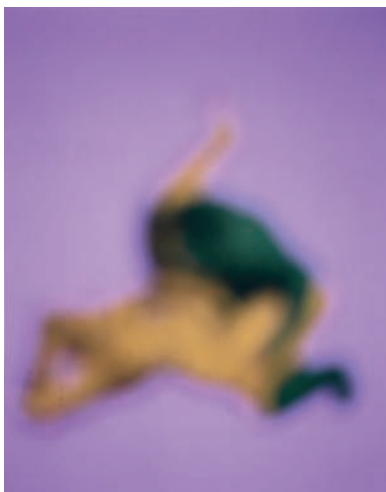
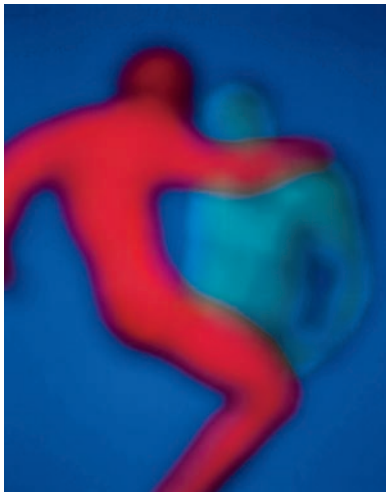
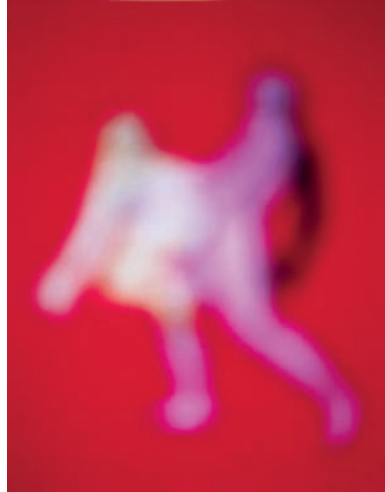

FICTION

ESCAPE FROM SPIDERHEAD

BY GEORGE SAUNDERS



"Drip on?" Abnesti said over the P.A.

"What's in it?" I said.

"Hilarious," he said.

"Acknowledge," I said.

Abnesti used his remote. My MobiPak™ whirred. Soon the Interior Garden looked really nice. Everything seemed super-clear.

I said out loud, as I was supposed to, what I was feeling.

"Garden looks nice," I said. "Super-clear."

Abnesti said, "Jeff, how about we pep up those language centers?"

"Sure," I said.

"Drip on?" he said.

"Acknowledge," I said.

He added some Verbaluce™ to the drip, and soon I was feeling the same things but saying them better. The garden still looked nice. It was like the bushes were so tight-seeming and the sun made everything stand out? It was like any moment you expected some Victorians to wander in with their cups of tea. It was as if the garden had become a sort of embodiment of the domestic dreams forever intrinsic to human consciousness. It was as if I could suddenly discern, in this contemporary vignette, the ancient corollary through which Plato and some of his contemporaries might have strolled; to wit, I was sensing the eternal in the ephemeral.

I sat, pleasantly engaged in these thoughts, until the Verbaluce™ began to wane. At which point the garden just looked nice again. It was something about the bushes and whatnot? It made you just want to lay out there and catch rays and think your happy thoughts. If you get what I mean.

Then whatever else was in the drip wore off, and I didn't feel much about the garden one way or the other. My mouth was dry, though, and my gut had that post-Verbaluce™ feel to it.

"What's going to be cool about that one?" Abnesti said. "Is, say a guy has to stay up late guarding a perimeter. Or is at school waiting for his kid and gets bored. But there's some nature nearby? Or say a park ranger has to work a double shift?"

"That will be cool," I said.

"That's ED763," he said. "We're thinking of calling it NatuGlide. Or maybe ErthAdmire."

"Those are both good," I said.

"Thanks for your help, Jeff," he said.

Which was what he always said.

"Only a million years to go," I said.

Which was what I always said.

Then he said, "Exit the Interior Garden now, Jeff, head over to Small Workroom 2."

II

Into Small Workroom 2 they sent this pale tall girl.

"What do you think?" Abnesti said over the P.A.

"Me?" I said. "Or her?"

"Both," Abnesti said.

"Pretty good," I said.

"Fine, you know," she said. "Normal."

Abnesti asked us to rate each other more quantifiably, as per pretty, as per sexy.

It appeared we liked each other about average, i.e., no big attraction or revulsion either way.

Abnesti said, "Jeff, drip on?"

"Acknowledge," I said.

"Heather, drip on?" he said.

"Acknowledge," Heather said.

Then we looked at each other like, What happens next?

What happened next was, Heather soon looked super-good. And I could tell she thought the same of me. It came on so sudden we were like laughing. How could we not have seen it, how cute the other one was? Luckily there was a couch in the Workroom. It felt like our drip had, in addition to whatever they were testing, some ED556 in it, which lowers your shame level to like nil. Because soon, there on the couch, off we went. It was super-hot between us. And not merely in a horndog way. Hot, yes, but also just right. Like if you'd dreamed of a certain girl all your life and all of a sudden there she was, in your Domain.

"Jeff," Abnesti said. "I'd like your permission to pep up your language centers."

"Go for it," I said, under her now.

"Drip on?" he said.

"Acknowledge," I said.

"Me, too?" Heather said.

"You got it," Abnesti said, with a laugh. "Drip on?"

"Acknowledge," she said, all breathless.

Soon, experiencing the benefits of the flowing Verbaluce™ in our drips, we were not only fucking really well but also talking pretty great. Like, instead of just saying the sex-type things we had

been saying (such as "wow" and "oh God" and "hell yes" and so forth), we now began freestyling re our sensations and thoughts, in elevated diction, with eighty-per-cent increased vocab, our well-articulated thoughts being recorded for later analysis.

For me, the feeling was, approximately: Astonishment at the dawning realization that this woman was being created in real time, directly from my own mind, per my deepest longings. Finally, after all these years (was my thought), I had found the precise arrangement of body/face/mind that personified all that was desirable. The taste of her mouth, the look of that halo of blondish hair spread out around her cherubic yet naughty-looking face (she was beneath me now, legs way up), even (not to be crude or dishonor the exalted feelings I was experiencing) the sensations her vagina was producing along the length of my thrusting penis were precisely those I had always hungered for, though I had never, before this instant, realized that I so ardently hungered for them.

That is to say: a desire would arise and, concurrently, the satisfaction of that desire would also arise. It was as if (a) I longed for a certain (heretofore untasted) taste until (b) said longing became nearly unbearable, at which time (c) I found a morsel of food with that exact taste already in my mouth, perfectly satisfying my longing.

Every utterance, every adjustment of posture bespoke the same thing: we had known each other forever, were soul mates, had met and loved in numerous preceding lifetimes, and would meet and love in many subsequent lifetimes, always with the same transcendently stupefying results.

Then there came a hard-to-describe but very real drifting-off into a number of sequential reveries that might best be described as a type of nonnarrative mind scenery, i.e., a series of vague mental images of places I had never been (a certain pine-packed valley in high white mountains, a chalet-type house in a cul-de-sac, the yard of which was overgrown with wide, stunted Seussian trees), each of which triggered a deep sentimental longing, longings that coalesced into, and were soon reduced to, one central longing, i.e., an intense longing for Heather and Heather alone.

This mind-scenery phenomenon

was strongest during our third (!) bout of lovemaking. (Apparently, Abnesti had included some Vivistif™ in my drip.)

Afterward, our protestations of love poured forth simultaneously, linguistically complex and metaphorically rich: I daresay we had become poets. We were allowed to lie there, limbs intermingled, for nearly an hour. It was bliss. It was perfection. It was that impossible thing: happiness that does not wilt to reveal the thin shoots of some new desire rising from within it.

We cuddled with a fierceness/focus that rivalled the fierceness/focus with which we had fucked. There was nothing *less* about cuddling vis-à-vis fucking, is what I mean to say. We were all over each other in the super-friendly way of puppies, or spouses meeting for the first time after one of them has undergone a close brush with death. Everything seemed moist, permeable, *sayable*.

Then something in the drip began to wane. I think Abnesti had shut off the Verbaluce™? Also the shame reducer? Basically, everything began to *dwindle*. Suddenly we felt shy. But still loving. We began the process of trying to talk après Verbaluce™: always awkward.

Yet I could see in her eyes that she was still feeling love for me.

And I was definitely still feeling love for her.

Well, why not? We had just fucked three times! Why do you think they call it “making love”? That was what we had just made three times: love.

Then Abnesti said, “Drip on?”

We had kind of forgotten he was even there, behind his one-way mirror.

I said, “Do we have to? We are really liking this right now.”

“We’re just going to try to get you guys back to baseline,” he said. “We’ve got more to do today.”

“Shit,” I said.

“Rats,” she said.

“Drip on?” he said.

“Acknowledge,” we said.

Soon something began to change. I mean, she was fine. A handsome pale girl. But nothing special. And I could see that she felt the same re me, i.e., what had all that fuss been about just now?

Why weren’t we dressed? We real quick got dressed.

Kind of embarrassing.

Did I love her? Did she love me?

WRONG ABOUT THE HORSE

The old woman felt sorry for herself
and angry at herself at the same time
many betrayals had afflicted her
she carried grudges
in her throat
that paralyzed speech
and prevented forgiveness

Unlike you who fear betrayal
I live my whole lifetime
in the open air and in the azure present moment
like a butterfly or gnat or horse
said the red tulip
I burden myself with no expectations
therefore I can never be betrayed

Unlike both of you
said the dog
I consider fierce competition essential to life
among dogs rivalry is not betrayal
it is energy, leaping and fanged energy
that makes a top dog
and you are wrong about the horse

—Alicia Ostriker

Ha.

No.

Then it was time for her to go. We shook hands.

Out she went.

Lunch came in. On a tray. Spaghetti with chicken chunks.

Man, was I hungry.

I spent all lunchtime thinking. It was weird. I had the memory of fucking Heather, the memory of having felt the things I’d felt for her, the memory of having said the things I’d said to her. My throat was like raw from how much I’d said and how fast I’d felt compelled to say it. But in terms of feelings? I basically had nada left.

Just a hot face and some shame re having fucked three times in front of Abnesti.

III

After lunch in came another girl. About equally so-so. Dark hair. Average build. Nothing special, just like, upon first entry, Heather had been nothing special.

“This is Rachel,” Abnesti said on the P.A. “This is Jeff.”

“Hi, Rachel,” I said.

“Hi, Jeff,” she said.

“Drip on?” Abnesti said.

We Acknowledged.

Something seemed very familiar about the way I now began feeling. Suddenly Rachel looked super-good. Abnesti requested permission to pep up our language centers via Verbaluce™. We Acknowledged. Soon we, too, were fucking like bunnies. Soon we, too, were talking like articulate maniacs re our love. Once again certain sensations were arising to meet my concurrently arising desperate hunger for just those sensations. Soon my memory of the perfect taste of Heather’s mouth was being overwritten by the current taste of Rachel’s mouth, so much more the taste I now desired. I was feeling unprecedented emotions, even though those unprecedented emotions were (I discerned somewhere in my consciousness) exactly the same emotions I had felt earlier, for that now unworthy-seeming vessel Heather. Rachel was, I mean to

say, *it*. Her lithe waist, her voice, her hungry mouth/hands/loins—they were all *it*.

I just loved Rachel so much.

Then came the sequential geographic reveries (see above): same pine-packed valley, same chalet-looking house, accompanied by that same longing-for-place transmuted into a longing for (this time) Rachel. While continuing to enact a level of sexual strenuousness that caused what I would describe as a gradually tightening, chest-located, sweetness rubber band to both connect us and compel us onward, we whispered feverishly (precisely, poetically) about how long we felt we had known each other, i.e., forever.

Again the total number of times we made love was three.

Then, like before, came the dwindling. Our talking became less excellent. Words were fewer, our sentences shorter. Still, I loved her. Loved Rachel. Everything about her just seemed *perfect*: her cheek mole, her black hair, the little butt-squirm she did now and then, as if to say, Mmm-mmm, was that ever good.

“Drip on?” Abnesti said. “We are going to try to get you both back to baseline.”

“Acknowledge,” she said.

“Well, hold on,” I said.

“Jeff,” Abnesti said, irritated, as if trying to remind me that I was here not by choice but because I had done my crime and was in the process of doing my time.

“Acknowledge,” I said. And gave Rachel one last look of love, knowing (as she did not yet know) that this would be the last look of love I would be giving her.

Soon she was merely fine to me, and I merely fine to her. She looked, as had Heather, embarrassed, as in, What was up with that just now? Why did I just go so overboard with Mr. Average here?

Did I love her? Or her me?

No.

When it was time for her to go, we shook hands.

The place where my MobiPak™ was surgically joined to my lower back was sore from all our positional changes. Plus I was way tired. Plus I was feeling so sad. Why sad? Was I not a dude? Had I not just fucked two different girls, for a total of six times, in one day?

Still, honestly, I felt sadder than sad.

I guess I was sad that love was not real? Or not all that real, anyway? I guess I was sad that love could feel so real and the next minute be gone, and all because of something Abnesti was doing.

IV

After Snack Abnesti called me into Control. Control being like the head of a spider. With its various legs being our Workrooms. Sometimes we were called upon to work alongside Abnesti in the head of the spider. Or, as we termed it: the Spiderhead.

“Sit,” he said. “Look into Large Workroom 1.”

In Large Workroom 1 were Heather and Rachel, side by side.

“Recognize them?” he said.

“Ha,” I said.

“Now,” Abnesti said. “I’m going to present you with a choice, Jeff. This is what we’re playing at here. See this remote? Let’s say you can hit *this* button and Rachel gets some Darkenflox™. Or you can hit *this* button and Heather gets the Darkenflox™. See? You choose.”

“They’ve got Darkenflox™ in their MobiPaks™?” I said.

“You’ve all got have Darkenflox™ in your MobiPaks™, dummy,” Abnesti said affectionately. “Verlaine put it there Wednesday. In anticipation of this very study.”

Well, that made me nervous.

Imagine the worst you have ever felt, times ten. That does not even come close to how bad you feel on Darkenflox™. The time it was administered to us in Orientation, briefly, for demo purposes, at one-third the dose now selected on Abnesti’s remote? I have never felt so terrible. All of us were just moaning, heads down, like, How could we ever have felt life was worth living?

I do not even like to think about that time.

“What’s your decision, Jeff?” Abnesti said. “Is Rachel getting the Darkenflox™? Or Heather?”

“I can’t say,” I said.

“You have to,” he said.

“I can’t,” I said. “It would be like random.”

“You feel your decision would be random,” he said.

“Yes,” I said.

And that was true. I really didn’t care. It was like if I put *you* in the Spiderhead and gave you the choice: which of these two strangers would you like to send into the shadow of the valley of death?

“Ten seconds,” Abnesti said. “What we’re testing for here is any residual fondness.”

It wasn’t that I liked them both. I honestly felt completely neutral toward both. It was exactly as if I had never seen, much less fucked, either one. (They had really succeeded in taking me back to baseline, I guess I am saying.)

But, having once been Darkenflox™, I just didn’t want to do that to anyone. Even if I didn’t like the person very much, even if I hated the person, I still wouldn’t want to do it.

“Five seconds,” Abnesti said.

“I can’t decide,” I said. “It’s random.”

“Truly random?” he said. “O.K. I’m giving the Darkenflox™ to Heather.”

I just sat there.

“No, actually,” he said. “I’m giving it to Rachel.”

Just sat there.

“Jeff,” he said. “You have convinced me. It would, to you, be random. You truly have no preference. I can see that. And therefore I don’t have to do it. See what we just did? With your help? For the first time? Via the ED289/290 suite? Which is what we’ve been testing today? You have to admit it: you were in love. Twice. Right?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Very much in love,” he said. “Twice.”

“I said yes,” I said.

“But you just now expressed no preference,” he said. “Ergo, no trace of either of those great loves remains. You are totally cleansed. We brought you high, laid you low, and now here you sit, the same emotionwise as before our testing even began. That is powerful. That is killer. We have unlocked a mysterious eternal secret. What a fantastic game-changer! Say someone can’t love? Now he or she can. We can make him. Say someone loves too much? Or loves someone deemed unsuitable by his or her caregiver? We can tone that shit right down. Say someone is blue, because of true love? We step in, or his or her caregiver does: blue no more. No longer, in terms of emotional controllability, are we ships adrift. No one is. We



“Always wondered what happened if you tried to drive through without a card.”

see a ship adrift, we climb aboard, install a rudder. Guide him/her toward love. Or away from it. You say, ‘All you need is love’? Look, here comes ED289/290. Can we stop war? We can sure as heck slow it down! Suddenly the soldiers on both sides start fucking. Or, at low dosage, feeling super-fond. Or say we have two rival dictators in a death grudge. Assuming ED289/290 develops nicely in pill form, allow me to slip each dictator a mickey. Soon their tongues are down each other’s throats and doves of peace are pooping on their epaulets. Or, depending on the dosage, they may just be hugging. And who helped us do that? You did.”

All this time, Rachel and Heather had just been sitting there in Large Workroom 1.

“That’s it, gals, thanks,” Abnesti said on the P.A.

And they left, neither knowing how close they had come to getting Darkenfloxed™ out their wing-wangs.

Verlaine took them out the back way, i.e., not through the Spiderhead but via the Back Alley. Which is not really an alley, just a carpeted hallway

leading back to our Domain Cluster.

“Think, Jeff,” Abnesti said. “Think if you’d had the benefit of ED289/290 on your fateful night.”

Tell the truth, I was getting kind of sick of him always talking about my fateful night.

I’d been sorry about it right away and had got sorrier about it ever since, and was now so sorry about it that him rubbing it in my face did not make me one bit sorrier, it just made me think of him as being kind of a dick.

“Can I go to bed now?” I said.

“Not yet,” Abnesti said. “It is hours to go before you sleep.”

Then he sent me into Small Workroom 3, where some dude I didn’t know was sitting.

∨

“Rogan,” the dude said.

“Jeff,” I said.

“What’s up?” he said.

“Not much,” I said.

We sat tensely for a long time, not talking. Maybe ten minutes passed.

We got some rough customers in

here. I noted that Rogan had a tattoo of a rat on his neck, a rat that had just been knifed and was crying. But even through its tears it was knifing a smaller rat, who just looked surprised.

Finally Abnesti came on the P.A.

“That’s it, guys, thanks,” he said.

“What the fuck was that about?”

Rogan said.

Good question, Rogan, I thought. Why had we been left just sitting there? In the same manner that Heather and Rachel had been left just sitting there? Then I had a hunch. To test my hunch, I did a sudden lurch into the Spiderhead. Which Abnesti always made a point of not keeping locked, to show how much he trusted and was unafraid of us.

And guess who was in there?

“Hey, Jeff,” Heather said.

“Jeff, get out,” Abnesti said.

“Heather, did Mr. Abnesti just now make you decide which of us, me or Rogan, to give some Darkenfloxx™ to?” I said.

“Yes,” Heather said. She must have been on some VeriTalk™, because she spoke the truth in spite of Abnesti’s withering silencing glance.

“Did you recently fuck Rogan, Heather?” I said. “In addition to me? And also fall in love with him, as you did with me?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Heather, honestly,” Abnesti said. “Put a sock in it.”

Heather looked around for a sock, VeriTalk™ making one quite literal.

Back in my Domain, I did the math: Heather had fucked me three times. Heather had probably also fucked Rogan three times, since, in the name of design consistency, Abnesti would have given Rogan and me equal relative doses of Vivistif™.

And yet, speaking of design consistency, there was still one shoe to drop, if I knew Abnesti, always a stickler in terms of data symmetry, which was: wouldn’t Abnesti also need Rachel to decide who to Darkenfloxx™, i.e., me or Rogan?

After a short break, my suspicions were confirmed: I found myself again sitting in Small Workroom 3 with Rogan!

Again we sat not talking for a long time. Mostly he picked at the smaller rat

and I tried to watch without him seeing.

Then, like before, Abnesti came on the P.A. and said, "That's it, guys, thanks."

"Let me guess," I said. "Rachel's in there with you."

"Jeff, if you don't stop doing that, I swear," Abnesti said.

"And she just declined to Darkenflox™ either me or Rogan?" I said.

"Hi, Jeff!" Rachel said. "Hi, Rogan!"

"Rogan," I said. "Did you by any chance fuck Rachel earlier today?"

"Pretty much," Rogan said.

My mind was like reeling. Rachel had fucked me plus Rogan? Heather had fucked me plus Rogan? And everyone who had fucked anyone had fallen in love with that person, then out of it?

What kind of crazy-ass Project Team was this?

I mean, I had been on some crazy-ass Project Teams in my time, such as one where the drip had something in it that made hearing music exquisite, and hence when some Shostakovich was piped in actual bats seemed to circle my Domain, or the one where my legs became totally numb and yet I found I could still stand fifteen straight hours at a fake cash register, miraculously suddenly able to do extremely hard long-division problems in my mind.

But of all my crazy-ass Project Teams this was by far the most crazy-assed.

I could not help but wonder what tomorrow would bring.

VI

Except today wasn't even over. I was again called into Small Workroom 3. And was sitting there when this unfamiliar guy came in.

"I'm Keith!" he said, rushing over to shake my hand.

He was a tall Southern drink of water, all teeth and wavy hair.

"Jeff," I said.

"Really nice meeting you!" he said.

Then we sat there not talking. Whenever I looked over at Keith, he would gleam his teeth at me and shake his head all wry, as if to say, "Odd job of work, isn't it?"

"Keith," I said. "Do you by any chance know two chicks named Rachel and Heather?"

"I sure as heck do," Keith said. And

suddenly his teeth had a leering quality to them.

"Did you by any chance have sex with both Rachel and Heather earlier today, three times each?" I said.

"What are you, man, a dang psychic?" Keith said. "You're blowing my mind, I admit it!"

"Jeff, you're totally doinking with our experimental design integrity," Abnesti said.

"So either Rachel or Heather is sitting in the Spiderhead right now," I said. "Trying to decide."

"Decide what?" Keith said.

"Which of us to Darkenflox™," I said.

"Eek," Keith said. And now his teeth looked scared.

"Don't worry," I said. "She won't do it."

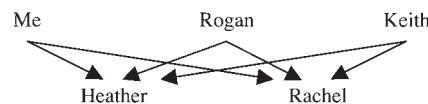
"Who won't?" Keith said.

"Whoever's in there," I said.

"That's it, guys, thanks," Abnesti said.

Then, after a short break, Keith and I were once again brought into Small Workroom 3, where once again we waited as, this time, Heather declined to Darkenflox™ either one of us.

Back in my Domain, I constructed a who-had-fucked-whom chart, which went like this:



Abnesti came in.

"Despite all your shenanigans," he said, "Rogan and Keith had exactly the same reaction as you did. And as Rachel and Heather did. None of you, at the critical moment, could decide whom to Darkenflox™. Which is super. What does that mean? Why is it super? It means that ED289/290 is the real deal. It can make love, it can take love away. I'm almost inclined to start the naming process."

"Those girls did it nine times each today?" I said.

"Peace4All," he said. "LuvInclined. You seem pissy. Are you pissy?"

"Well, I feel a little jerked around," I said.

"Do you feel jerked around because you still have feelings of love for one of the girls?" he said. "That would need to be noted. Anger? Possessiveness? Residual sexual longing?"

"No," I said.

"You honestly don't feel miffed that a girl for whom you felt love was then fucked by two other guys, and, not only that, she then felt exactly the same quality/quantity of love for those guys as she had felt for you, or, in the case of Rachel, was about to feel for you, at the time that she fucked Rogan? I think it was Rogan. She may have fucked Keith first. Then you, penultimately. I'm vague on the order of operations. I could look it up. But think deeply on this."

I thought deeply on it.

"Nothing," I said.

"Well, it's a lot to sort through," he said. "Luckily it's night. Our day is done. Anything else you want to talk about? Anything else you're feeling?"

"My penis is sore," I said.

"Well, no surprise there," he said.

"Think how those girls must feel. I'll send Verlaine in with some cream."

Soon Verlaine came in with some cream.

"Hi, Verlaine," I said.

"Hi, Jeff," he said. "You want to put this on yourself or want me to do it?"

"I'll do it," I said.

"Cool," he said.

And I could tell he meant it.

"Looks painful," he said.

"It really is," I said.

"Must have felt pretty good at the time, though?" he said.

His words seemed to be saying he was envious, but I could see in his eyes, as they looked at my penis, that he wasn't envious at all.

Then I slept the sleep of the dead.

As they say.

VII

Next morning I was still asleep when Abnesti came on the P.A.

"Do you remember yesterday?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"When I asked which gal you'd like to see on the Darkenflox™?" he said. "And you said neither?"

"Yes," I said.

"Well, that was good enough for me," he said. "But apparently not good enough for the Protocol Committee. Not good enough for the Three Horsemen of Anality. Come in here. Let's get started—we're going to need to do a

kind of Confirmation Trial. Oh, this is going to stink.”

I entered the Spiderhead.

Sitting in Small Workroom 2 was Heather.

“So this time,” Abnesti said, “per the Protocol Committee, instead of me asking you which girl to give the Darkenflox™ to, which the ProtComm felt was too subjective, we’re going to give this girl the Darkenflox™ no matter what you say. Then see what you say. Like yesterday, we’re going to put you on a drip of—Verlaine? Verlaine? Where are you? Are you there? What is it again? Do you have the project order?”

“Verbaluce™, VeriTalk™, ChatEase™,” Verlaine said over the P.A.

“Right,” Abnesti said. “And did you refresh his MobiPak™? Are his quantities good?”

“I did it,” Verlaine said. “I did it while he was sleeping. Plus I already told you I already did it.”

“What about her?” Abnesti said. “Did you refresh her MobiPak™? Are her quantities good?”

“You stood right there and watched me, Ray,” Verlaine said.

“Jeff, sorry,” Abnesti said to me. “We’re having a little tension in here today. Not an easy day ahead.”

“I don’t want you to Darkenflox™ Heather,” I said.

“Interesting,” he said. “Is that because you love her?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t want you to Darkenflox™ anybody.”

“I know what you mean,” he said. “That is so sweet. Then again: is this Confirmation Trial about what you want? Not so much. What it’s about is us recording what you say as you observe Heather getting Darkenflox™. For five minutes. Five-minute trial. Here we go. Drip on?”

I did not say “Acknowledge.”

“You should feel flattered,” Abnesti said. “Did we choose Rogan? Keith? No. We deemed your level of speaking more commensurate with our data needs.”

I did not say “Acknowledge.”

“Why so protective of Heather?” Abnesti said. “One would almost think you loved her.”

“No,” I said.

“Do you even know her story?” he said. “You don’t. You legally can’t. Does

it involve whiskey, gangs, infanticide? I can’t say. Can I imply, somewhat peripherally, that her past, violent and sordid, did not exactly include a dog named Lassie and a lot of family talks about the Bible while Grammy sat doing macramé, adjusting her posture because the quaint fireplace was so sizzling? Can I suggest that, if you knew what I know about Heather’s past, making Heather briefly sad, nauseous, and/or horrified might not seem like the worst idea in the world? No, I can’t.”

“All right, all right,” I said.

“You know me,” he said. “How many kids do I have?”

“Five,” I said.

“What are their names?” he said.

“Mick, Todd, Karen, Lisa, Phoebe,” I said.

“Am I a monster?” he said. “Do I remember birthdays around here? When a certain individual got athlete’s foot on his groin on a Sunday, did a certain other individual drive over to Rexall and pick up a prescription, paying for it with his own personal money?”

That was a nice thing he’d done, but it seemed kind of unprofessional to bring it up now.

“Jeff,” Abnesti said. “What do you want me to say here? Do you want me to say that your Fridays are at risk? I can easily say that.”

Which was cheap. My Fridays meant a lot to me, and he knew that. Fridays I got to Skype Mom.

“How long do we give you?” Abnesti said.

“Five minutes,” I said.

“How about we make it ten?” Abnesti said.

Mom always looked heartsick when our time was up. It had almost killed her when they arrested me. The trial had almost killed her. She’d spent her savings to get me out of real jail and in here. When I was a kid, she had long brown hair, past her waist. During the trial she cut it. Then it went gray. Now it was just a white poof about the size of a cap.

“Drip on?” Abnesti said.

“Acknowledge,” I said.

“O.K. to pep up your language centers?” he said.

“Fine,” I said.

“Heather, hello?” he said.

“Good morning!” Heather said.

“Drip on?” he said.

“Acknowledge,” Heather said.

Abnesti used his remote.

The Darkenflox™ started flowing. Soon Heather was softly crying. Then was up and pacing. Then jaggedly crying. A little hysterical, even.

“I don’t like this,” she said, in a quaking voice.

Then she threw up in the trash can.

“Speak, Jeff,” Abnesti said to me.

“Speak a lot, speak in detail. Let’s make something useful of this, shall we?”

Everything in my drip felt Grade A. Suddenly I was waxing poetic. I was waxing poetic re what Heather was doing, and waxing poetic re my feelings about what Heather was doing. Basically, what I was feeling was: Every human is born of man and woman. Every human, at birth, is, or at least has the potential to be, beloved of his/her mother/father. Thus every human is worthy of love. As I watched Heather suffer, a great tenderness suffused my body, a tenderness hard to distinguish from a sort of vast existential nausea; to wit, why are such beautiful beloved vessels made slaves to so much pain? Heather presented as a bundle of pain receptors. Heather’s mind was fluid and could be ruined (by pain, by sadness). Why? Why was she made this way? Why so fragile?

Poor child, I was thinking, poor girl. Who loved you? Who loves you?

“Hang in there, Jeff,” Abnesti said. “Verlaine! What do you think? Any vestige of romantic love in Jeff’s Verbal Commentary?”

“I’d say no,” Verlaine said over the P.A. “That’s all just pretty much basic human feeling right there.”

“Excellent,” Abnesti said. “Time remaining?”

“Two minutes,” Verlaine said.

I found what happened next very hard to watch. Under the influence of the Verbaluce™, the VeriTalk™, and the ChatEase™, I also found it impossible not to narrate.

In each Workroom was a couch, a desk, and a chair, all, by design, impossible to disassemble. Heather now began disassembling her impossible-to-disassemble chair. Her face was a mask of rage. She drove her head into the wall. Like a wrathful prodigy, Heather, beloved of someone, managed, in her great sadness-fuelled rage, to disassemble the

chair while continuing to drive her head into the wall.

"Jesus," Verlaine said.

"Verlaine, buck up," Abnesti said. "Jeff, stop crying. Contrary to what you might think, there's not much data in crying. Use your words. Don't make this in vain."

I used my words. I spoke volumes, was precise. I described and redescribed what I was feeling as I watched Heather do what she now began doing, intently, almost beautifully, to her face/head with one of the chair legs.

In his defense, Abnesti was not in such great shape himself: breathing hard, cheeks candy-red, as he tapped the screen of his iMac non-stop with a pen, something he did when stressed.

"Time," he finally said, and cut the Darkenflox™ off with his remote. "Fuck. Get in there, Verlaine. Hustle it."

Verlaine hustled into Small Workroom 2.

"Talk to me, Sammy," Abnesti said.

Verlaine felt for Heather's pulse, then raised his hands, palms up, so that he looked like Jesus, except shocked instead of beatific, and also he had his glasses up on top of his head.

"Are you *kidding* me?" Abnesti said.

"What now?" Verlaine said. "What do I—"

"Are you fricking *kidding* me?" Abnesti said.

Abnesti burst out of his chair, shoved me out of the way, and flew through the door into Small Workroom 2.

VIII

I returned to my Domain.

At three, Verlaine came on the P.A. "Jeff," he said. "Please return to the Spiderhead."

I returned to the Spiderhead.

"We're sorry you had to see that, Jeff," Abnesti said.

"That was unexpected," Verlaine said.

"Unexpected plus unfortunate," Abnesti said. "And sorry I shoved you."

"Is she dead?" I said.

"Well, she's not the best," Verlaine said.

"Look, Jeff, these things happen," Abnesti said. "This is science. In science we explore the unknown. It was unknown what five minutes on Darken-

flox™ would do to Heather. Now we know. The other thing we know, per Verlaine's assessment of your commentary, is that you really, for sure, do not harbor any residual romantic feelings for Heather. That's a big deal, Jeff. A beacon of hope at a sad time for all. Even as Heather was, so to speak, going down to the sea in her ship, you remained totally unwavering in terms of continuing to not romantically love her. My guess is ProtComm's going to be like, 'Wow, Utica's really leading the pack in terms of providing some mind-blowing new data on ED289/290.'"

It was quiet in the Spiderhead.

"Verlaine, go out," Abnesti said. "Go do your bit. Make things ready."

Verlaine went out.

"Do you think I liked that?" Abnesti said.

"You didn't seem to," I said.

"Well, I didn't," Abnesti said. "I hated it. I'm a person. I have feelings. Still, personal sadness aside, that was good. You did terrific over all. We all did terrific. Heather especially did terrific. I honor her. Let's just—let's see this thing

through, shall we? Let's complete it. Complete the next portion of our Confirmation Trial."

Into Small Workroom 4 came Rachel.

IX

"Are we going to Darkenflox™ Rachel now?" I said.

"Think, Jeff," Abnesti said. "How can we know that you love neither Rachel nor Heather if we only have data regarding your reaction to what just now happened to Heather? Use your noggin. You are not a scientist, but Lord knows you work around scientists all day. Drip on?"

I did not say "Acknowledge."

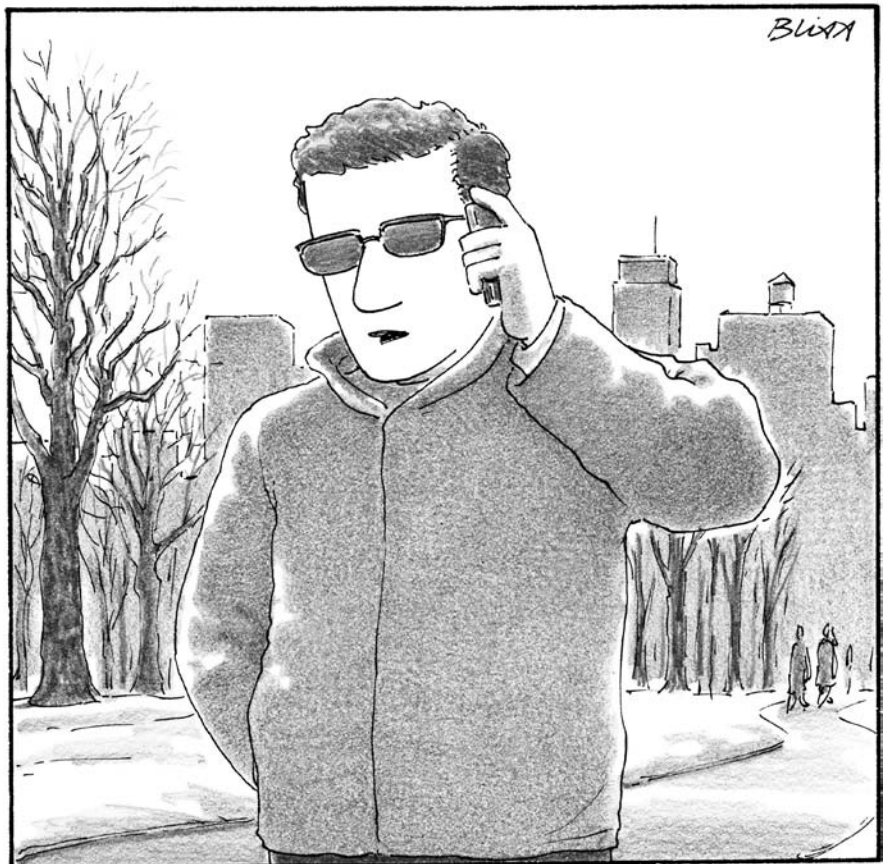
"What's the problem, Jeff?" Abnesti said.

"I don't want to kill Rachel," I said.

"Well, who does?" Abnesti said. "Do I? Do you, Verlaine?"

"No," Verlaine said over the P.A.

"Jeff, maybe you're overthinking this," Abnesti said. "Is it possible the Darkenflox™ will kill Rachel? Sure. We have the Heather precedent. On the



"Honey, let me call you back—I'm bored."

other hand, Rachel may be stronger. She seems a little larger.”

“She’s actually a little smaller,” Verlaine said.

“Well, maybe she’s tougher,” Abnesti said.

“We’re going to weight-adjust her dosage,” Verlaine said. “So.”

“Thanks, Verlaine,” Abnesti said.

“Thanks for clearing that up.”

“Maybe show him the file,” Verlaine said.

Abnesti handed me Rachel’s file.

Verlaine came back in.

“Read it and weep,” he said.

Per Rachel’s file, she had stolen jewelry from her mother, a car from her father, cash from her sister, statues from their church. She’d gone to jail for drugs. After four times in jail for drugs, she’d gone to rehab for drugs, then to rehab for prostitution, then to what they call rehab-refresh, for people who’ve been in rehab so many times they are basically immune. But she must have been immune to the rehab-refresh, too, because after that came her biggie: a triple murder—her dealer, the dealer’s sister, the dealer’s sister’s boyfriend.

Reading that made me feel a little funny that we’d fucked and I’d loved her.

But I still didn’t want to kill her.

“Jeff,” Abnesti said. “I know you’ve done a lot of work on this with Mrs. Lacey. On killing and so forth. But this is not you. This is us.”

“It’s not even us,” Verlaine said. “It’s science.”

“The mandates of science,” Abnesti said. “Plus the dictates.”

“Sometimes science sucks,” Verlaine said.

“On the one hand, Jeff,” Abnesti said, “a few minutes of unpleasantness for Heather—”

“Rachel,” Verlaine said.

“A few minutes of unpleasantness for Rachel,” Abnesti said, “years of relief for literally tens of thousands of underloving or overloving folks.”

“Do the math, Jeff,” Verlaine said.

“Being good in small ways is easy,” Abnesti said. “Doing the huge good things, that’s harder.”

“Drip on?” Verlaine said. “Jeff?”

I did not say “Acknowledge.”

“Fuck it, enough,” Abnesti said. “Verlaine, what’s the name of that one?”

The one where I give him an order and he obeys it?”

“Docilryde™,” Verlaine said.

“Is there Docilryde™ in his MobiPak™?” Abnesti said.

“There’s Docilryde™ in every MobiPak™,” Verlaine said.

“Does he need to say ‘Acknowledge?’” Abnesti said.

“Docilryde™’s a Class C, so—” Verlaine said.

“See, that, to me, makes zero sense,” Abnesti said. “What good’s an obedience drug if we need his permission to use it?”

“We just need a waiver,” Verlaine said.

“How long does that shit take?” Abnesti said.

“We fax Albany, they fax us back,” Verlaine said.

“Come on, come on, make haste,” Abnesti said, and they went out, leaving me alone in the Spiderhead.

X

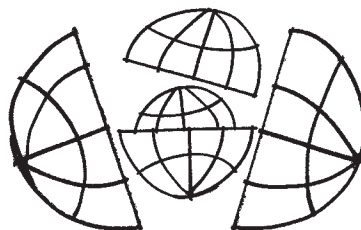
It was sad. It gave me a sad, defeated feeling to think that soon they’d be back and would Docilryde™ me, and I’d say “Acknowledge,” smiling agreeably the way a person smiles on Docilryde™, and then the Darkenflox™ would flow, into Rachel, and I would begin describing, in that rapid, robotic way one describes on Verbaluce™/VeriTalk™/ChatEase™, the things Rachel would, at that time, begin doing to herself.

It was like all I had to do to be a killer again was sit there and wait.

Which was a hard pill to swallow, after my work with Mrs. Lacey.

“Violence finished, anger no more,” she’d make me say, over and over. Then she’d have me do a Detailed Remembering re my fateful night.

I was nineteen. Mike Appel was seventeen. We were both wasto. All night he’d been giving me grief. He was smaller, younger, less popular. Then we



were out front of Frizzy’s, rolling around on the ground. He was quick. He was mean. I was losing. I couldn’t believe it. I was bigger, older, yet losing? Around us, watching, was basically everybody we knew. Then he had me on my back. Someone laughed. Someone said, “Shit, poor Jeff.” Nearby was a brick. I grabbed it, glanced Mike in the head with it. Then was on top of him.

Mike gave. That is, there on his back, scalp bleeding, he gave, by shooting me a certain look, like, Dude, come on, we’re not all that serious about this, are we?

We were.

I was.

I don’t even know why I did it.

It was like, with the drinking and the being a kid and the nearly losing, I’d been put on a drip called, like, TemperBerst or something.

InstaRaje.

LifeRooner.

“Hey, guys, hello!” Rachel said. “What are we up to today?”

There was her fragile head, her undamaged face, one arm lifting a hand to scratch a cheek, legs bouncing with nerves, peasant skirt bouncing, too, clogged feet crossed under the hem.

Soon all that would be just a lump on the floor.

I had to think.

Why were they going to Darkenflox™ Rachel? So they could hear me describe it. If I wasn’t here to describe it, they wouldn’t do it. How could I make it so I wouldn’t be here? I could leave. How could I leave? There was only one door out of the Spiderhead, which was autolocked, and on the other side was either Barry or Hans, with that electric wand called the DisciStick™. Could I wait until Abnesti came in, wonk him, try to race past Barry or Hans, make a break for the Main Door?

Any weapons in the Spiderhead? No, just Abnesti’s birthday mug, a pair of running shoes, a roll of breath mints, his remote.

His remote?

What a dope. That was supposed to be on his belt at all times. Otherwise one of us might help ourselves to whatever we found, via Inventory Directory, in our MobiPaks™: some Bonviv™, maybe, some BlissTyme™, some SpeedErUp™.

Some Darkenflox™.

Jesus. That was one way to leave.
Scary, though.

Just then, in Small Workroom 4, Rachel, I guess thinking the Spiderhead empty, got up and did this happy little shuffle, like she was some cheerful farmer chick who'd just stepped outside to find the hick she was in love with coming up the road with a calf under his arm or whatever.

Why was she dancing? No reason.

Just alive, I guess.

Time was short.

The remote was well labelled.

Good old Verlaine.

I used it, dropped it down the heat vent, in case I changed my mind, then stood there like, I can't believe I just did that.

My MobiPak™ whirred.

The Darkenflox™ flowed.

Then came the horror: worse than I'd ever imagined. Soon my arm was about a mile down the heat vent. Then I was staggering around the Spiderhead, looking for something, anything. In the end, here's how bad it got: I used a corner of the desk.

What's death like?

You're briefly unlimited.

I sailed right out through the roof.

And hovered above it, looking down. Here was Rogan, checking his neck in the mirror. Here was Keith, squat-thrusting in his underwear. Here was Ned Riley, here was B. Troper, here was Gail Orley, Stefan DeWitt, killers all, all bad, I guess, although, in that instant, I saw it differently. At birth, they'd been charged by God with the responsibility of growing into total fuck-ups. Had they chosen this? Was it their fault, as they tumbled out of the womb? Had they aspired, covered in placental blood, to grow into harmers, dark forces, life-enders? In that first holy instant of breath/awareness (tiny hands clutching and unclutching), had it been their fondest hope to render (via gun, knife, or brick) some innocent family bereft? No; and yet their crooked destinies had lain dormant within them, seeds awaiting water and light to bring forth the most violent, life-poisoning flowers, said water/light actually being the requisite combination of neurological tendency and environmental activation that would transform them (transform us!) into earth's offal, murderers,

and foul us with the ultimate, unwashable transgression.

Wow, I thought, was there some Verbaluce™ in that drip or what?

But no.

This was all me now.

I got snagged, found myself stuck on a facility gutter, and squatted there like an airy gargoyle. I was there but was also everywhere. I could see it all: a clump of leaves in the gutter beneath my see-through foot; Mom, poor Mom, at home in Rochester, scrubbing the shower, trying to cheer herself via thin hopeful humming; a deer near the dumpster, suddenly alert to my spectral presence; Mike Appel's mom, also in Rochester, a bony, distraught checkmark occupying a slender strip of Mike's bed; Rachel below in Small Workroom 4, drawn to the one-way mirror by the sounds of my death; Abnesti and Verlaine rushing into the Spiderhead; Verlaine kneeling to begin CPR.

Night was falling. Birds were singing. Birds were, it occurred to me to say, enacting a frantic celebration of day's end. They were manifesting as the earth's bright-colored nerve endings, the sun's descent urging them into activity, filling them individually with life-nectar, the life-nectar then being passed into the world, out of each beak, in the form of that bird's distinctive song, which was, in turn, an accident of beak shape, throat shape, breast configuration, brain chemistry: some birds blessed in voice, others cursed; some squawking, others rapturous.

From somewhere, something kind asked, *Would you like to go back? It's completely up to you. Your body appears salvageable.*

No, I thought, no, thanks, I've had enough.

My only regret was Mom. I hoped someday, in some better place, I'd get a chance to explain it to her, and maybe she'd be proud of me, one last time, after all these years.

From across the woods, as if by common accord, birds left their trees and darted upward. I joined them, flew among them, they did not recognize me as something apart from them, and I was happy, so happy, because for the first time in years, and forevermore, I had not killed, and never would. ♦