EXECUTIVE CLEMENCY

By Gardner Dozois and Jack C. Haldeman II

The President of the United States sat very still in his overstuffed chair on the third floor and watched early morning sunlight sweep in a slow line across the faded rug.

He couldn't remember getting out of bed or sitting down in the chair. He could dimly recall that he had been sitting there for a long time, watching the slow advent of dawn, but he was only just beginning to become fully aware of himself and his surroundings.

Only his eyes moved, yellow and wet, as the world seeped in.

This happened to him almost every morning now. Every morning he would return slowly to his body as if from an immense distance, from across appalling gulfs of time and space, to find himself sitting in the chair, or standing next to the window, or, more rarely, propped up in the corner against the wall. Sometimes he'd be in the middle of dressing when awareness returned, and he'd awake to find himself tying a shoelace or buttoning his pants. Sometimes,

like this morning, he'd just be sitting and staring. Other times he would awaken to the sound of his own voice, loud and cold in the bare wooden room, saying some strange and important things that he could never quite catch. If he could only hear the words he said at such times, just once, he knew that it would change everything, that he would understand everything. But he could never hear them.

He didn't move. When the lines of sunlight reached the chair, it would be time to go downstairs. Not before, no matter how late it sometimes made him as the sunlight changed with the seasons, no matter if he sometimes missed breakfast or, on cloudy winter days, didn't move at all until Mrs. Hamlin came upstairs to chase him out. It was one of the rituals with which he tried to hold his life together.

The east-facing window was washed over with pale, fragile blue, and the slow-moving patch of direct sunlight was a raw, hot gold. Dust motes danced in the beam. Except for those dust motes, everything was stillness and suspension. Except for his own spidery breathing, everything was profoundly silent. The room smelled of dust and heat and old wood. It was the best part of the day. Naturally it couldn't last.

Very far away, floating on the edge of hearing, there 'came the mellow, mossy bronze voice of a bell, ringing in the village of Fairfield behind the ridge, and at that precise moment, as though the faint tintinnabulation were its cue, the house itself began to speak. It was a rambling wooden house, more than a hundred years old, and it talked to itself at dawn and dusk, creaking, groaning, whispering, muttering like a crotchety old eccentric as its wooden bones expanded with the sun or contracted with the frost. This petulant, arthritic monologue ran on for a

few minutes, and then the tenants themselves joined in, one by one: Seth in the bathroom early, spluttering as he washed up; Mr. Thompkins, clearing his throat interminably in the room below, coughing and hacking and spitting as though he were drowning in a sea of phlegm; Sadie's baby, crying in a vain attempt to wake her sluggard mother; Mrs. Hamlin, slamming the kitchen door; Mr. Samuels's loud nasal voice in the courtyard outside.

The sunlight swept across his chair.

The President of the United States stirred and sighed, lifting his arms and setting them down again, stamping his feet to restore circulation. Creakily he got up. He stood for a moment, blinking in the sudden warmth, willing life back into his bones. His arms were gnarled and thin, covered, like his chest, with fine white hair that polarized in the sunlight. He rubbed his hands over his arms to smooth out gooseflesh, pinched the bridge of his nose, and stepped across to the gable window for a look outside. It seemed wrong somehow to see the neat, tree-lined streets of Northview, the old wooden houses, the tiled roofs, the lines of smoke going up black and fine from mortar chinked chimneys. It seemed especially wrong that there were no automobiles in the streets, no roar and clatter of traffic, no reek of gasoline, no airplanes in the sky-

He turned away from the window. For a moment everything was sick and wrong, and he blinked at the homey, familiar room as though he'd never seen it before, as though it were an unutterably alien place. Everything became hot and tight and terrifying, closing down on him. What's happening? he asked himself blindly. He leaned against a crossbeam, dazed and baffled, until the distant sound of Mrs. Hamlin's voice-she was scolding Tessie in the kitchen, and the ruckus rose all the way up through three floors of pine and plaster and fine old penny nails-

woke him again to his surroundings, with something like pleasure, with something like pain.

Jamie, they called him. Crazy Jamie.

Shaking his head and muttering to himself, Jamie collected his robe and his shaving kit and walked down the narrow, peeling corridor to the small upstairs bedroom. The polished hardwood floor was cold under his feet.

The bathroom was cold, too. It was only the beginning of July, but already the weather was starting to turn nippy late at night and early in the morning. It got colder every year, seemed like. Maybe the glaciers were coming back, as some folks said. Or maybe it was just that he himself was worn a little thinner every year, a little closer to the ultimate cold of the grave. Grunting, he wedged himself into the narrow space between the sink and the down slant of the roof, bumping his head, as usual, against the latch of the skylight window. There was just enough room for him if he stood hunch-shouldered with the toilet bumping up against his thigh. The toilet was an old porcelain monstrosity, worn smooth as glass, that gurgled constantly and comfortably and emitted a mellow breath of earth. It was almost company. The yard boy had already brought up a big basin of "hot" water, although by now, after three or four other people had already used it, it was gray and cold; after the last person used it, it would be dumped down the toilet to help flush out the system. He opened his shaving kit and took out a shapeless cake of lye soap, a worn hand towel, a straight razor.

The mirror above the sink was cracked and tarnished no help for it, nobody made mirrors anymore. It seemed an appropriate background for the reflection of his face, which was also, in its way, tarnished and dusty and cracked with age. He didn't know how old he was; that was one of the many things Doc Norton had warned him
not to think about, so long ago. He couldn't even remember how long he'd been living here in Northview. Ten years? Fifteen? He studied himself in the mirror, the blotched, earth-colored skin, the eyes sunk deep under a shelf of brow, the network of fine wrinkles. A well-preserved seventy? Memory was dim; the years were misty and fell away before he could number them. He shied away from trying to remember. Didn't matter.

He covered the face with lathered soap.

By the time he finished dressing, the other tenants had already gone downstairs. He could hear them talking down there, muffled and distant, like water bugs whispering at the mossy bottom of a deep old well. Cautiously Jamie went back into the hall. The wood floors and paneling up here were not as nicely finished as those in the rest of the house. He thought of all the hidden splinters in all that wood, waiting to catch his flesh. He descended the stairs. The banister swayed as he clutched it, groaning softly to remind him that it, too, was old.

As he came into the dining room, conversation died. The other tenants looked up at him, looked away again. People fiddled with their tableware, adjusted their napkins, pulled their chairs closer to the table or pushed them farther away. Someone coughed self-consciously.

He crossed the room to his chair and stood behind it.

"Morning. Jamie." Mrs. Hamlin said crossly.

"Ma'm," he replied politely, trying to ignore her grumpiness. He was late again.

He sat down. Mrs. Hamlin stared at him disapprovingly, shook her head, and then turned her attention pointedly back to her plate. As if this were a signal, conversation started up again, gradually swelling to its normal level. The awkward moment passed. Jamie concentrated on filling his plate, intercepting the big platters of country ham and eggs and corn bread as they passed up and down the table. It was always like this at meals: the embarrassed pauses, the uneasy sidelong glances, the faces that tried to be friendly but could not entirely conceal distaste. Crazy Jamie, Crazy Jamie. Conversation flowed in ripples around him, never involving him, although the others would smile dutifully at him if he caught their eyes, and occasionally Seth or Tom would nod at him with tolerably unforced cordiality. This morning it wasn't enough. He wanted to talk, too, for the first time in months. He wasn't a child, he was a man, an old man! He paid less attention to his food and began to strain to hear what was being said, looking for a chance to, get into the conversation.

Finally the chance came. Seth asked Mr. Samuels a question. It was a point of fact, not opinion, and Jamie knew the answer.

"Yes," Jamie said, "at one time New York City did indeed have a larger population than Augusta."

Abruptly everyone stopped talking. Mr. Samuels's lips closed up tight, and he grimaced as though he had tasted something foul. Seth shook his head wearily, looking sad and disappointed. Jamie lowered his head to avoid Seth's eyes. He could sense Mrs. Hamlin swelling and glowering beside him, but he wouldn't look at her, either.

Damn it, that wasn't what he'd meant to say! They hadn't been talking about that at all. He'd said the wrong thing.

He'd done it again.

People were talking about him around the table, he knew, but he could no longer understand them. He could still hear their voices, but the words had been leeched away, and all that remained was noise and hissing static. He concentrated on buttering a slice of corn bread, trying
to hang on to that simple mechanical act while the world pulled away from him in all directions,

retreating to the very edge of his perception, like a tide that has gone miles out from the beach. When the world tide came back in, he found himself outside on the porch-the veranda, some of the older folks still called it-with Mrs. Hamlin fussing at him, straightening his clothes, patting his wiry white hair into place, getting him ready to be sent off to work. She was still annoyed with him, but it had no real bite to it, and the exasperated fondness underneath kept showing through even as she scolded him. "You go straight to work now, you hear? No dawdling and mooning around." He nodded his head sheepishly. She was a tall, aristocratic lady with a beak nose, a lined, craggy face, and a tight bun of snowy white hair. She was actually a year or two younger than he was, but he thought of her as much, much older. "And mind you come right straight back here after work, too. Tonight's the big Fourth day dinner, and you've got to help in the kitchen, hear? Jamie, are you listening to me?"

He ducked his head and said "Yes'm," his feet already fidgeting to be gone.

Mrs. Hamlin gave him a little push, saying, "Shoo now!" and then, her grim face softening, adding, "Try to be a good boy." He scooted across the veranda and out into the raw, hot brightness of the morning.

He shuffled along, head down, still infused with dull embarrassment from the scolding he'd received. Mr. Samuels went cantering by him, up on his big roan horse, carbine sheathed in a saddle holster, horseshoes ringing against the pavement: off to patrol with the Outriders for the day. Mr. Samuels waved at him as he passed, looking enormously tall and important and adult up on the high

saddle, and Jamie answered with the shy, wide, loose lipped grin that sometimes seemed vacuous even to him. He ducked his head again when Mr. Samuels was out of sight and frowned at the dusty tops of his shoes. The sun was up above the trees and the rooftops now, and it was getting warm.

The five-story brick school building was the tallest building in Northview-now that the bank had burned down-and it cast a cool, blue shadow across his path as he turned onto Main Street. It was still used as a school in the winter and on summer afternoons after the children had come back from the fields, but it was also filled with stockpiles of vital supplies so that it could be used as a stronghold in case of a siege-something that had happened only once, fifteen years ago, when a strong raiding party had come up out of the south. Two fifty-caliber machine guns-salvaged from an Army jeep that had been abandoned on the old state highway a few weeks after the War-were mounted on top of the school's roof, where their field of fire would cover most of the town. They had not been fired in earnest for years, but they were protected from the weather and kept in good repair, and a sentry was still posted up there at all times, although by now the sentry was likely to smuggle a girl up to the roof with him on warm summer nights. Times had become more settled, almost sleepy now. Similarly, the Outriders who patrolled Northview's farthest borders and watched over the flocks and the outlying farms had been reduced from thirty to ten, and it had been three or four years since they'd had a skirmish with anyone; the flow of hungry refugees and marauders and aimless migrants had mostly stopped by now-dead, or else they'd found a place of their own.

These days the Outriders were more concerned with animals. The black bears and grizzlies were back in the

mountains and the nearby hills, and for the past four or five years there had been wolves again, coming back from who-knew-where, increasing steadily in numbers and becoming more of a threat as the winters hardened. Visitors down from Jackman Station, in Maine, brought a story that a mountain lion had recently been sighted on the slopes of White Cap, in the unsettled country "north of the Moosehead," although before the War there couldn't have been any pumas left closer _than Colorado or British Columbia. It had taken only twenty years.

There was a strange wagon in front of the old warehouse that was now the Outriders' station, a rig Jamie had never seen before. It was an ordinary enough wagon, but it was painted. It was painted in mad streaks and strips and random patchwork splotches of a dozen different colors-deep royal blue, vivid yellow, scarlet, purple, earthbrown, light forest-green, black, burnt orange-as if a hundred children from prewar days had been at it with finger paint. To Jamie's eyes, accustomed to the dull and faded tones of Northview's weatherbeaten old buildings, the streaks of color were so brilliant that they seemed to vibrate and stand out in raised contrast from the wagon's surface. He was not used to seeing bright colors anymore, except those in the natural world around him, and this paint was fresh, something he also hadn't seen in more years than he could remember. Even the big horse, which stood patiently in the wagon's traces-and which now rolled an incurious eye up at Jamie and blew out its lips with a blubbery snorting sound-even the horse was painted, blue on one side, bright green on the other, with orange streaks up its flanks.

Jamie goggled at all this, wondering if it could possibly be real or if it was one of the "effects"-hallucinations, as even he understood-that he sometimes got during particularly bad

"spells." After a moment or two-during which the wagon didn't shimmer or fade around the edges at all-he widened his attention enough to notice the signs: big hand-painted signs hung on either side of a kind of sandwich board framework that was braced upright in the wagon bed. At the top each sign read MOHAWK CONFEDERACY in bright red paint, and then, underneath that, came a long list of words, each word painted in a different color:
HAND-LOADED AMMUNITION PAINT FALSE TEETH EYEGLASSES-GROUND TO PRESCRIPTION LAMP OIL PAINLESS DENTISTRY UNTAINTED SEED FOR WHEAT, CORN, MELONS FLAX CLOTH WINDOW GLASS MEDICINES & LINIMENT CONDOMS IRON FARM TOOLS UNTAINTED LIVESTOCK NAILS MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS MARIJUANA WHISKY SOAP PRINTING DONE !ALL MADE IN MOHAWK!
Jamie was puzzling out some of the harder words when the door to the Outriders' station opened and Mr. Stover came hurriedly down the stairs. "What're you doing here,
Jamie?" he asked. "What're you hanging around here for?"
Jamie gaped at him, trying to find the words to describe the wonderful new wagon, and how strange it made him feel, but the effort was too great, and the words slipped away. "Going to Mr. Hardy's store," he said at last. "Just going to sweep up at Mr. Hardy's store."
Mr. Stover glanced nervously back up at the door of the Outriders' station, fingered his chin for a moment while he made up his mind, and then said, "Never mind that today, Jamie. Never mind about the store today. You just go on back home now."
"But-" Jamie said, bewildered. "But-I sweep up every day!"
"Not today," Mr. Stover said sharply. "You go on home, you hear me? Go on, git!"
"Mrs. Hamlin's going to be awful mad," Jamie said sadly, resignedly.
"You tell Edna I said for you to go home. And you stay inside, too, Jamie. You stay out of sight, hear? We've got an important visitor here in Northview today, and it'd never do to have him run into you."
Jamie nodded his head in acceptance of this. He wasn't so dumb that he didn't know what the unvoiced part of the sentence was: run into you, the half-wit, the crazy person, the nut. He'd heard it often enough. He knew he was crazy. He knew that he was an embarrassment. He knew that he had to stay inside, away from visitors, lest he embarrass Mrs. Hamlin and all his friends.
Crazy Jamie.
Slowly he turned and shuffled away, back the way he had come.
The sun' beat down on the back of his head now, and sweat gathered in the wrinkled hollows beneath his eyes.
Crazy Jamie.
At the corner, bathed in the shadow cast by the big oak at the edge of the schoolyard, he turned and looked back.
A group of men had come out of the Outriders' station and were now walking slowly in the direction of Mr. Hardy's store, talking as they went. There was Mr. Jameson, Mr. Galli, Mr. Stover, Mr. Ashley, and, in the middle of them, talking animatedly and waving his arms, the visitor, the stranger-a big, florid-faced man with a shock of unruly blond hair that shone like beaten gold in the sunlight.
Watching him, the visitor-now clapping a hand on Mr. Galli's shoulder, Mr. Galli shrinking away-Jamie felt a chill, that unreasoning and unreasoned fear of strangers, of everything from outside Northview's narrow boundaries, that had affected him ever since he could remember, and suddenly his delight in the wonderful wagon was tarnished, diminished, because he realized that it, too, must come from outside.
He headed for home, walking a little faster now, as if chivied along by some old cold wind that didn't quite reach the sunlit world.
That night was the Fourthday feast-"Independence Day," some of the old folks still called it-and for Jamie, who was helping in the kitchen as usual, the early part of the evening was a blur of work as they sweated to prepare the meal: roast turkey, ham, wild pigeon, trout, baked raccoon, sweet potatoes, corn, pearl onions, berry soup, homemade bread, blackberries, plums, and a dozen other things.
That was all as usual; he expected and accepted that. What was not usual-and what he did not expect-was that he would not be allowed to eat with the rest when the
feast was served. Instead, Tessie set a plate out for him in the kitchen, saying, not unkindly, "Now, Jamie, mind you stay here. They've got a guest out there. this year, that loud-mouthed Mr. Brodey, and Mrs. Hamlin, she says you got to eat in the kitchen and keep out of sight. Now don't you mind, honey. I'll fix you up a plate real nice, just the same stuff you'd get out there."
And then, after a few moments of somewhat embarrassed bustling, she was gone.
Jamie sat alone in the empty kitchen.
His plate was filled to overflowing with food, and he'd even been given a glass of dandelion wine,

a rare treat, but somehow he wasn't hungry anymore.
He sat listening to the wind tug at the old house, creaking the rafters, making the wood groan. When the wind died, he could hear them talking out there in the big dining room, the voices just too faint for him to make out the words.
An unfamiliar anger began to rise in him, "Crazy Jamie," he said aloud, his voice sounding flat and dull to his own ears. It wasn't fair. He glanced out the window, to where the sun had almost set in a welter of sullen purple clouds. Suddenly he slashed out at the glass of wine, sending it spinning to the floor. It wasn't fair! He was an adult, wasn't he? Why did he have to sit back here by himself like a naughty child? Even if-In spite of- He was-
Somehow he found himself on his feet. He deserved to eat with the others, didn't he? He was as good as anybody else, wasn't he? In fact- In fact-
The corridor. He seemed to float along it in spite of his stumbling, hesitant feet. The voices got louder, and just at the point where they resolved into words he stopped, standing unnoticed in the shadows behind the diningroom archway, hanging onto the doorjamb, torn between
rage and fear and a curious, empty yearning.
".Sooner or later you'll find that you have to incorporate with the Confederacy," Mr. Brodey, the stranger, was saying. The other faces around the big dining-room table were cool and reserved.
"The kind of inter-village barter economy you've got up here just can't hold up forever, you know, even though it's really a kind of communal socialism-"
"Are you sayin' we're communists up heah?" Mr. Samuels said, outraged, but before Brodey could reply (if he intended to), Jamie strode to the table, pulled out an empty chair-his own habitual seat-and sat down. All faces turned to him, startled, and conversation stopped.
Jamie stared back at them. To walk to the table had taken the last of his will; things were closing down on him again, his vision was swimming, and he began to lose touch with his body, as if his mind were floating slowly up and away from it, like a balloon held by the thinnest sort of tether. Sweat broke out in his forehead, and he opened his mouth, panting like a dog. Through a sliding, shifting confusion, he heard Mrs. Hamlin start to say, "Jamie! I thought I told you-" at the same time that Mr. Ashley was saying to Mr. Brodey, "Don't let him bother you none. He's just the local half-wit. We'll send him back to the kitchen," and Brodey was smiling in tolerant, condescending amusement, and something about Brodey's thin, contemptuous smile, something about the circle of staring faces, something wrenched words up out of Jamie, sending them suddenly flying out of his mouth. He hurled the familiar words out at the pale staring faces as he had so many times before, rattling their teeth with them, shaking them to their bones. He didn't know what the words meant anymore, but they were the old strong words, the right words, and he heard his voice fill with iron. He
spoke the words until there were no more words to speak, and then he stopped.
A deathly hush had fallen over the room. Mr. Brodey was staring at him, and Jamie saw his face run through a quick gamut of expressions: from irritation to startled speculation to dawning astonishment. Brodey's jaw went slack, and he gasped-a little startled grunt, as if he had been punched in the stomach-and the color went swiftly out of his face. "My God!" he said, "Oh, my God!"
For Jamie, it was as if the world were draining away again, everything pulling back until he could just barely touch reality with his fingertips, and the room shimmered and buzzed as he struggled to hold on to even that much control. All the faces had gone blank, wiped clean of individuality, and he could no longer tell which of the featureless pink ovoids was the sweating, earnest, astounded face of Mr. Brodey. He got clumsily to his feet, driving his leaden body by an act of conscious will, as though it were some ill-made clockwork golem. He flailed his arms for balance, knocked his chair over with a clatter, and stood swaying before them, smelling the sour reek of his own sweat. "I'm sorry," he blurted, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Hamlin. I didn't mean to-"
The silence went on a moment longer, and then, above the mounting waves of buzzing nausea and unreality, he heard Mrs. Hamlin say, "That's all right, child. We know you didn't mean any harm. Go on upstairs now, Jamie. Go on." Her voice sounded dry and flat and tired. '
Blindly Jamie spun and stumbled for the stairs, all the inchoate demons of memory snapping at his heels like years.
Downstairs, Mr. Brodey was still saying, "Oh, my God!" He hardly noticed that the dinner party was being dissolved around him or that Mrs. Hamlin was hustling
him out onto the porch "for a word in private." When she finally had him alone out there, the cool evening breeze slapping at his face through the wire mesh of the enclosed porch, he shook himself out of his daze and turned slowly to face her where she stood hunched and patient in the dappled shadows. "It's him," he said, still more awe than accusation in his voice. "Son of a bitch. It

really is him, isn't it?"
"Who, Mr. Brodey?"
"Don't play games with me," Brodey said harshly. "I've seen the old pictures. The half-wit, he really was-"
"Is."
"-the President of the United States." Brodey stared at her. "He may be crazy, but not because he thinks he's the President-he is the President. James W. McNaughton. He is McNaughton, isn't he?"
"Yes."
"My God! Think of it. The very last President."
"The incumbent President," Mrs. Hamlin said softly:
They stared at each other through the soft evening shadows.
"And it's not a surprise to you, either, is it?" Anger was beginning to replace disbelief in Brodey's voice. "You've known it all along, haven't you? All of you have known. You all knew from the start that he was President McNaughton?"
"Yes."
"My God!" Brodey said, giving an entirely new reading to the phrase, disgust and edgy anger instead of awe. He opened his mouth, closed it, and began turning red.
"He came here almost twenty years ago, Mr. Brodey," Mrs. Hamlin said, speaking calmly, reminiscently. "Perhaps two months after the War. The Outriders found him collapsed in a field out by the edge of town. He was nearly
dead. Don't ask me how he got there. Maybe there was some sort of hidden bunker way back up there in the hills, maybe his plane crashed nearby, maybe he walked all the way up here from what's left of Washington-I don't know. Jamie himself doesn't know. His memory was almost gone; shock, I guess, and exposure. All he remembered, basically, was that he was the President, and even that was dim and misty, like something you might remember out of a bad dream, the kind that fades away and comes back sometimes, late at night. And life's been like a half-dream for him ever since, poor soul. He never did get quite right in the head again."
"And you gave him shelter?" Brodey said, his voice becoming shrill with indignation. "You took him in? That butcher?"
"Watch your mouth, son. You're speaking about the President."
"God damn it, woman. Don't you know-he caused the War?"
After a smothering moment of silence. Mrs. Hamlin said mildly, "That's your opinion, Mr. Brodey, not mine."
"How can you deny it? The `One Life' Ultimatum? The `preventative strikes' on Mexico and Panama? It was within hours of the raid on Monterrey that the bombs started falling."
"He didn't have any other choice! The Indonesians had pushed him-"
"That's crap, and you know it!" Brodey was shouting now. "They taught us all about it down in Mohawk; they made damn sure we knew the name of the man who destroyed the world, you can bet on that! Christ, everybody knew then that he was unfit for office, just a bombastic backwoods senator on a hate crusade, a cracker-barrel warmonger. Everybody said that he'd cause the War if he got into the White House-and he did! By God, he did! That pathetic half-wit in there. He did it!"
Mrs. Hamlin sighed and folded her arms across her middle, hugging herself as if in pain. She seemed to grow smaller and older, more withered and gnarled. "I don't know, son," she said wearily, after a heavy pause. "Maybe he was wrong. I don't know. All that seemed so important then. Now I can hardly remember what the issues were, what it was all about. It doesn't seem to matter much anymore, somehow."
"How can you say that?" Brodey wiped at his face-he was sweating profusely and looking very earnest now, bewilderment leeching away some of the anger. "How can you let that . . . that man . . . him-how can you let him live here, under your roof? How can you stand to let him live at all, let alone cook for him, do his washing. My God!"
"His memory was gone, Mr. Brodey. His mind was gone. Can you understand that? Old Doc Norton, rest his soul, spent months just trying to get Jamie to the point where he could walk around by himself without anybody to watch him too close. He had to be taught how to feed himself, how to dress himself, how to go to the bathroom-like a child. At first there was some even right here in Northview that felt the way you do, Mr. Brodey, and there's still some as can't be comfortable around Jamie, but one by one they came to understand, and they made their peace with him. Whatever he was or wasn't, he's just like a little child now-a sick, old, frightened child who doesn't really understand what's happening to him, most of the time. Mr. Brodey, you can't hate a little child for something he can't even remember he's done."
Brodey spun around, as though to stalk back into the house, and then spun violently back. "He should be

dead!" Brodey shouted. His fists were clenched now, and the muscles in his neck were corded. "At the very least, he should be dead! Billions of lives on that man's hands! Billions. And you, you people, you not only let him live, you make excuses for him! For him!" He stopped, groping for words to express the enormity of his outrage. "It's like . . . like making excuses for the Devil himself!"

Mrs. Hamlin stirred and came forward, stepping out of the porch shadows and into the moonlight, drawing her shawl more tightly around her, as though against a chill, although the night was still mild. She stared eye to eye with Brodey for several moments, while the country silence gathered deeply around them, broken only by crickets and the hoarse sound of Brodey's impassioned breathing. Then she said, "I thought I owed it to you, Mr. Brodey, to try to explain a few things. But I don't know if I can. Things have changed enough by now, steadied down enough, that maybe you younger people find it hard to understand, but those of us who lived through the War, we all had to do things we didn't want to do. Right there where you're standing, Mr. Brodey, right here on this porch, I shot a marauder down, shot him dead with my husband's old pistol, with Mr. Han-din himself laying stiff in the parlor not ten feet away, taken by the Lumpy Plague. And I've done worse things than that, too, in my time. I reckon we all have, all the survivors. And just maybe it's no different with that poor old man sitting in there."

Brodey regained control of himself. His jaw was clenched, and the muscles around his mouth stood out in taut little bands, but his breathing had evened, and his face was tight and cold. He had banked his anger down into a smoldering, manageable flame, and now for the first time he seemed dangerous. Ignoring-or seeming to ignore Mrs. Hamlin's speech, he said conversationally, "Do you know that we curse by him down in Mohawk? His name is a curse to us. Can you understand that? We burn him in effigy on his birthday, in the town squares, and over the years it's become quite a little ceremony. He must atone, Mrs. Hamlin. He must be made to pay for what he's done. We don't suffer monsters to live, down in Mohawk."

"Ayuh," Mrs. Hamlin said sourly, "you do a lot of dam fool, jackass things down there, don't you?"

Mrs. Hamlin tossed her head back, silver hair glinting in the silver light, and seemed to grow taller again. There was a hard light in her eyes now, and a hard new edge in her voice. "Atone, is it now, you jackass? As if you're some big pious kind of churchman, some damn kind of saint, you red-faced, loudmouthed man. You with your dam fool flag and dam fool Mohawk Confederacy. Well, let me tell you, mister, this isn't any Mohawk Confederacy here, never has been, never will be: This is Northview, sovereign state of Vermont, United States of America. Do you hear me, mister? This here is the United States of America, and that poor fool in there-why, he's the President of the United States of America, even if sometimes he can't cut his meat up proper. Maybe he was a fool, maybe he was wrong long ago, maybe he's crazy now, but he's still the President." Eyes snapping, she jabbed a finger at Brodey. "As long as this town stands, then there's still an America, and that old man will be President as long as there are still Americans alive to serve him. We take care of our own, Mr. Brodey; we take care of our own."

A shadow materialized at Brodey's elbow and spoke with Seth's voice. "Edna?"

Brodey turned his head to glance at Seth. When he
turned back to face Mrs. Hamlin, there was a gun in her hand, a big; old-fashioned revolver that looked too huge for the small, blue-veined hand that held it.

"You can't be serious," Brodey whispered.

"You need any help, Edna?" the shadow said. "I brought some of the boys."

"No, thank you, Seth." The barrel of the revolver was as unwavering as her gaze. "There's some things a person's got to do for herself."

Then she cocked the hammer back.

The President of the United States didn't notice the shot. Alone in the small upstairs bathroom, he avoided the eyes of the tarnished reflection in the mirror and compulsively washed his hands.