

The Utility Man

Robert Reed

MOST PEOPLE stand up front and wait for the horn. It's Monday morning. Faces are long and tired, voices hoarse, and red eyes squint and water from too little of this. Too much of that. It's like any Monday, except for two things. First, Miller is up front with the others. That's unusual. For the last three years, without exception, he's punched in and gone to the back of the plant. He's got his stuff back there, and he reads until the horn goes off. Books. It's always books with Miller. Except today, that is. He's sitting on a heavy worktable and staring at the door, his expression eager and strange. The second oddity is visible from where he's sitting. Out on the parking lot, on the dirty white gravel, waits a camera crew from the town's only TV station. The new employee is coming this morning. But what's the big fucking deal? some wonder. There's already a couple, three of *them* working in town. Right? It's been what? Two years since that big spiderweb of metal and glass pulled into orbit, and *they* came out. The aliens. Those toothless things from Tau Ceti. There's several million of them inside the starship, right? Miller would know how many. He's got a thing about the aliens. A couple of people consider asking Miller some questions, giving him the chance to talk about what he knows. Only that's dangerous. He might not shut up. God, they think, look at him. He looks like a kid at Christmas. All eager and ready. They think, So what the fuck if the government's giving us an alien? A lot of businesses are getting them. Some sort of get-to-know-each-other nonsense, right? It's been on TV from the first, and everyone understands the basics of the thing. And nobody wants to get excited like Miller. No, they know better. All the good these aliens are supposed to do for people, people everywhere, but they want to wait and see. To keep a rein on things. Pretend it's any Monday, they tell themselves. Ignore Miller and just wait for the damned horn.

The horn screams. Miller jerks and looks at the clock; then he turns, reluctant and slow, and hopes against hope that he can work up front today. Up where he can watch for the Cetian.

Only the foreman comes over to him. He's a tall, beefy man with a

fringe of dirty-blond hair, and he tells Miller that so-and-so is gone and he's got to be on the line for now. With Jacob. "Sure," says Miller. "Okay." He's the utility man. He plugs holes during vacations and drunks and whatnot. He's worked here for three years, ever since he last quit school, and he does every job in the plant without complaints. Without lapses. Miller is a small man, young-looking but with lines starting to show on his face. Around his eyes and mouth. He has the kind of face that moves from adolescence into middle age without once looking thirty; and his expressions tend to compound the illusion of youth. Dreamy. Distracted. A little lost, perhaps.

He's a prideful sort of fellow. The pride shows whenever he smiles and shakes his head at this or that.

People don't like Miller. As a rule.

It isn't any one thing. There are others in the plant with smug attitudes. And others who keep to themselves in their free time. A couple people even have college degrees. (Miller doesn't. But he's close in three different majors.) Yet nobody puts together these traits quite like he does. The book reading, the know-it-all voice. And besides, Miller is a prude. An incredible prude. He's not married, but he doesn't talk like any normal bachelor. Off-color jokes and conquest stories embarrass him. Nor does he drink or smoke weed. People have learned to tease him about these things. It's something of a game to them. They like to make him red-faced and crazy, seeing how far they can push him. For the fun of it. "You get any last night, Miller? Huh?" He hates that talk. "Come with us at lunch, Miller. Get high. What do you say, huh? Come down from that pulpit, and let's have some fun."

Fun. They call that fun, thinks Miller. Imagine!

It's the worst thing about working here—listening to the harsh, frank chatter about pussy and dope. Miller's outside life is nobody else's business, he figures. He guards his privacy every moment. Every day. That's one of his prides. He has strict, solid values, and he won't make compromises. Never. After all, he tells himself, he's not part of this place. He doesn't really belong here, and he has no intention of letting this place rub off on him. Or wound him. Not even when he goes to the toilet and reads what people have written on the walls — the Fag Professor and Virgin Miller and the rest of it. He tells himself to ignore it. He won't stoop to their garbage. Sure, he gets angry. Furious, even. But the pay here is

good, and he can read while he works. At least sometimes. And most of the time, most days, they leave him alone. Which is fine.

They don't matter, after all.

He's going to make something of his life. Absolutely. He's told them that in a hundred different ways, a thousand times. Just as soon as he saves enough money, he's quitting this dump and heading back to school.

The alien arrives a few minutes after eight, delayed by who-knows-what. He's probably driving his own car, Miller knows. Something suitable. A used car purchased at one of the local lots. Something a factory worker would buy for a thousand dollars, worn tires and dripping oil but otherwise sound.

That's the way they operate.

The Cetians are coming to work and live among human beings, doing their surveying firsthand. That's what this is all about. The Cetians have a master plan, and they've explained it to all the world's nations. From the United States to Chad. They are here to dispense knowledge. An ancient race, they are wise beyond human understanding. Their technologies are eerie, almost magical, and some of them will be turned over in time. Their stardrive, for instance. And their closed ecosystems. Metallurgy. Architecture. And so on. But first they need to learn about the human species. All its facets, weaknesses and strengths. They've done this kind of thing with other alien races. Miller has read every official account. The Cetians are masters of this business. By studying a species from the inside out, they can dispense their gifts without fear of causing massive disruptions. Indeed, thinks Miller, they'll come to understand people better than people do. Maybe that'll be their greatest gift, he tells himself. And he smiles. They'll teach us about ourselves, he thinks. They're going to show us the way to peace and happiness.

Miller has studied the Cetians since their arrival —their starship a glittering webwork rushing from deep space. "They're millions of years older than us," he mutters. He's working across the table from a small pudgy black man. Jacob. "They're part of the great galactic community," he says to himself. "Hundreds of thousands of worlds..."

"What's that?" asks Jacob. "What're you mumbling?"

Miller blinks and says, "Nothing." He looks at Jacob for an instant. Then there's motion in the aisle, and he turns his head and sees a cameraman walking backward, a spotlight perched on a pole rising over his head. The alien is nearby. The emissary from the stars. Miller feels a tightness in his throat. He's full of emotion. This won't be the first Cetian he has seen, not hardly; but still and all, he can barely contain himself.

"Hey, Einstein," shouts Jacob. "Get that up here. Here!" A wooden frame is on the end of the belt, only partway up on the big tabletop. Miller sighs and does what he has to do. Doesn't Jacob see what's happening? Who understands besides him? Sometimes he feels ashamed by everyone's lack of enthusiasm. By their sheer indifference. He wonders why any alien race, saintly or not, would waste precious time in trying to educate mankind. The Earth doesn't deserve the attention, he believes. It has too little imagination, too much stupidity, and he feels like shouting his opinions for the passing camera. Let everyone hear the truth...

"Would ya fucking watch what you're fucking doing?"

Miller blinks and apologizes. He pushes the frame into position and Jacob uses an air gun, pounding long staples into the pine with a slick liquid motion. Jacob is famous for his thoroughness. His efficiency. He takes the frame and pushes it onto the next belt, and the next frame is already here and waiting. The alien is coming down the aisle, but Miller doesn't have time for more than a quick glance or two. He notices the human shape with the milky white skin —skin that can change into gray or black or even become clear. At will. They're beautiful, he knows. Remarkable entities. No real teeth, but a complex gizzard in place of enamel. No hair, but wearing thoroughly human clothes and not looking the least bit silly. This Cetian has faded jeans and a pale blue work shirt, plus running shoes. Miller glances again. He sees a cap riding the smooth hairless head, its brim tilted up and some seed company's emblem riding above the brim. Very natural. Very *right*. If it wasn't for the cameras and the crowd, he thinks, the figure might be anyone. It's a little bit unnerving to see how easily the Cetian fits in.

Half of the front office is helping to give a tour of the plant. For the camera. They're the ones who look misplaced, what with their suits and ties and polished leather shoes. Miller has to concentrate on his job; he can't watch the group as it moves, lingers, then moves again. He's talking to the Cetian whenever he can. In his head. And the imaginary alien asks

him how he came to be here. A person of his interests, of his training, seems wasted in this place. I needed the money, Miller explains. It's just the way things fell together, you know? But the alien doesn't understand, no. So Miller, speaking inside his head, tells half of his life story. It doesn't answer everything, but he tells it with all the vigor he can muster. As if he's practicing for later. For the conversations to come.

The imaginary Cetian smiles in his peculiar fashion —the beaklike lips parting and the violet tongue showing against the roof of his mouth. Then he compliments Miller in glowing terms, telling him that he's bright and articulate, and so on. A good thing I found you, the Cetian declares. I thought I might be lonely while I'm here. And bored. But now I've got you for a friend... a soul mate...

"Hey! You alive, Miller?"

Miller is behind again. He apologizes to Jacob and lifts the next frame, making dead certain that it's properly aligned.

And the next one, too.

And the next.

People from the office begin to file past them, and the news-people. Their jobs are done. Smiles and amiable chatter mean everything has gone well. Miller concentrates on his job. Eventually, the foreman wanders past. He's alone, smoking and looking generally pissed at the world. Miller remembers how last week, hearing that they were getting a Cetian, the foreman had moaned something about not wanting or needing one of those goddamn chameleons. Fuck gifts from the stars and all that shit. He had a business to run. Product to get out. If he couldn't fucking hire who he wanted, then screw all the suits and their goddamn offices, too—

Miller stands on his toes for a moment, looking down the line.

The Cetian is standing at the line's end. In the plant's hierarchy, that's one of the worst jobs. The Cetian and a scruffy man are pulling the finished frames from the belt and stacking them on pallets. But what else are they doing? he wonders. Talking? The scruffy man is a drunk, Miller knows. He didn't get past ninth grade, and he's been to prison how many times? For stupid crimes. For drugs. He's probably still stoned, Miller realizes. Red-eyed and wobbly. Yet the Cetian is talking to him, and he's

answering. They're having a conversation — ?

There comes a sudden wood-splitting *crash*.

"Goddamn you!" shouts Jacob. He aims the air gun at Miller's chest. "Pull your head out of your ass, Professor. The chameleon will keep, for God's sake! So let's get busy. What do you say? Huh?"

There's a horn for the morning break—fifteen minutes of rest, minus walking time. Most people go back up front, up to where the vending machines are stacked along the concrete walls. They settle down to play cards and nap on the golden stacks of lumber. And there's the talk, the constant talk, about tits and asses and blow and beer.

Normally Miller goes the other way. He has a corner, quiet and out of the way, where he keeps his lunch and books and a comfortable seat he made for himself out of scrap lumber. Sometimes when he's reading he finds a sentence or a little paragraph that he likes, and he uses a marking pen to copy it on the concrete walls. For future reference. Today, hearing the break horn, Miller's first thought is that the Cetian might wander back to his corner and pause, reading some of the carefully written wisdoms. Yes? They're from great novels and classic works of science —the crowns of human achievement. It's such a wonderful image, the Cetian and him meeting in that corner. So wonderful that Miller almost expects it to happen. He's got it all planned.

Except the Cetian doesn't know the plan. He comes forward with the general flow of bodies. It's unnerving to watch him. He seems to carry himself like any new employee. There's a tentativeness, a calculated caution in the eyes —flat and square, in this case, with tiny triangular pupils the color of new snow —and the caution extends to everyone around him. Maybe these people are scared, thinks Miller. I'm not scared, he tells himself. This is an opportunity, rare and remarkable. Miller feels singularly suited to act as a bridge between the two sides. A rush of adrenaline pours through him. He climbs under the belt and joins the flow of bodies, and it's all he can do to keep from jogging after the Cetian and calling to him. Like some long lost friend.

They're amazing, really. These aliens.

In Asia, Cetians dress in peasant clothes and enormous straw hats,

bending over and shuffling through the flooded rice paddies. In Australia, in the dusty outback, they drive little 4x4 pickups while they do simple ranch work like abos do. In Europe, odd as it sounds, Cetians are among the protestors marching against imperialism and environmental decay; and they're also the police wearing riot gear and standing in rows, defending order and the state.

These ironies are abundant and somehow comforting.

There is a sense of utter fairness in the process.

Cetians will undergo almost anything to learn about mankind firsthand—some even dying—and Miller has to wonder how many of his coworkers appreciate their earnestness, their good intentions. He doubts any of them do. Probably not one, he thinks.

It must be lonely, dull work for them.

Miller knows.

A Cetian would welcome a friend, sure. Someone who appreciates the age and depth of the Cetian culture. Miller sees the odd white figure sitting alone on a lumber stack, the square eyes watching a cluster of men playing poker on a little table. Miller breathes and sits on the same stack, not too close but near enough that they could talk. If they want. He glances at the odd eyes and the white, white skin. What should I say? he wonders. Why am I so nervous? I shouldn't be nervous, he tells himself. His hands shake in his lap. A couple of poker players glance up at him and smile, then they mutter something rude. No doubt. Again Miller breathes, finding a quick courage. "Hello?" He sees all of the Cetian face, blank and so strange. He offers his name and smiles, extending one of his nervous hands.

The square eyes blink in slow motion. "I'm Rozz," says the Cetian, the voice deep and liquid and amazingly human. One of Rozz's four-fingered hands grabs Miller's hand, squeezing and feeling like plastic. It's smooth and cool and tough. Like plastic. Or maybe Teflon.

"Hey," says Miller, "it's great you're here. I mean it. Everywhere, I mean." He feels clumsy, his mouth spitting words at random. "I just really think it's neat."

Rozz blinks again, no expression to be read.

Miller hears a poker player laughing. Maybe at him. He gulps and tells the Cetian, "This isn't much to look at, I know," and then he glances about, his own face critical but tolerant. "Did they show you everything? I mean, do you have questions? Because I might answer them. I mean, I've been here quite a while." He feels giddy now. He tells himself that he's doing too much, he wants too much, but all he can do is listen to his own prattle. "Years," he says. "I mean, if you want to get a feel for this place and all—"

The poker table erupts in laughter. Miller jerks, not having heard what was said but imagining several things. Something tasteless and pointed at him, no doubt. Then he looks at Rozz, ready to deny anything. The Cetian is now focused on the little table—raw pine scraps stapled together—and the hunched-over bodies with cigarettes in their laughing mouths and the cards tight in their hands. Maybe fifty cents in nickels and dimes are in the middle. Everyone is looking at the alien. The laughter diminishes. Something wary and alert comes into their faces. For a long moment, nothing happens. Then Rozz says with a slow, precise voice:

"Five-card draw."

A couple players blink as if surprised. Someone asks, "You know it? The game?"

Rozz lifts a hand, flattens it, and wiggles it in the air. "A little bit," he seems to imply. "I'm not so good," he says aloud. "But I can play."

The men look at one another, not sure what to make of things. It's the foreman, sitting with his back to Rozz, who announces, "This is an open game, I guess. Anyone who wants to join, joins."

Rozz drops off the stack, leaving Miller without a good-bye glance. One of the players moves aside, giving up most of a long bench, and Rozz sits and watches a new hand being laid out. No one looks comfortable. They're judging him, thinks Miller. This is some test. Rozz picks up the five cards and finds a nickel in his front pocket, putting it into the new pot. Then he draws three cards, adds a second nickel, and loses with a pair of tens. The game couldn't be any quieter. They play again, a couple more hands, and everyone is sneaking looks at the hard plasticlike skin, at the square eyes, at the beaked and toothless mouth. Rozz pays no attention to them, and Miller stays on the stack, still marveling. An ancient race that has traveled

around the galaxy, to countless wonderful places, and yet their representative has the charity and poise to sit with a backward race. A hard and graceless race. Us.

At one point, his voice cracking, Miller asks, "How's it going, Rozz? How are we doing?"

Rozz looks at him, maybe smiling. "Not too fucking bad," he declares. "Not bad at all." And he lays down the winning hand, grinning in a very human fashion, sweeping in the nickels while the other players stare, almost laughing, a few of them nodding as if they've seen something and it's something they might like.

Through the rest of the morning, Miller writes little notes on the golden wood of the frames. He uses a black marker. The frames are going to be painted, so there's no damage done. Then the belt carries them and his notes on down the line, straight to Rozz.

"The Cetian Earth," he scribbles, "is tropical and wet and covered with lemon-colored vegetation." He hopes Rozz will be impressed with his interest. "Its largest creature is a fish-analog, one hundred tons, semi-intelligent and peaceful and worshiped by the ancient Cetians." He has to write quickly, trying Jacob's patience. He wants Rozz to respond somehow, but he can't even tell if his new friend is reading the notes. "Cetian starships are powered by matter-antimatter engines, both fuels derived from the interstellar medium." The message is broken up on several frames. Still no response. No wave or smile. Nothing. "I'm interested in you," he writes finally. "And I admire your culture."

This time Rozz looks down the line and nods. Once.

Miller is excited. He looks at his watch, thinking hard. It's close to noon. "Eat with me?" he writes. "Miller." Then he waits, watching the frame travel to the end. To *him*.

But the Cetian doesn't respond. He seems to read it, yes, but then there's the horn and he's walking down the aisle, down past Miller and gone. Jacob wants to finish the frame on the table. Maybe Rozz didn't understand? thinks Miller. Maybe I should have told him where? Still optimistic, he hurries back to his corner and gets a certain book—a recently published guide to Cetian myths and legends—plus his lunch pail.

But when he's up front, trotting toward the time clock, he discovers the Cetian sitting snugly between the foreman and another one of the poker players.

Disappointment starts to nag at him.

He punches out and returns. The three figures are sharing a stack of lumber. The humans eat from pails — sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs and sweating pop cans within easy reach. Rozz has a crumpled grocery sack behind him and a cellophane bag of unshelled, unsalted peanuts in one hand. No one is talking, but the humans watch the peanuts being flipped up into the mouth two at a time. Rozz doesn't chew; he only swallows. His pace is amazing. The foreman shakes his head and smiles. Miller settles at the poker table, barely hungry but pretending to chew on his sandwich. While he watches.

He feels cheated.

Coming here this morning, he had expectations. They'd been building since last week's announcement. It was the prospect of a *friend*— someone he could respect, and converse with, and learn from. Not another sweatshop goon full of harsh talk and ugly humor. But someone of culture, of learning. Someone who had been to odd and wondrous places beyond human reach. Someone he could share breaks with, and lunchtime, the two of them talking and talking and talking—

Miller bristles, thinking he might have been wrong.

He sets down his lunch-meat sandwich, his stomach churning and his breath tasting foul. The foreman asks Rozz, "So how do you do it?" and Miller waits. "Like I've seen on TV—?"

"A gizzard," Rozz answers, his tone matter-of-fact. Patient. "You know, like a chicken's gizzard? It's lined with rocks that grind up the shells, and I shit out what my body can't use."

"Huh," says the foreman. "Huh!"

"Do you want to see it?"

"What? Your gizzard?" The foreman halfway shudders, surprised.

"You've seen 'em, Pete," says the other man. "They do it on TV."

Rozz unbuttons the blue cotton shirt, exposing the white chest with its narrow, widely spaced ribs. Maybe he's smiling. Miller shifts on the hard wooden seat and watches, his thoughts jumbled. A look of utter calm comes into Rozz's face, and the whiteness weakens like milk being flooded with water. A large yellow heart, six chambers and a tangle of thick arteries and veins, is set within the long pale ribs. The gizzard is the darker bundle of round muscle beneath the heart. Miller recognizes it from all the science articles. He feels an urge to stand and point out organs, lecturing. "This is where the peanuts are now." But Rozz himself points, telling them the same thing. Then, as if to display his talents, the gizzard contracts with a sudden violence. Shells crumble and the two men give a little jump, then they shake their heads and laugh, looking at one another as if to congratulate themselves on their courage.

"All right," says Pete, the foreman. "With rocks, you say?"

Rozz turns white again, and he smiles again. "Here. Watch this." He reaches into the grocery sack and retrieves a single black walnut, rough against the smooth skin of the hand. "Watch," he cautions. The nut vanishes into his mouth, and he swallows in a theoretical way; and with Miller eating again, unnoticed and still glowering at all of them, the walnut shatters somewhere inside the Cetian's belly. It's like a little explosion. The men jump and then giggle, then turn and look around the plant, hunting for someone to show the marvel they've just found.

Rozz is moved off the line after lunch. The foreman wants him up front, up in Assembly, which is pretty much the easiest department. It's where the foreman spends most of his day. What's going on? Miller wonders. He feels betrayed and rather jealous. And maybe foolish, too. All the time he'd been building this image of the Cetians, and all the time he'd been so blind. The Cetians fit into all kinds of places, with anyone. It never occurred to him that they actually *enjoyed* it! Now the blood roars in his head and his fingers shake. He can scarcely think, barely able to do his job. Jacob glares at him several times, shaking his head but too weary to shout. Miller counts the minutes till afternoon break, the halfway point, because everything afterward will be quick. The day and the craziness will be over soon after break. Then he'll have time to go home and collect himself, to sleep and relax and get it all straight in his head.

When the break horn sounds, Miller decides a Coke would taste good.

By the time he's up front, the poker players are at it. Rozz is among them. Miller pauses and stands nearby, just watching, and then something unexpected occurs to him. Why not? he asks himself. It's an open game, isn't it? There's an empty seat. Miller takes it and looks straight across at the Cetian, waiting, feeling tight inside while he watches the white hands shuffling the deck like a pro.

How does he do it? Miller wonders. Did he practice before coming here? Or does he just pick it up along the way? Card games. The language. All of it. The humans watch Miller while Rozz deals. Miller isn't sure how to bet. He throws a nickel into the pot, takes three cards, and loses with a pair of fours. The foreman wins, grinning at Miller and sweeping up the coins. He says, "So what's the occasion? Thought you'd be social for a change?"

Miller doesn't know what he's thinking. He opens his mouth as if to answer, but nothing comes to mind.

The foreman is amused. Still smiling, he turns to another man and asks, "Have you seen what the new guy can do, Ed? Have you?"

"What do you mean?" Ed works in the paint department—an ancient simpleton with a partial beard and spooked eyes. He glances at Rozz, unsure of himself. "What can he do?" he manages. "Tell me."

"Would you?" says the foreman. "You mind?"

Rozz shrugs. No, he doesn't mind. His skin immediately turns black, like coal. Someone up on the stacks yells, "Hey, he looks like Jacob! Don't he?"

A lot of them laugh.

The foreman laughs. "But it's the other thing I wanted."

"God, I don't want to see!" Ed shivers. "Why the fuck would anyone do that to himself? I mean... Jesus...!"

"For camouflage," Miller responds. He says, "They do it so they can hide," and nods, glad to have spoken. To throw in his knowledge.

But no one is listening to him. Except Ed. And Ed doesn't like what he

hears. "So how come he's not colored? You know. Green and all? Those fucking lizards are green and brown and shit. Right?"

"Cetians are color-blind." Miller smiles. He's sorting his next hand without looking at his cards, telling everyone, "They see the world in black and white and gray. Like cheap TV."

Only Ed listens, his mouth opened and his expression befuddled. The rest of the table, Rozz included, studies the cards and Ed and the little piles of change out in front of them. They aren't going to let him take part in this. Not if they can help it. Someone up on the stacks says something, probably about Miller, and he hears men chuckling. It was funny to them. He can imagine what they just said.

Nickels are tossed into the pot.

Miller glances at his cards once, then catches Rozz staring at him. The square eyes are cold and a little bit unnerving. He shifts his weight, feeling the hard wood against his butt. There's more betting and he loses again. Rozz wins. Reaching for the pot, he makes the skin of his hands turn transparent. Everyone can see his colorless meat and the fine yellow bones, and almost everyone laughs. Except for Miller and Ed. "Would you fucking stop that?" says Ed. "Goddamn, you're nuts. Can all of you... you people do that? Can you?"

"You should have seen him at lunch," the foreman confides. "We looked in on Rozz's heart, didn't we?" Everyone nods. Poker has been temporarily forgotten. "And his *gizzard*. And his guts."

"I don't want to see any guts," says Ed, emphatic. He waves his large calloused hands, telling the Cetian, "I don't even like *thinking* about that stuff."

Rozz shrugs.

The foreman says, "Do it in the face. Can you do it there?" He asks, "Can you make your face go clear?"

"Sure." Rozz seems unperturbed. Amused, even.

Ed says, "No, no, no! I can't stand this shit."

The foreman waves to the men on the stacks. "Come on over. Old Rozz is going to give us a show."

They drop from the stacks, giggling and trotting over and forming a clumsy horseshoe around the poker table. Miller doesn't know what to do. He feels small and absolutely unnoticed, picking at his cards and trying to focus on their blurred figures.

People start to applaud.

He jerks and looks. He has to look. He's startled by the yellow skull—eye sockets cubic and the tongue curled against the mouth's roof and pale muscles making the small jaw move, Rozz saying, "Look, Ma. No face!"

The men start to howl. Someone says, "What's the matter, Ed? Hey! You don't look so good!"

Ed's face has turned pale. His hands push the coins and cards away from him. "I can't take it," he squeals. "You guys-!"

"What's wrong, Ed?"

"Why the hell does he have to do that? Why?" he wondered. "I don't see why he's got to turn to glass!"

Miller knows. He touches Ed and says, "It's because of sex," with a very serious, utterly sober voice.

The table becomes quiet.

Rozz turns white again, watching Miller.

Ed turns his head and looks lost. "What do you mean? What's sex got to do with it?"

No one admits they're listening, but no one makes a sound. Not the foreman. Not any of them. Miller says, "It's like with birds. Birds have bright plumage so they can show potential mates they're healthy. Strong. Virile. Cetians do the same thing by making themselves transparent. It's a very private thing." And he pauses. "Normally. It's to show their mate that they don't have internal parasites. No diseases. Nothing bad or out of place." He breathes and puts his own cards on top of the mess, feeling

every eye and relishing the attention. These stupid jerks, he's thinking. And he means *all* of them. He glares at Rozz as if accusing him of some failure, some wicked crime, and he crosses his arms on his chest and says nothing more.

Says Rozz, "What do you know?"

Eyes shift to the Cetian.

"He's right, you know." Rozz nods, telling them, "When I go to bed with a girl, I really undress."

A few men laugh, uneasily.

Rozz grabs the scattered cards, arranging and then shuffling the deck. Everyone takes back their old bets. Rozz deals. When he starts to throw in a nickel, by accident, he knocks other coins to the floor. So he bends and vanishes under the table for a moment. The men are glaring at Miller. One of them says, "Professor Perfect," and several of them are laughing.

Rozz returns. The hand is finished in tense silence. Miller wins sixty-five cents with three aces, but he doesn't care. It means nothing. He's halfway tempted to leave the pot, proving his scorn for everyone. The alien is manipulating the crowd, he senses. But not me! The horn sounds, and everyone is standing. Miller starts to pocket his winnings regardless, and there comes a sudden stillness. What's happening? He notices how everyone else is looking at the floor, at his feet, and he looks down and spots a single card on the floor. A fourth ace right beneath his seat.

Says the foreman, "What's this?"

Miller looks at the smiling alien.

"What're you doing?" asks the foreman. "Cheating us for change?"

They're all watching him, waiting, their expressions stern and maybe angry. Maybe not. He's having trouble reading their faces. "I didn't do this," he argues. "I mean, you can't really believe... !"

Rozz shakes his head as if supremely disappointed.

"It's you!" shouts Miller. "You put that there, didn't you?"

"Did I?" asks Rozz.

Miller moves toward him. "When you went under the table, you did it! Didn't you?"

"Gosh," says the foreman. "That's a pretty strong accusation, Miller. I hope you can back it up."

"Someone must have seen him do it." Miller pivots, wanting a witness to step forward. "Who saw him put the card there — ?"

Nobody says, "Me."

Miller faces the Cetian again, waiting for a moment. Then he leaps. He shoves a handful of nickels into the bastard's face, right at its beaked mouth, shouting, "They're yours, goddamn you! You eat them! Now!" He says, "Line your goddamn gizzard with these, you shit!"

The men pull him off Rozz.

The foreman and another fellow, stern-faced and certain, march him into the little glass-walled office where the plant manager holds court. He isn't here just now. The other man goes to find him. The foreman shakes his head and says nothing. His arms are crossed on his chest.

"I didn't do it," Miller manages to say.

"I know," says the foreman. "We all know that. Rozz was just having fun with you. It was just a joke, you idiot."

Miller can barely hear him. He's looking out into the plant, into Assembly. A group of men are standing in a circle, talking to Rozz. He's so far away that he looks human. The jeans, the shirt, the seed cap. Even his motions are true. It occurs to Miller that the alien is genuinely fitting into this place. All the Cetians fit in. To them this isn't a chore, it's a joy. They wear humanity like you would a new suit—

"What's happening out there?" asks the foreman.

Miller can't tell for certain.

"Stay here. I'll be back." He shuts the door and stalks out into the plant. The men don't see him approaching. They're engrossed with whatever

Rozz is telling them, both of Rozz's hands above his head, eyes wide, the hands implying some epic tale of great drama and worth.

The foreman breaks it up.

Miller watches everyone get back to work. He sees Rozz talking to the foreman and glancing toward the office. Then the foreman returns. "He gave me a message. He wants you to know something."

Miller asks, "What?"

"He said he's been sizing you up — "

"Yeah?"

" — and he doesn't like your insides."

Miller has no response. He presses his face to the glass and sighs, feeling nothing, his thoughts jumbled and slow. What I'll have to do first, he thinks, is get my stuff out of that corner. The books and the rest of it that I want. Then he remembers the quotes on the walls and wishes there was some way he could take them, too. But there's not, of course. They're there. That's where they'll have to stay.