

Up the Abyss

by James Lynn Smith

She reached behind her head and attached a band to the back of her long, sun bleached hair. “You like my hair back in a pony-tail?” she asked. “Maybe it’s a bit square, but it’s better in the wind if we have to run from a black bear.”

“I like you all over,” he said, eyeing her curvaceous shape.

“You always did know how to say groovy things. And yet you’re so cool. You didn’t even let the grade point hassle freak you out back at UM”

Hip university students were well aware of the career traps in the early 1970s. This couple blissfully turned their backs on the system which prepared young minds to fit like buttons on a keyboard into the production society. Recently they had joined one of the last communes for a back-to-nature move in the remote Tennessee hills. As they walked hand in hand up one of those hills, they acted free and uninhibited, with no scrap of paper or formal ceremony giving them license to love. She scratched her ample buttocks which itched from having lain naked in Mother Earth’s green embrace. He sneezed and his eyes watered from pollen in the outdoors air of the lush forest.

“Far out,” she said, laughing. “This is like, so natural. You know?”

“Right-on, it’s super.” He sniffed and winced at another urge to sneeze.

“We’re going to make it here, Tom. Nobody’s going to stuff our mind with any more bourgeois, capitalist crap. We’re free, you know, and—Oh dammit!” Her cutoff, hippie-style jeans had caught on one of Mother’s Earth’s branches and ripped a pocket.

“Yeah, we’re finally with our own kind.” He examined the tear without

concern. “Not a bunch of pseudo-hippies like most of ‘em back at UM.” His face twisted to suppress another sneeze. Then he rubbed his forehead thoughtfully and spoke of the commune leader. “Bill said something about garden duty for us in the morning, didn’t he?” He looked directly at her. “I don’t much like that *duty* crap. I know you’ve got to pull your own load. But that should be natural...like it’s an opportunity. I hope we didn’t get into some kind of regimented thing. Nobody should be *assigned* to do anything. If people are simply told what’s needed and understand how things have to be, they’ll *want* to do it.”

“We’re new here, Tom. Maybe it feels too regimented now, but let’s give it time—Okay?” She took his hand and pulled him onward toward the hilltop. There they surveyed the valley spread beneath them. “Oh, this is a neat view, Tom,” she said, lifting her eyebrows. “Jeez, it really *is* far out *now*. Look at that little farm down there.”

“Actually, it looks a little run down. But that’s okay. It’s not like a whole friggin’ city turned into a slum while they pollute the air and water with tons of crap.” Tom pondered the scene. “I’m really on that guy’s side. I have more karma that jibes with that farmer than the city bourgeois. In a way, we’re kindred spirits.” He paused briefly, searching for words. “That farmer and I probably commune on the same vibrations. We both trip on sensual contact. We—”

“Have you ever known a farmer, Tom?”

He looked away. “Not...exactly.” Sneezing again, he pulled out his handkerchief and blew noisily into it.

“Didn’t Bill say something about a farmer that lived over this way?” she asked. “Seems like he said he wasn’t really a farmer...and that he was strange and grouchy.”

“I’m pretty sure he also used the word ‘spooky’. I guess we should go back now.”

They turned and slowly ventured back down the hill. He sneezed. She scratched.

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Down in the valley, Fred leaned back in his porch rocking chair and took another swig from the bottle. It had become the old man's constant companion, but gave him no pleasure. It did, however, dull the urge to do things he felt his body was not up to.

Muttering to himself did little to remove his apathy or the guilt he felt for having it. "Why can't I work out of it? Same thoughts torment me, day after day." After a deep breath, he closed his eyes and tried to remember pleasurable incidents in his life. Only matter-of-fact outlines came to mind. He even doubted he could find solace in the notion of suicide. His life was an abyss of dreariness.

Fred's thought of Joe, an old friend he used to see sitting on the bench in front of the court house, and to Sarah, the only woman of recent years who could understand him. They both had a lilt in their voice and a naïve desire for life. "How can they be that way?" He took another swig from the bottle, convulsed momentarily with a hiccup and shook his head slowly. "Those kids in the hills, that commune and damn fool notions that nature and meditation makes 'em enlightened. Omm, what a joke. They'll find out they have to work their ass off to stay fed."

Fred drained the remainder of the bottle and tossed it into the yard, not looking at where it shattered. "Existence is a damn bore," he blurted at no one.

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There was a time when Dr. Fred Brackford had been a different person. On his better days, Fred would reminisce: *Somehow, I was enthusiastic*. He had worked for many years in the nuclear laboratories in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Though married, there were no children. His wife, Carol, was intent on developing

her own career. *I was undecided about no kids, but we were busy.* After twelve years of nuclear research, Fred realized he received more gratification in his sideline activity—writing. His interest in fiction grew intense and added to his science article writing. Eventually he began to get acceptance letters for his fiction manuscripts. *I thought I was headed for glory.*

After a couple of years he and his wife moved into the remote Tennessee town of Parsonburg. Reasons included low cost housing, the colorful Tennessee mountain autumns, and a community college twenty miles away where Carol took a job as career counselor. Soon he stopped the long commutes, severed connections with his former profession and devoted himself to full time writing. *That strained finances at first. Also adjusting to a different life-style.* Still, in an hour they could be in Knoxville, where they had several friends. In time, the need for such excursions dwindled. *I was happy then. Sold my second novel to a New York publisher.* There was no glory in Carol's job, but she gleaned gratification from Fred's success.

Years passed, and they agreed to have a home in the mountains. They bought a nearby farm from the estate of M. J. Brown with notions of remodeling the little house on it or building another. They had no intentions of farming like the Browns, but intended to take up gardening. The pastures could support cattle. *But we wanted them for walks and joy rides in the Jeep.*

When they moved into the little house, he was no longer young, but could still turn any topic into an adventure. Friends in Parsonburg were amazed that he could find interest in almost anyone he met.

Six months later, something happened. Fred dismissed "writer's block" as peculiar to unimaginative people. *I couldn't imagine such a thing, but there it was.* For the first time, he became painfully aware of the full effort in good writing.

Fred lamented memories of what followed: Social events had become

tiresome. He also avoided his wife. Sensing that Carol would look at him wanting to ask what was wrong, he would turn away. *I didn't encourage it. Didn't know what to say.* Though feeling guilty for neglecting Carol, he could no longer touch her and did not understand why. He admonished himself. "I've got to pull out of this."

A strain in the marriage grew. Eventually Fred started to drive his wife away. *Better to cut it off and let her start over.* It wasn't that he didn't care about her. He cared, but could not face failing her any longer. Soon, Carol also yielded to the strange state of despair. *She left and moved to Ohio to be with family. Best thing, considering.*

During the next year, Fred stopped resisting depression. *I just gave up.* Fortunately, a small income existed because of savings investments and royalties on his former anthologies and novels.

Fred felt the years bearing down. When he felt energetic, he went into town for supplies but usually expressed cynicism when called on to speak.

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Dr. Cason looked up from the paperwork his desk. "What do you mean *environmental* factors?" Because of administrative duties, he didn't have much time, but still wanted to keep in touch with the actual practice of psychiatry. He bristled and looked at his watch. "I have a meeting with the board this afternoon, and I need to get ready." Cason faced the tall man again and prompted "So what did you mean, Dr. Knoll?"

The younger Doctor rubbed his beard and continued, "First of all, both Mr. and Mrs. Brown were admitted about the same time. Although in their late seventies, they didn't initially display full dementia. But they *had* slipped into a critical state of self-neglect and apathy. Family members assert they never had either episodic or chronic depression until a year before they were admitted."

The head doctor raised one bushy eyebrow, voicing the question an administrator would pursue. “What arrangements were made regarding their homestead?”

“Well, after the couple was legally declared as incompetent, their kin sold the farm, put part of the proceeds in trust, and the rest is being used with Medicare toward their care here.”

Cason leaned back in his swivel chair. “Back to the point. What does this have to do with the environment?”

Knoll nodded and raised his hand. “I’ll get to that soon. At first I only examined Mr. Brown and suspected senile melancholia. The usual tests followed. He had a high Cortisol level, indicative of stress despite apparent lethargy. But thyroid, pituitary, electrolytic balance and cholesterol were normal. On a hunch, I felt something was different in his case, so I had Dr. Felps do further tests. Felps is the best biochemical diagnostician around with a background in psychiatric medicine. All he could say was the profile was unique. He recommended tri-cyclic antidepressants. Lithium was contraindicated.

“After a few months, Mr. Brown improved. Then he relapsed.” Knoll shrugged and took a deep breath. “It was then I met Mrs. Brown. She had been under Dr. Alice Dayton’s care, but Alice left for the job at the Bambyr College Department of Psychology. I took Mrs. Brown’s case as she was improving, almost sociable. But shortly after, she also relapsed. It was more severe... a ruptured cerebral aneurysm.”

Cason’s face became stony. “And—go on,” he urged.

Knoll lifted his eyes to a spot just above Cason’s head and swallowed. “I then recalled the similarity to Mr. Brown’s case. Dr. Felps examined Mrs. Brown’s test records for me. He told me the profile did resemble that of Mr. Brown.”

“So this means—what?”

“Dr. Cason, I believe Mr. and Mrs. Brown were beginning to improve even as they were admitted. I also believe their condition was unique, and their advanced age, coupled with the medication we administered, led to their present condition.”

“Do you realize what you’re saying?” Dr. Cason said, voice rising in volume. “That we actually *cause* strokes in patients who would get better if we didn’t pump them with drugs?”

Knoll now looked directly into Cason’s eyes. “Yes, I do. But there were things beyond our control at the outset because we didn’t have relevant facts. For months I’ve been plagued with this. That’s why I reviewed their cases—and more. I checked with their family and the Board of Health in Parsonburg, Tennessee. Knoll glanced down at the paper in his hand. “It appears that at one time chemical wastes from Talborn Pharmaceuticals were disposed of in a land fill near the Brown’s farm. In the past they had government contracts in biochemical warfare.”

Cason’s forehead furrowed. “So ground waters leached chemicals from disposal canisters—water which in time might have infiltrated that supplying the Brown’s well.”

“Yes, highly probable.”

“Damn,” Cason shouted. “What an mess we could get into by making that known to the public. Lawsuits, counter-suits, accusations of slander and general chaos. Talborn would try to crush us for letting the cat out.”

“I know.”

Dr. Cason rose, walked to the window and looked out. He rubbed his temples as though a headache were starting. “Get the Parsonburg Board of Health on the phone,” he said. “Ask for advice but don’t be too explicit. Somehow or other, get out to that farm and see if whoever lives there now has any peculiar problems.”

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Fred was sitting on the living room sofa when the car drove up in front of his house. A feeling of dread swept over him at the notion of having a guest. He stood, mumbling, and locked the door. Peering out from behind the curtain, he saw that the tall, bearded young man wore a red shirt. He was unfamiliar to Fred and appeared too uncertain to be a local, but finally walked to the front door and knocked. Fred eyed the car without much interest and looked at the parking emblem on the windshield. Somewhere he had seen it before. Slowly it dawned on him. It was the emblem in the doctor's parking area at Bartson Psychiatric Clinic. Long years ago he had supervised the installation of nuclear isotope equipment in the brain scan facility. He wondered what someone from Bartson was doing out here.

A troublesome thought surfaced: Possibly someone in town had finally convinced officials that old Fred was not merely grouchy and remote but also insane. This young man was probably a doctor and would pretend to be lost and start a conversation in order to "observe" him. *They'll manufacture a legal reason to lock me up. Destroy me with useless drugs.*

A feeling of entrapment seized him. His heart burst into activity as adrenalin and panic surged through him. Trembling, Fred ran through the back door and set a fast pace for the forested hills behind his house. The young doctor heard the back door slam and came around to investigate. Fred turned and saw the bearded young man with his red shirt waving and calling his name. Though dizzy with exertion, Fred continued his escape into the woods.

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He was lost. Fred could have simply rested unobserved and then returned to his house when no one was there, but he wanted to make sure he would not be seen. An old logging road could have led him back by a circuitous route, but he

never found it. Instead there were two days of fatigue, thirst and hunger. The crisis somehow invigorated his dull, regret-plagued brain, but still it was distressing. A rabbit hopped into view, saw him and quickly skittered away. With momentary attention subsiding he mumbled, “Die in this damn forest. Starve to friggin’ death.” Sitting down to rest, his mind drifted into pessimism. His tongue felt thick, and his throat was so dry he could hardly swallow.

After drifting into a light sleep, he heard it in a dream. It sounded like bubbles laughing. *Water*. Fred awoke with ears straining to hear what had been there but never recognized. Though faint and distant, it was a brook. Stumbling to his feet he moved in the direction of the sound. After a quarter hour he found the brook and collapsed on the bank. Hanging his head over, Fred drank deeply of the cold water. Then he pushed his entire head under and brought it back up, sputtering and shaking. After pushing his hair back, he sat against a tree and bemoaned his situation until, again, he dozed off . . .

Hunger woke him. His growling stomach would not tolerate self-pity. Fred rose and began moving parallel to the stream. Twice small animals scurried about, suitable for a meal if he had a way to catch and cook them.

Hours later he was exhausted again and looked about for a place to sit. A faint sound like voices stopped him. Or was it the gurgling of water? Straining to hear, Fred decided it was voices. He moved on and saw the two people in a small clearing. They lay on the ground near a basket lunch.

“What the hell,” Fred muttered softly. “Must be a couple of those commune kids. Overalls and cutoffs, soft white faces and long hair.” He focused on the basket of food and his mouth began to water.

He found a palm-sized rock and threw it off into the wood to make a distracting noise. They stopped talking and stood. Fred threw yet another stone and the couple walked toward the noise of its landing, hand in hand. When they had

gone twenty yards beyond the brush, Fred stealthily moved into the clearing. He reached into the basket and pulled out a chicken breast. With wild gusto he chomped into it and reached back for more food. He stuffed his pockets and turned to leave.

They were standing there watching him. Fred froze, shifting his eyes from one face to the other, still munching.

“Hey man, you didn’t have to do that,” the young man said. “If you’re hungry you could have asked.”

Fred said nothing.

“Jeez, Tom. He looks worn out,” the girl added. Her nervous grip on Tom’s hand relaxed. “Who are you, Mister?”

“I was just—I was lost, and saw this,” Fred said. He swallowed, cleared his throat and finally continued. “I’m Fred Brackford. Live on a small farm somewhere nearby and...” He saw no way to cover for his stealing, so he came to the point. “Look, I’m sorry about the food.

In a brighter voice Tom said, “Hey, it’s all right, Pop. No real harm done. This is June. I’m Tom.”

“You kids, you live at the commune?”

“Right-on, Pop. Listen man, sit down. You look bushed.”

“Tom, Fred must live on that farm we saw the other day,” June said.

Tom nodded and sneezed.

Leaning against a tree, Fred settled onto the ground. The couple also sat down and began gently aiming questions at him, but he drifted off again. His sleep was troubled and dreary, but it gave him essential rest anyhow...

Later, Fred’s eyes opened and he sighed.

Tom was staring at him, as if amazed. “Hey, Pop’s waking up now. Jeez, man, you can really snore.”

Fred leaned forward and rubbed his face. He then sat straighter and stared bleary-eyed at the youths. “Oh hell. I know I’m not in Heaven,” he murmured, then louder. “I’m not seeing two angels here.”

“*Whoa Pop,*” Tom said. “We may not be your ultra-straight with short hair and creased pants, but we’re okay.”

Fred felt differently than he had in months: not especially good, but as if his opinions mattered. There was some irritability, but it was better than lethargy. He grimaced, repositioning his back against the tree. “What you kids do at the commune?”

“We’re new here,” June said. “We just decided to hell with the system’s regimented life. We want the freedom of nature and the commune.”

“Freedom?”

“Yeah,” Tom said. “At least no one’s trying to program you to be a damned robot. Like, we’re not going to be—Oh man, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me,” Fred snapped. “Look, I’ve got an institutional Ph.D. and chucked it. I’ve written about life for years, and now I live like a bum in a broken down ten-acre farmhouse. In some ways I’m a stick-in-the-mud, but hardly anybody’s robot.”

“Ah, so he’s a writer,” Tom said, raising eyebrows in mock surprise. “He understands life because he watches other people live it. Okay, here it is: Most middle class kids go to school and learn to fit into our socioeconomic system. Despite its complex workings, the system’s so dumb it can only overproduce consumer crap here and start wars elsewhere. People become neurotic machines at work and zombies afterwards. Man, nuclear families are little, mobile, *exclusive* units designed by the system to paralyze imagination. That’s so they’ll have plenty of energy left over to make crap, consume crap, and send kids to war for deranged old men.”

“That’s it?” Fred said. “I suppose your commune is ‘open’. No exclusivity there. Some horny guy wants to get a little, legs open up everywhere, huh?”

Tom snickered. “What do we have here—envy? Pop wishes his lifestyle had been a little more active.”

June broke in. “Look you two, this trip’s getting messy. Tom, you know it’s not quite like that. People have preferences, feelings, just no rigid walls.”

“There’s the kink,” Fred said. “There are preferences and feelings, but no walls. Somebody always ends up left out while some other fool’s a glutton. Otherwise someone beds down with a creep because it’s expected in the clan—”

“Hold on, Pop,” Tom said. “Your neurotic squares deal with that too. The uptight lifestyle just doesn’t allow time to work it out. Man, the commune is relaxed enough for people to grow.”

“Two things, young man: One, my name is not ‘Pop.’ Second, you are finally getting at the crux.” Fred grinned. “You have to ‘work it out.’ Freedom costs something. There are warmonger brutes all over the world. If our military went to lunch, a new military would pounce in to ‘protect’ you: alien, dictatorial brutes from some other country. They’ll not only laugh at your open love and chase you out of parks, but they’ll throw you in the pokey.”

Fred stood and his face reddened with anger. “You can drop out and let somebody else fight your wars, make the machines and elect the VIP’s who might screw up and end life for all of us. Get away from the hassle and let the ‘squares’ handle it. Run for the good life in the woods. Let me tell you something.” Fred was now shaking. “You get out here with time on your hands, you will still find problems.”

A sinking feeling came over him. The anger was draining, and the familiar feeling of pessimism returned. He looked away but felt the young man staring, waiting for a slobbering old fool to blow it off. Without further comment, Fred

turned and bounded into the forest.

June called after him and Tom tried to wave him back, but he never acknowledged.

Fred continued to run, hoping exertion would drive off the gloom he felt. He considered that, despite their differences, the youths were right in some ways. Fred almost hoped their commune would work out. Then pesky words began to form: *They're escapists, naïve dropouts...But I ran away too. I dropped out—in a different way. Oh, not again. No words.*

Gripping his his hair in his fists he fell to his knees. “Oh please stop.” Regrets formed words as they had thousands of times before. There was *some* difference, however. Anger and lack of tolerance were unexpected. And yet, there was another side. He wished the young couple well.

Fred wondered. Do problems negate a thing's worth? Is the price of pleasure a valid objection? Maybe he had forgotten what pleasure was. *God, there must be something wrong with me.* The words, the broken record continued. Finally, another merciful sleepiness crept over him, and he willingly gave in to it.

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For the next two days, Fred wandered about, drinking from streams and eating berries until he discovered the commune. Early the next morning, in cover of near darkness, he crept into the garden and then a storehouse. Sneaking off with some vegetables and bread, he then returned and took a blanket and other supplies for a makeshift camp.

The following morning he rose from his fitful sleep and began a small fire for a stew concocted from assorted foodstuffs. Achieving the desired flame, he sat back, watching the sticks and twigs become engulfed by hungry little tongues of fire. The smoke curled upward in the crisp morning air and appeared to collect in a lofty horizontal blanket. A bluff dropped away into a canyon a scant thirty feet

away. Fred sat, content to take root in the ground. Then pesky words of pessimism formed in his mind again. Yet there were new words too, words that almost offered hope. Fred thought maybe something different was happening in his mind.

Soon his growling stomach prompted him to test the stew. *Not too bad.* Pouring some into a makeshift bowl and spooning it up slowly, he blew on each bite to avoid scalding his tongue. The relief from hunger was gratifying, but short lived: Twigs snapping in the distance interrupted his peace, and he placed the half empty bowl down. Someone or something was walking over the forest floor near his camp. Fred determined that the sound came from north of him, near the edge of the canyon. Rapidly, he moved into the brush back from the precipice and moved parallel to it, toward the sound of the intruder.

Fred saw flashes of red between the trees. After moving closer he recognized a bright red shirt. A bearded man with a hiking pack on his back moved stealthily toward the smoke of his camp. It was the young doctor Fred had seen a few days ago. Alarm forged his next thought. *I've got to stop this guy.* Fred reached down and picked up a large club-sized piece of wood. Then his panic changed to rage, and he ran toward the man.

Fred saw surprise on the face of the intruder at his furious approach. The wooden club whistled a few scant inches from the man's ear before he reacted. He turned, ran toward the bluff and, apparently seeing his mistake, turned back.

"Now, Mr. Brackford," he said. "Easy Mr.—"

"*Doctor* Brackford to you, shrink, I know what you are up to, and you are not—" He swung the club again and this time struck the other man's forearm.

"Ow! Look, man, I'm Dick Knoll, and I'm not here to cause you harm." Knoll then tried to wrest the club from Fred on the next swing, but loose rocks on the ground beneath his boot made him lose balance and Fred's club struck his shoulder.

When Knoll staggered back, clutching his shoulder, Fred rushed in. In a light-headed frenzy, he drove the other man closer to the precipice and mustered another long, deliberate swing of his weapon. The club hit the side of the younger man's head with a distinct *thump*. Knoll's form careened and fell half way over the escarpment. The weight of his upper body over the edge tugged at the remainder, and then he slipped off entirely. Fred watched the body as it dropped, legs cart-wheeling in abruptly changing patterns as it bumped against the rugged bluff wall. Finally, it came to a sudden stop. A leg was twisted unnaturally under the motionless form.

Slowly the rage subsided, and Fred moved in a daze back to his camp. A veil descended upon his remembrance of the immediate past, and he forgot about the man with the red shirt. Eventually he went about getting foodstuffs in order and bringing in firewood. Another evening came, and Fred started a fire, then sat back against a pine tree and stared into the dancing flames. Eventually he gave up trying to remember something that was needling him.

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Fred was more relaxed than he had been since his entry into the woods, but he was not sleepy. An undefined sense of thrill almost trickled underneath his awareness. He lifted his eyes from the dancing flickers of the campfire and paused upon distant pines silhouetted against the large, orange orb of a rising moon. Distinctly, Fred heard the firewood hiss and pop. With each pop, thousands of tiny bright sparks shot out and rose into the chilling air, winking out above the silhouette of the pines. Inner connections and feelings long forgotten began to sprout deep within him.

He recalled his friend Joe was sitting on a bench in front of the Parsonburg courthouse, carving a pony from a piece of wood. He bobbed his head in cheerful agreement as he was spoken to. After an amusing anecdote of his own, he would

run his thick tongue slowly across his grinning lips. Never mind his shabby gray hair and stubble of a beard, he was one of the neatest men Fred had ever known. He always tied up loose ends in any story he told.

There was Sarah now, standing behind the counter at the library. She always liked Fred and was interested in almost anything he pursued. For some time after his wife had left, Fred still fought against his depression. He tried to distract his feelings at the library. Sarah would always try to find a silver lining even in his most pessimistic statements. She helped him locate material, and he could see her now; a large-framed but well-shaped woman on a step ladder, reaching up in the stacks for a book on the top shelf. More out of male habit than feelings, Fred looked at the back of her white knees and calves as the hem of her dress lifted while she stretched.

She would then turn back to him, holding a book, with her wide mouth smiling and dark eyes glittering. Once she said “This ole’ boy can’t stay down forever. He’s got to get his spunk back someday. And when he does, maybe he’ll give Sarah a little notice since he’s a free man now.” She then laughed, putting it over as a kindly joke rather than pressure. At that time, Fred felt little. But now as he thought of her face, his heart swelled with feelings of love. *God, she never gave up. It was me.* He eventually withdrew.

He shook his head slowly and looked into the starry night. Eventually, a great feeling of weariness came over him and he lay back. Soon he was in a sound sleep...

Something was lost and he was trying to find it. He couldn’t remember what it was, but it was lost in the folds of his blanket. He moved the rumped bed cover back and forth, occasionally catching sight of something like a penny. Somehow the penny was alive, in trouble and needed rescue. Trying to pick it up, he fumbled and only caught a glance revealing that it wore a tiny red shirt. As he watched, the

blanket rose from him and flew out the window. He could hear the red penny calling for help.

Fred awoke to the pre-dawn morning. The fire was but a glowing ember, and he shivered from the cold. The sky was brightening rapidly, however, giving promise of warmth. He lay quietly and thought about his bizarre dream—the red-shirted penny.

Red shirt. Fred sat up abruptly as realization poured in. “My god, That *man* down there. What did I do?” He stumbled to his feet and started moving toward the precipice. Stopping near the edge he swayed back and forth, wishing his realization were also simply a dream. Then he moved parallel to the edge, toward the spot where Knoll had fallen. Fred stumbled twice, each time cursing his awkwardness. Soon he saw a shallow trench caused by erosion that led in tortuous fashion down the side of the bluff. He slipped into the depression and began to scramble, crawl, and tumble down.

Eventually, he reached the bottom of the canyon and began his search. The perspective entirely different from above, he nevertheless persisted until he saw what appeared to be a body. The dirty red shirt confirmed his discovery.

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Fred finally sat down after stoking the fire again. More stew would soon be ready. The older man had not even stopped after the long, exhausting ordeal of bringing Knoll up the bluff. He barely managed to keep the unconscious body from slipping back.

The day was bright and no longer cold. On occasions Knoll would almost wake, only to drift off again. His head was badly bruised but had not bled much. Fred had straightened his lower leg and bound it with makeshift splints. He did what he could. Somehow he had to get help, but for now he needed rest.

Fred sighed wearily and lay back, the blanket bundled under his head for a

pillow. His mind wandered back over the last year or two, and he thought of Sarah again.

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Once he was feeling fairly good and asked her to go on a walk through the park with him during the lunch period. The day was warm and sunny and he felt unusually talkative that day. Sarah was delighted.

She took his arm and squeezed: “Well, this ole’ boy has got a lot of things inside he hasn’t been saying. You know, Fred, you really are an interesting guy.”

He cracked a slight crooked smile. The genuine warmth of this person penetrated even his dulled and self-critical mind.

They came to a park bench and sat down. Fred was bubbling with pleasure and looked at her confident and expectant smile. Her dark eyes were surrounded by the little lines that years bestow, but they were still lively and alert. He began to outline an unfinished story he started two years earlier. Even as he spoke to Sarah’s attentive ears, his enthusiasm collapsed for no known reason, and his imagination shrank into the recesses of his mind. An immense sense of pressure at being with someone weighed upon him, and he said to Sarah. “I guess I’d better get along home. I have things to do.”

Her wide, happy face melted. To Fred it was the saddest he had ever seen. She sat and said nothing. As he was walking from her his mind screamed: *Oh dear God, not with her. Why does it happen to me with her?*

In a daze Fred drove home. He sank in his chair to sulk, and pleaded that whatever gods there may be would take his life. Later the phone rang. Fred pulled his wits together and answered it. It was Sarah. In a somber but kindly voice she thanked him for the outing that day. After she hung up, Fred’s tears flowed with both self-pity and gratitude. By all rights she should have rejected him, but didn’t.

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Knoll groaned and his eyelids flickered. He rolled his head back and forth a few times and opened his eyes.

At first Fred didn't notice, still thinking about the incident with Sarah.

Knoll called out, "What?"

Fred sat up and looked at the man. His eyes were open wide, and he was trying to lift his head. Fred stood and walked toward Knoll.

"What? Why?" the young doctor said. "Dursdy. Um, thirsty," he added.

Fred gave him a drink of water and then poured out a little stew. He brought it to Knoll and carefully spooned it into his open lips. Knoll received the nourishment, but became apprehensive.

"Take it easy fella," Fred said. "I'm not going to knock you around anymore. You've had a nasty fall, and I'm really sorry about my part in that. It's a miracle your head wasn't cracked. I don't understand it. I've been in the pits for years, and then when you show up, I turn into some wild-ass ape man and try to smash you."

"Mr.—uh, Brackford," the young doctor said., "there's something you need to know." He struggled painfully to sit upright, and, with Fred's help managed. "There's the possibility that well water contamination at your farm has been affecting you or your family." After pausing with a pain in his throbbing leg, he continued. "A case history on previous owners of that farm shows mental depression and possibly other medical complications." He grimaced and lay back down.

Fred stared, as yet without comprehension.

Knoll tried to sit up but settled back again. "God, my head hurts. My whole body hurts... You've got to get me some help, and yourself also." He turned his head toward Fred. "Believe me, normally I wouldn't be blurting these things out, but under the circumstances there's more to lose by keeping it quiet. Talborn

Pharmaceuticals had a chemical waste dump.” Knoll lay the back of his hand on his brow and haltingly continued. “Water probably leached certain chemicals from their containers and...”

Slowly, the impact of what Knoll was saying sank in. Fred could hardly believe it. It was too optimistic. He could be *cured*, and he thought it might already be happening; he hadn’t drunk poisoned well water for days. That’s why he was changing.

Knoll explained how too rapid a withdrawal could cause emotional vacillation and states of mania.

Never mind, Fred thought. That was far better than the lethargic, soul crushing gloom that had been his life for so long. He stood and, with hands locked behind his back, began to pace. It was not from anxiety but from unexpressed joy. Finally he stretched his arms upward shouting “Wahoo.” and then faced Knoll. “I’ll find someone to help you, young fella.” Turning toward the commune, Fred began a brisk pace through the woods.

*

“Right-on man, we know that spot,” Bill said. “Tom, go round up some guys and get that stretcher from the sick room.” He then leaned back and looked at Fred. “You look like you could flake out, man. Just hang around here ‘til we get him back. Don’t fret, we know that spot well.”

Fred sat down, glad to rest. The kids at the commune, as well as the older ones like Bill, seemed a generous and kind group—at least for an emergency. Soon Bill left with the crew of rescuers and Fred was alone in the small room.

Almost alone: June stood in the hallway barely outside the door, looking at him pensively. “Fred, isn’t it?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Did you—I mean, like is anything wrong? You know, like you’re having a

heavy trip or something?” She moved to the doorway, but stopped there with her left leg straight, supporting her weight, and right hand against the upper doorjamb for balance. The right knee had a slight bend.

“In fact,” Fred said, watching the slow, unconscious side-to-side oscillations of her bare right leg. “I have been under some...medical complications.” He watched the tan fleshy leg a little longer and raised his eyes. The waist of her short, shaggy jeans ended before the jersey-type top began and showed her navel resting in soft belly flesh. His eyes lifted past the easy swells of her breasts, covered by the soft, thin material. The sensuous mouth distorted slightly as she nibbled at one corner of her lower lip. Head lowered, her forehead lined as her eyes and brows lifted upward to see him.

Visions of what her body must be like under the garments caressed Fred’s mind. He felt a stirring in his groin and a gentle heat in the pit of his stomach. *Oh my god*, he thought, stumbling to his feet. “Look, I’m going to find one of those cots in the sick room and take a short nap, okay?”

“Sure, Fred, I’ll show you where it is.” She led him down the hallway of the crudely assembled building.

He watched her rounded buttocks move in a rhythmic pattern underneath the faded denim. She directed him into a small room and turned to leave, stopping momentarily to wave in circular fashion.

Fred lay down and tried to relax. But visions of bouncy flesh underneath denim straining to contain it drifted through his mind. The stirring in his groin returned, and he marveled at the renewed sensation, unable to even *remember* when that last happened. Soon, his mind became too active to rest. He arose and went out of the room. A feeling of adventure beckoned and he had to follow. Opening the front door to the building, Fred saw that no one was around. After darting across the clearing into a thicket, he was soon lost among the trees and

without a care in the world.

Coming to the foot of a large forested hill, he began to trudge upward. Despite his enthusiasm, he could not maintain the pace he initiated. Soon he had to stop and lie down. As the wild beating of his heart slowed, a troublesome question arose: Why had Carol left him? Because he had become sick and unloving, and she had, too? Yet she had recovered after leaving. Why didn't she try to get him to seek help instead of doing everything she could to promote the divorce? Was there something else involved that the mental depression triggered?

Fred then remembered something he ignored in his enthusiastic days: the look of quiet shock and initial reticence when he proposed moving to Parsonburg. Maybe she preferred to travel a different road all along but was too protective of his happiness to assert herself.

What should he do now? There was nothing he could do. That part of his life was simply lost. He heard she had remarried, anyhow. Gradually the thoughts slowed, and Fred sensed the drowsiness he should have felt on the cot back at the commune. Yawning, he soon forgot everything and drifted into a timeless, thoughtless space.

*

It was dusk when he awoke, feeling hungry. Fred fumbled in his pockets for a morsel, pulling out a dried beef stick and a carrot, both wrapped in a single piece of foil. His mouth watered in anticipation of the salty meat. He stood and munched as he continued the upward trip. The hill was high, but he finally reached the top. Fred found a boulder suitable for a seat and sat while his heartbeat returned to normal. It was night now but he didn't mind. He peered out over the surroundings from his high place, once again seeing an enchanting sight.

A full moon, made yellow by nearness to the horizon, was rising. Tiny silhouettes of distant trees seemed to magnify it. It rose slowly like a giant,

glowing balloon, radiating love and promise. Fred felt a mysterious excitement, as though his soul were rising up the abyss toward a world of wonder. The whole universe appeared conscious and in a state of waiting. Anticipation of joy not experienced since boyhood swelled in his chest. A gentle breeze stirred and branches of nearby trees nodded toward one another as if in silent communication of timeless secrets. Fred stood and took a deep breath. Stretching his arms outward, he then pulled them back in to his chest, drawing the essence of the magic night into his being.

He thought of Carol and felt love. There was no desire to change anything: simply a wish to assure her everything was all right. The thought of Joe brought a smile. Fred could see himself laughing at some outrageous yarn with his arm, good-pal fashion, about Joe's shoulders.

Old Fred didn't feel *old* anymore. In fact he had many good years to come. The *old man* syndrome had been mostly a state of mind and now it would be different. "I'm *young*," Fred shouted. "Young, you hear?" He imagined the presence of the entire commune population below. His mental audience also included ancient sages, nodding their heads in delight at his discovery. Fred thought of Sarah. "Oh sweet Sarah," he whispered. Then louder, "Sarah, this ole' boy is alive again. In more ways than one." He chortled, thinking of his reaction to June back at the commune.

He began to fantasize: Cupping Sarah's face in his hands and softly kissing those wide, expectant lips. Nuzzling her dark hair and neck and pretending to nibble an ear lobe. Her soft, mature breasts pressing against him as his hands moved down her back, past the narrow of her waist and over the rounded contours below. Fred could imagine her looking up at him with glittering eyes. He sighed and shook his head slowly. "Heart of gold—deserves to be treated right."

In the distance, Fred heard the quavering of a loon. There was a lake nearby.

Over the gentle swelling and ebbing of the breeze he heard an owl. An image of large, alert eyes and wind-ruffled feathers appeared in his mind. Eventually the moon turned into a bright silver disk and rested high in the night sky. The moonlit forest possessed an eerie beauty: trees, rocks and grass made enchanting by the silvery highlight. Shadows on the ground created dark patches of nocturnal mystery. He looked at the sky and saw thin clouds racing silently across the face of the moon. In his mind he was soaring among them. There was no place his mind could not go.

But there was more. With his change of mental and emotional state, the world about him changed. The universe *was* mind, and his mind could do what it wanted. If he wanted to fly, all he had to do was believe it. Nothing was impossible. “This boy’s gonna friggin’ *fly*,” Fred shouted and began jumping around, flapping his arms. Then he approached a severe drop-off in the hill. The ultimate test was before him: Mind over matter which, itself, was merely part of mind. Running toward the edge of the steep grade, he felt a strange power flowing through him. Then he lunged outward with arms up before him and legs straight behind.

Something inside his head told him he ought to feel a sickening, falling sensation followed by a rude, jarring crash. But, that was not what he experienced. Instead, he felt suspension in space and time. Silent thunder released a mystical stream which flowed through his body, causing a tingling along his spine. He actually began to move upward through the air. The leaves of top tree branches shimmered in breeze and moonlight underneath his feet. Fred felt slight temperature differences in the air currents softly buffeting his body. At the distant horizon, he saw storm clouds gathering. They created a startling counterpoint with the clear sky near the moon. Diffuse flickers of electrical discharge deep within the cloud bank contrasted with the crisp orb overhead.

Soon Fred felt moisture from one of the scanty clouds and things about him became misty. He closed his eyes for the rise through and above the clouds. Then he shuttered at the onset of a strange headlong rushing. When cautiously opening his eyes, he gasped.

The moon, no longer a small orb, nearly filled his entire field of vision. He was closer to the moon than the Earth. He must have encountered some kind of vortex in space and now he was on the other side, staring wide-eyed at the cold lunar surface. The incredible nature of what was happening then occurred: There was a powerful, loving intelligence behind this event. Fred had been *chosen* for an adventure into paranormal dimensions of mind and space that a mere handful of humans had ever experienced. Legendary visionaries watched and waited silently; he could *feel* their smiles and sense their rapt attention to some extraordinary coming event.

It was gradual at first, but soon it became apparent what was happening. A tugging had taken hold of him. He was moving toward the lunar surface with greater acceleration than gravity could account for. As the searing pain of fear stabbed his belly, Fred knew. *They made a mistake.*

His body rotated in slow head-over-heel motion as he streaked onward, and he heard a repetitive sound, *pat pat pat pat*. The part of his body pulled hardest was nearest to the moon, as though the orb contained an immense black hole. With feet downward, he felt his knees painfully disjoint as ligaments and tendons snapped. His gonads pulled as if in the grasp of a demonic terror. When his head moved into the lead, he felt his eyes bulge as his brain crushed against his cranium. The aching, straining skull began to open at fissures between the bones. His neck disjointed segment by segment, and the stretched spinal cord threatened to snap. *Pat pat pat pat*. Hot, sour stomach contents rushed to his throat. Pain forced his inner scream. But on it went. *Pat pat pat pat*—Suddenly it stopped.

*

Fred saw a timeless, blue expanse spread before him. He could hear waves sloshing in upon an unseen shore. Occasionally there was that other sound in the distance: *Pat pat pat pat*. He tried to move and felt pain. He was somehow restricted but not alarmed. The sloshing upon that unseen shore soothed him, each wave a nourishment to his soul.

PAT PAT PAT PAT. A large dragonfly hovered in the sky and looked down at him. Something was wrong with its wings. The wings were located on the back but spun around mechanically, beating the air. An engine hum added to the sound. Finally the helicopter turned slowly and raced off. Full recognition then came to him like a dawn. It was a search and rescue team dispatched to find him.

Fred craned his neck and struggled to see beyond the blue sky overhead. His upward facing body was precariously cradled in the branches of a tree. He tested his arms and legs, one by one, and managed slight movement in spite of pain and aching. Needed help would come in time because he had been seen. The tree supporting him was anchored low in the steep hill he had ascended earlier. The lake shore below him harbored clicking insects and croaking frogs, bringing a peaceful feeling of familiarity. Fred guessed he must have been in that tree for at least half a night and some of the day.

Did he really fly? Maybe *they did* make a mistake and he was sent back. No matter if it happened or not, to Fred it was real and fostered an exciting expectancy about life. He tried to remember what it was like to be pessimistic and melancholy but could not. It was now inconceivable that he had not recognized it as sickness and wondered whether the depressed mind actually protects its illness. He yawned and felt weariness. In spite of his uncomfortable position, drowsiness washed over him...

The distant roaring of an engine roused him. A ground vehicle was making

its way through the woods, along logging trails and across brush. The whining transmission protested the strain demanded of it. Soon the motor dropped to a low rumble and the piercing squeal of brakes announced arrival atop a bluff above Fred's location. From his perspective, only the top of a truck could be seen until several people moved to the edge of the precipice. They moved around excitedly and then pointed toward him. The distance between the tip of the bluff on which they stood and the tree in which Fred lay was too great for him to make out the words, but he could hear them calling toward him.

After more confusing ado, a megaphone was produced. A tall man brought it to his mouth and called to Fred. "Dr. Brackford, can you hear me? Are you conscious?"

It was painful, but Fred managed to raise one arm and noted some response among the group.

"Good," the voice continued. "I'm Ranger Morgan and we'll be down to get you before long. Just hang in there. If this doesn't work, we'll call in the rescue helicopter for an air lift."

Beneath the soreness and pain, Fred felt that he was going to be all right.

"Oh, by the way," the ranger's voice continued, "we have a young couple here from a nearby commune camp that helped us locate you. But there are two others from Parsonburg."

He didn't have to say. Fred knew. It was Joe and Sarah.

"This lady here...she wants to talk to you while I make preparations." The megaphone was transferred. Fred grew alert.

"What in god's name are you doing down there, Fred?" Sarah said, laughing. After a pretended sigh, she continued. "You can be a pill at times, but you're a lovable ole' cuss. I reckon we'll just have to get you out." There was a confused pause as though she could not understand the lack of a reply. Then she brought the

megaphone to her mouth again. “Are you doing research for another book, Fred? I’ll bet you are. I’ll bet you’re gathering material for another fantastic adventure story.”

Fred grinned as the warm feeling crept over him. *That’s true*. He now had experiences for one of the best stories he ever wrote. Something of an exposé, as a matter of fact. After a deep breath, he closed his eyes and made an oath. *Never again accept chronic despair as inevitable reality*. Then Fred let his breath out slowly and thought of Sarah and Joe. Though it hurt his side, he began to chuckle with anticipation of new adventures in a good life.

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