

## MOTHER TO THE WORLD

Richard Wilson

His name was Martin Rolfe. She called him Mr. Ralph.

She was Cecelia Beamer, called Siss.

He was a vigorous, intelligent, lean and wiry forty-two, a shade under six feet tall. His hair, black, was thinning but still covered all of his head; and all his teeth were his own. His health was excellent. He'd never had a cavity Or an operation and he fervently hoped he never would.

She was a slender, strong young woman of twenty-eight, five feet four. Her eyes, nose and mouth were regular and well-spaced but the combination fell short of beauty. She wore her hair, which was dark blonde, not quite brown, straight back and long in two pigtailed which she braided daily, after a ritualistic hundred brushings. Her figure was better than average for her age and therefore good, but she did nothing to emphasize it. Her disposition was cheerful when she was with someone; when alone her tendency was to work hard at the job at hand, giving it her serious attention. Whatever she was doing was the most important thing in the world to her just then and she had a compulsion to do it absolutely right. She was indefatigable but she liked, almost demanded, to be praised for what she did well.

Her amusements were simple ones. She liked to talk to people but most people quickly became bored with what she had to say she was inclined to be repetitive. Fortunately for her, she also liked to talk to animals, birds included.

She was a retarded person with the mentality of an eight-year-old.

Eight can be a delightful age. Rolfe remembered his son at eight bright, inquiring, beginning to emerge from childhood but not so fast as to lose any of his innocent charm; a refreshing, uninhibited conversationalist with an original viewpoint on life. The boy had been a challenge to him and a constant delight. He held on to that memory, drawing sustenance from it, for her.

Young Rolfe was dead now, along with his mother and three billion other people.

Rolfe and Siss were the only ones left in all the world.

It was M.R. that had done it, he told her. Massive Retaliation; from the Other Side.

When American bombs rained down from long-range jets and rocket carriers, nobody'd known the Chinese had what they had. Nobody'd suspected it of that relatively backward country which the United States had believed it was softening up, in a brushfire war, for enforced diplomacy.

Rolfe hadn't been aware of any speculation that Peking's scientists were concentrating their research not on weapons but on biochemistry. Germ warfare, sure. There'd been propaganda from both sides about that, but nothing had been hinted about a biological agent, as it must have been, that could break down human cells and release the water.

"M.R.," he told her. "Better than nerve gas or the neutron bomb." Like those, it left the buildings and equipment intact. Unlike them, it didn't leave any messy corpses only the bones, which crumbled and blew away. Except the bone dust trapped inside the pathetic mounds of clothing that lay everywhere in the city.

"Are they coming over now that they beat us?"

"I'm sure they intended to. But there can't be any of them left. They outsmarted themselves, I guess. The wind must

have blown it right back at them. I don't really know what happened, Siss. All I know is that everybody's gone now, except you and me."

"But the animals"

Rolfe had found it best in trying to explain something to Siss to keep it simple, especially when he didn't understand it himself. Just as he had learned long ago that if he didn't know how to pronounce a word he should say it loud and confidently.

So all he told Siss was that the bad people had got hold of 'a terrible weapon called M.R. she'd heard of that and used it on the good people and that nearly everybody had died. Not the animals, though, and damned if he knew why.

"Animals don't sin," Siss told him.

"That's as good an explanation as any I can think of," he said. She was silent for a while. Then she said: "Your name initials are M.R., aren't they?"

He'd never considered it before, but she was right. Martin Rolfe Massive Retaliation. I hope she doesn't blame everything on me, he thought. But then she spoke again. "M.R. That's short for Mister. What I call you. Your name that I have for you. Mister Ralph."

"Tell me again how we were saved, Mr. Ralph."

She used the expression in an almost evangelical sense, making him uncomfortable. Rolfe was a practical man, a realist and freethinker.

"You know as well as I do, Siss," he said. "It's because Professor Cantwell was doing government research and because he was having a party. You certainly remember; Cantwell was your boss."

"I know that. But you tell it so good and I like to hear it."

"All right. Bill Cantwell was an old friend of mine from the army and when I came to New York I gave him a call at the University. It was the first time I'd talked to him in years; I had no idea he'd married again and had set up housekeeping in Manhattan."

"And had a working girl named Siss," she put in.

"The very same," he agreed. Siss never referred to herself as a maid, which was what she had been. "And so when I asked Bill if he could put me up, I thought it would be in his old bachelor apartment. He said sure, just like that, and I didn't find out till I got there, late in the evening, that he had a new wife and was having a house party and had invited two couples from out of town to stay over."

"I gave my room to Mr. and Mrs. Glenna, from Columbus," Siss said.

"And the Torquemadas, of Seville, had the regular guest room." Whoever they were; he didn't remember names the way she did. "So that left two displaced persons, you and me."

"Except for the Nassers."

The Nassers, as she pronounced it, were the two self-contained rooms in the Cantwell basement. The NASAs, or the Nasas, was what Cantwell called them because the National Aeronautics and Space Administration had given him a contract to study the behavior of human beings in a closed system.

Actually the money had gone to Columbia University, where Cantwell was a professor of mechanical and aerospace engineering.

"A sealed-off environment," Rolfe said. "But because Columbia didn't have the space just at that time, and because the work was vital, NASA gave Cantwell permission to build the rooms in his own home. They were -still are -in his

basement, and that's where you and I slept that fateful night when the world ended."

"I still don't understand."

"We were completely sealed off in there," Rolfe said. "We weren't breathing Earth air and we weren't connected in any way to the rest of the world. We might as well have been out in space or on the moon. So when it happened to everybody else to Professor and Mrs. Cantwell, and to the Glenns and the Torquemadas and to the Nassers in Egypt and the Joneses in Jones Beach and all the people at Columbia, and in Washington and Moscow and Pretoria and London and Peoria and Medicine Hat and La Jolla and all those places all over it didn't happen to us. That's because Professor Cantwell was a smart man and his closed systems worked."

"And we were saved."

"That's one way of looking at it."

"What's the other way?"

"We were doomed."

*From his notebooks:*

Siss asked why I'm so sure there's nobody but us left in the whole world. A fair question. Of course I'm not absolutely positively cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die, swear-on-a-Bible convinced that there isn't a poor live slob hidden away in some remote corner. Other people besides Bill must have been working with closed systems; certainly any country with a space program would be, and maybe some of *their* nassers were inhabited, too. I hadn't heard that any astronauts or cosmonauts were in orbit that day but if they were, and got down safely, I guess they could be alive somewhere.

But I've listened to the rest of the world on some of the finest radio equipment ever put together and there hasn't been a peep out of it. I've listened and signaled and listened and signaled and listened. Nothing. Nil. Short wave, long wave, AM, FM, UHF, marine band, everywhere. Naught. Not a thing. Lots of automatic signals from unmanned satellites, of course, and the quasars are still being heard from, but nothing human.

I've sent out messages on every piece of equipment connected to Con Ed's EE net. RCA, American Cable & Radio, the Bell System, Western Union, The Associated Press, UPI, Reuters' world news network. *The New York Times'* multifarious teletypes, even the Hilton Hotels' international reservations system. Nothing. By this time I'd become fairly expert at communications and I'd found the Pentagon network at AT&T. Silent. Ditto the hot line to the Kremlin. I read the monitor teletype and saw the final message from Washington to Moscow. Strictly routine. No hint that anything was amiss anywhere. Just as it must have been at the Army message center at Pearl Harbor on another Sunday morning a generation ago.

This is for posterity, these facts. My evidence is circumstantial. But to Siss I say: "There's nobody left but us. I know. You'll have to take my word for it that the rest of the world is as empty as New York."

Nobody here but us chickens, boss. Us poor flightless birds. One middle-aged rooster and one sad little hen, somewhat deficient in the upper story. What do you want us to do, boss? What's the next step in the great cosmic scheme? Tell us: where do we go from here?

But don't tell me; tell Siss. I don't expect an answer; she does. She's the one who went into the first church she found open that Sunday morning (some of them were locked, you know) and said all the prayers she knew, and asked for mercy for her relatives, and her friends, and her employers,

and for me, and for all the dead people who had been alive only yesterday, and finally for herself; and then she asked why. She was in there for an hour and when she came out I don't think she'd had an answer.

Nobody here but us chickens, boss. What do you want us to do now, fricassee ourselves?

Late on the morning of doomsday they had taken a walk down Broadway, starting from Cantwell's house near the Columbia campus.

There were a number of laughs to be had from cars in comical positions, if anybody was in a laughing mood. Some were standing obediently behind white lines at intersections, and obviously their drivers had been overtaken during a red light. With its driver gone, each such car had simply stood there, its engine dutifully using up all the gas in its tank and then coughing to a stop. Others had nosed gently into shop windows, or less gently into other cars or trucks. One truck, loaded with New Jersey eggs, had overturned and its cargo was dripping in a yellowy-white puddle. Rolfe, his nose twitching as if in anticipation of a warm day next week, made a mental note never to return to that particular spot.

Several times he found a car which had been run up upon from behind by another. It was as if, knowing they would never again be manufactured, they were trying copulation.

While Siss was in church Rolfe found a car that had not idled away all its gas and he made a dry run through the streets. He discovered that he could navigate pretty well around the stalled or wrecked cars, though occasionally he had to drive up on the sidewalk or make a three-block detour to get back to Broadway.

Then he and Siss, subdued after church, went downtown.

"Whose car is this, Mr. Ralph?" she asked him.

"My car, Siss. Would you like one, too?"

"I can't drive."

"I'll teach you. It may come in handy."

"I was the only one in church," she said. It hadn't got through to her yet, he thought; not completely.

"Who were you expecting?" he asked kindly.

"God, maybe."

She was gazing straight ahead, clutching her purse in her lap. She had the expression of a person who had been let down.

At 72nd Street a beer truck had demolished the box office of the Trans-Lux movie house and foamy liquid was still trickling out of it, across the sidewalk and along the gutter and into a sewer. Rolfe stopped the car and got out. An aluminum barrel had been punctured. The beer leaking from it was cool. He leaned over and let it run into his mouth for a while.

The Trans-Lux had been having a Fellini festival; the picture was *8½*. On impulse he went inside and came back to the car with the reels of film in a black tin box. He remembered the way the movie had opened, with all the cars stalled in traffic. Like Broadway, except that the Italian cars had people in them. He put the box in the rear of the car and said: "We'll go to the movies sometime." Siss looked at him blankly.

At Columbus Circle a Broadway bus had locked horns with a big van carrying furniture from North Carolina. At 50th Street a Mustang had nosed gently into the front of a steak house, as if someone had led it to a hitching post.

He made an illegal left turn at 42nd Street, noting what was playing at the Rialto: two naughty, daring, sexy, nudie pix, including a re-run of "My Bare Lady." He didn't stop

for that one.

At the old Newsweek Building east of Broadway, an Impala had butted into the ground-floor liquor store. The plate glass lay smashed but the bottles in the window were intact. He made a mental note. Across the street, one flight up, was the Keppel Folding Boat Company, which had long intrigued him. Soon it might be useful to unfold one and sail off to a better place. He marked it in his mind.

Bookstores, 42nd Street style. Dirty books and magazines. Girly books. Deviant, flagellant, homosexual, Lesbian, sadistic books. Pornographic classics restored to the common man *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure. The Kama Sutra*, quaint but lasciviously advertised. Books of nudes for the serious artist (no retoucher's airbrush here, men!).

Nudie pix in packets, wrapped in pliofilm, at a buck and a half the set. Large girls in successive states of undress. How big can a breast be before it disgusts? What is the optimum bosom size? A cup? D cup? It would depend on the number to be fed, wouldn't it? And how hungry they were? Or was that criterion passe?

He looked over at Siss, who wasn't looking at him or the bookstores or the dirty-movie houses but straight ahead. She had a nice figure. About a C.

But it was never the body alone; it was the mind that went with it and the voice with which it spoke.

"What are you thinking, Siss?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said. It was probably true. "What are *you* thinking?"

Riposte. How could he tell her?

He improvised. They were passing Bryant Park. "Pigeons in the park," he said. "I'm thinking of the pigeons. Hungrier than yesterday because nobody's buying peanuts for them, bringing slices of bread from home; there's no bread lady buying bagfuls for them at Horn & Hardart's day-old bakery shop."

"It's a sad time, isn't it, Mr. Ralph?"

"Yes, Siss; a sad time."

They got to First Avenue and the U.N. There wasn't anybody there, either.

*Notes for a History of the World* was what he wrote on page one of his notebook.

On page two he had alternate titles, some facetious:

The True History of the Martin Rolfe Family on the Planet Earth; or, *Two for Tomorrow*.

Recollections of a World Well Lost.

How the Population Crisis Was Solved.

What Next? or, if *You Don't Do It, Marty, Who the Hell Will?*

*From his notebooks:*

Thank God for movies. We'd be outen our minds by now if I hadn't taught myself to be a projectionist.

Radio City Music Hall apparently's only movie on Con Ed's EE list. Bit roomy for Siss and me but getting used to it. Sometimes she sits way down front, I in mezzanine, and we shout to each other when Gregory Peck does heroic things.

Collected first runs to add to *81/2* from all major Manhattan houses Capitol, Criterion, Cinema I & II, State, etc. so we have good backlog. Also, if Siss likes, we run it again right away or next night. I don't mind. Then there are the 42nd St. houses and the art houses and the nabes & Mod. Museum film library. Shouldn't run out for a long time.

Days are for exploring and shopping. I go armed because of the animals. Siss stays home at hotel.

(*Why* are there animals? Find out. *Where* find out; how?)

The dogs in packs are worst. So far they haven't attacked and a shot fired in the air scares them off. So far.

Later they left the city. It had been too great a strain to live a life half primitive, half luxurious. The contrast was too much. And the rats were getting bolder. The rats and the dogs.

They had lived there at first for the convenience. He picked a hotel on Park Avenue. He put Siss in a single room and took a suite down the hall for himself.

He guessed correctly that there'd be huge refrigerators and freezers stocked with food enough for years.

The hotel, with its world-famous name, was one of the places the Consolidated Edison Company had boasted was on its Emergency Electricity net, along with City Hall, the Empire State Building, the tunnels and bridges, Governors Island and other key installations. The EE net, worked out for Civil Defense (what had ever become of Civil Defense?), guaranteed uninterrupted electricity to selected customers through the use of deep underground grids and conduits, despite flood, fire, pestilence or war. A promotional piece claimed that only total annihilation could knock out the system.

There was a hint of the way it worked in a slogan that Con Ed considered using before the government censors decided it would have given too much away: ". . . as long as the Hudson flows."

Whatever the secret, he and Siss had electricity, from which so many blessings flowed, for as long as they stayed in the city.

*From his notebooks:*

I've renamed our hotel the Living End. Siss calls it our house, or maybe Our House.

I won't let her go out by herself but she has the run of the hotel. She won't use the self-service elevators. Doesn't trust them. Don't blame her. She cooks in the hotel kitchen and carries our meals up two flights on a tray.

Garbage disposal no problem. There's an incinerator that must work by electricity. So far it's taken everything I've dumped down it. I can't feel any heat but it doesn't stink.

We're getting some outdoor stinks, though. Animal excrement that nobody cleans up (I'd be doing nothing else if I started). Uncollected garbage. Rotting food in supermarkets and other places without EE.

There are certain streets I avoid now. Whole sections, when the wind is wrong.

Bad night at the Living End. Had a nightmare.

I dreamed that Siss and I, home from the Music Hall (Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn in something from the sixties), were having a fight. I don't know about that but we were shouting and I was calling her unforgivable names and she was saying she was going to climb up to the 20th floor and jump, when the phone rang . . .

I woke up, seeming to hear the echo of the last ring. The phone was there on the floor, under the night table.

I didn't dare pick it up.

It must have happened just before dawn, when Manhattan was as deserted as it ever got.

I took a chance on the EE and went up in the elevators to the top of the Empire State Bldg. First time I'd ever been up also the last, probably. What a sight. Plenty of cars, cabs, trucks, buses rammed into each other & sides of bldgs but lots more just came to natural (!) stop in midstreet or near curb. Very feasible to drive around and out of town, though probably

not thru tunnels. GW Bridge she'd be okay, with its 8 lanes. Have to get out of town one day anyhow, so best explore in advance.

Planes. No sign that any crashed but bet lots did somewhere. Everything looks orderly at NY airports.

Fires. Few black spots signs of recent fires. Nothing major.

Harbor & rivers. Some ships, lots of boats drifting around loose. No sign of collisions; nothing big capsized.

Animals. Dog packs here and there. Sound of their barking rises high. *Nasty* sound. Birds, all kinds.

Air very dry.

Down in the street again, Rolfe began to think about the animals other than the dogs that ran in packs. How long would it be until the bigger ones the wolves and bears and mountain lions found their way into the city? He decided to visit Abercrombie & Fitch and arm himself with something heavier than the pistol he carried. Big-bore stuff, whatever they called it.

Rolfe was admiring an elephant gun in the fantastic store (Hemingway had shopped here, and probably Martin and Osa Johnson and Frank Buck and others from the lost past) when he remembered another sound he'd heard from the top of the Empire State Building. It had puzzled him, but now he could identify it. It had been the trumpeting of an elephant. An elephant in Manhattan? The circus wasn't in town He knew then, but for the moment he pushed aside the thought and its implications.

After he had picked out the guns, and a wicked gas-operated underwater javelin for good measure, he outfitted himself in safari clothes. Khaki shorts and high socks, a big-pocketed bush jacket, a sun helmet. Hurrah for Captain Spalding! He looked a true Mamnan, he thought, humming the song Groucho had sung and admiring himself in a full-length mirror.

He took a cartridge belt and boxes of shells and first-aid and water-purification kits and a trapper's knife and a light-weight trail ax and a compass and binoculars and snowshoes and deerskin gloves and a tough pair of boots. He staggered out into Madison Avenue and dumped everything into the back of the cream-colored Lincoln convertible he was driving that day.

The trumpeting of the elephant had come from the Central Park Zoo, of course. He drove in from Fifth Avenue and parked near the restaurant opposite the sea lions' pool. He could see three of them lying quietly on a stone ledge, just above the water, watching him. He wondered when they'd last been fed.

First, though, he went to the administration building and let himself in with lock-picking tools. He had become adept at the burglary trade. He found a set of what seemed to be master keys and tried them first at the aviary. They worked.

The names of the birds, on the faded wooden plaques, were as colorful as their plumage. There were a Papuan lory, a sulphur-crested cockatoo, the chiffchaff and kookaburra bird, laughing jackass and motmot, chachalaca, drongo and poor old puffin. He opened their cages and watched their tentative, gaudy passage to freedom.

A pelican waddled out comically, suspicion in its round eyes. He ducked a hawk and cowered from a swift, fierce eagle. An owl lingered, blinking, until he shoed it toward the doors. He left to the last two brooding vultures, hesitating to free creatures so vile. But there was a role for scavengers, too. He opened their cage and ran, to get outdoors before they did.

After the cacophony of the aviary, he was surprised at the silence as he neared the monkey house. He'd have to be damned careful about the gorilla, which obviously had to be shot. The big chimps were nothing to fool around with, either. But the monkey house was empty. The signs were -there and the smell remained but the apes, big and little, were not. Could they have freed themselves? But all the cages were locked.

Puzzled, he went on to the smaller mammals, freeing the harmless ones, the raccoons, the mongooses, the deflowered skunks, the weasels and prairie dogs even the spiny porcupine, which looked over its shoulder at him as it shuffled toward the doors.

He freed the foxes, too, and they bounded off as if to complete an interrupted mission. "Go get the rats," Rolfe yelled after them.

He marked the location of the wolves and the big cats. He'd come back to them with his guns.

Last of all he freed the lone elephant, scarcely grown, whose trumpet call had summoned him. The elephantan unofficial sign said it was a female, Geraldine followed him at a distance almost to the car, then broke into a clumsy trot and drank from the sea lions' pool.

As Rolfe was returning to the cages with the guns he knew why there weren't any monkeys. The big and little apes were hominids, like man. Their evolutionary climb had doomed them, too.

He killed the beasts of prey. It was an awful business. He was not a good shot even at close range and the executions took many bullets. A sinuous, snarling black panther took six before he was sure. The caged beasts, refusing to stand still for the mercy killings, made it hot, bloody, stinking work. He guessed it was necessary.

Finally he was done. Quivering and sweating, he returned to the car. The sea lions honked and swam across to his side of the pool. He could see now that there were three babies and two adults.

What was he to do with them? He couldn't bring himself to a final butchery. And what was he to do about all the other captive animals in the Bronx Zoo uptown, in zoos all over the world? He couldn't be a one-man Animal Rescue League.

Rolfe had a momentary fantasy in which he enticed the sea lions into the car (four in the back, one in the front) and drove them to the East River, where they flopped into the water and swam toward the sea, honking with gratitude. But he knew that in his present state of exhaustion he couldn't lift even the babies, and there was no way for them to get out of their enclosure unaided. Maybe he could come back with a truck and plank 'and fish to tempt them with. He left the problem, and that of the Bronx and Prospect Park Zoos and the Aquarium (not to get too far a field) and started the car.

Geraldine looked after him. He would have liked a little trumpet of farewell but she had found some long grass and was eating.

As he drove back to the Living End through the wider streets, weaving carefully around the stalled cars, his mind was full of other trapped beasts, great and small, starving and soon to go mad from thirst, as if in punishment for having outlived man.

Only then did the other thought crash into his consciousness what of the millions of pets, trapped in the houses of their vanished owners? Dogs and cats, unable to open the refrigerators or the cans in the pantries. Some would have



the craft to tear open packages of dried food and would learn to drink from leaking faucets or from toilet bowls. But at best they could prolong their miserable existence for only a few more days.

What was he to do about the pets? What could he do? Run around the city freeing them? Where would he start? Should he free all those on the north sides of odd-numbered streets? Or those on the ground floors of houses in named streets beginning with consonants? What were the rules? How did you play God?

He resolved not to talk to Siss about it. He wouldn't have her breaking her heart over a billion doomed animals; she had enough to mourn.

*From his notebooks:*

What should I call today? Rolf day? Sissuary the 13th? Year Zero?

Shd have kept track but don't really know how many days it's been since I walked out of Bill's storage vault and found myself V2 the human pop. of the whole furshlugginer world.

Asked Siss. *She* remembers. It has been exactly 11 days since the holocaust. She accounted for every one of them. Moren I eld do: they started to run together for me after the first three.

OK, so it's Sissuary the 11th, Year One, Aimo Rolfe. Somebody's got to keep a record.

How many days in Sissuary? We'll see. Got to name the second month before closing out the first.

It was difficult for him to look back and remember exactly when he had first realized with certainty that this was the woman with whom he was fated to spend the rest of his life, when it had dawned on him that this moron was to be his bosom companion, that he had to take care of her, provide for her, *talk* with her (and *listen* to her), answer her stupid questions, *sleep* with her!

The realization must have come about the time he began to experience his stomach-aches. They weren't pains; they were more like a gnawing at the vitals of his well-being, a pincers movement by the enemy that was trapping him where he didn't want to be, with someone he didn't want to be with, a leaden weight that was smothering his freedom.

Some of her traits nearly drove him out of his mind. He was oversensitive, he supposed, but he had to wince and tried to close his ears every time she converted a sneeze into a clearly-enunciated "Ah *chool*" and waited for him to bless her.

Worse because more frequent was her way of grunting audibly when she was picking up something, or pushing something or moving something around. This was to let him know that she- was hard at work, for him. After a while he forced himself to praise her while she was at it -her diligence; her strength, her unselfishness-and she stopped making so much noise. He hated himself for being a hypocrite and felt sure she would see through him, but she never did and in the end his exaggerated praise became a way of life. It stood him in good stead later, when he had to tell her white lies about the degree of his affection for her and the great esteem in which he held her.

*From his notebooks:*

Asked Siss if she'd ever read a book and she said oh yes the Good Book. Parts of it. It used to comfort her a lot more in the old days, apparently. She'd read two books all the way thru Uncle Wiggily and Japanese Fairy Tales, and parts of a Tarzan book. She sometimes used to look at the paper read the comics, the horoscope, picture captions, the TV list-

ings. Lord save us from ever having to hold a literary conversation.

To be fair I've tried to remember the last 10 books I read before doom. Probably be a pretty stupid list if I was following my usual random reading pattern off on an Erie Stanley Gardner or James Bond kick and reading everything available all at once.

Aside from his obligation to humanity to sire a new race, what was there for him to do? Rolfe considered the possibilities, dividing them into two groups: necessities (duties or obligations) and pastimes (including frivolities).

Under necessities he put:

Keep a journal for posterity, if any. He was already doing that.

Give Siss the equivalent of a grammar school education; more if she could take it.

Try to elevate her taste for the sake of the unborn children she would one day influence.

Keep his family fed and sheltered. Would it be necessary to clothe them, except for warmth in the winter? Nudity might be more practical, as well as healthier.

Then he jotted down on a separate piece of paper "Obligation to self paramount" and looked at it. He felt that he had to come first, with his duty to Siss a little lower (on the paper and in his estimation) because he was smarter than. she was and therefore more worth saving.

Then he had another look and amended it. Siss was more worth saving because she was a woman and able to reproduce her kind.

But not without his help, of course.

Finally he put himself and Siss at the top of the list. No good saving one without the other.

Pastimes. Take up a sport to keep fit. What one-man sports were there? Woodchopping? Fat chance. Too blister-prone, he. Hiking? Maybe he and Siss should hike around the world to make positively sure there was nobody else. Or around the eastern United States, anyhow. Or just up and down the Hudson River Valley? Somehow walking didn't seem to be his sport, either.

He might take up cooking. Men. had always been the best chefs and now ingenuity would be needed to make nourishing and palatable meals from what was available to them. They couldn't depend on canned and preserved food forever. Okay, he'd be a cook. Of course that was a sport that tended to put pounds on, not take them off. He'd better find an antidote, like swimming or handball.

How about collecting? What money? Diamonds? Great art? Neither money nor diamonds, obviously; neither had any intrinsic value in a World of Two and then art was best left where it was, as well-protected as anything in the poor old world. If he wanted Siss to see a Rembrandt or an Andrew Wyeth, he'd take her to it.

*From his notebooks:*

Collecting old-fashioned windup phonographs against the day when no elec. Also old-fashioned 78 records. Got to keep so many things I can't reproduce.

Music. Good; Siss likes. She enjoys Tchaikowsky, Wagner and Beethoven (what wildness must stir within her poor head sometimes!) She'll sit still for Bach. I can't complain.

We're both crazy about Cole Porter, she for the music, I for the words, those great words, so much more ironic now than he had ever meant them to be.

"It's All Right With Me," for instance.

We've found a place. *We* -Is that the first time I've used

the word?

It's far enough away from the city to be really country; beyond the stink and the reminders of dead glory; yet close enough so I can get in for supplies if I need them. I've stored up enough good gassed-up cars so that travel is no problem, but I think I'll try to stay here as much as I can. I used to be a fair woodsman. Let's see how much I remember.

It's peaceful here. My stomach-ache is better, all of a sudden.

He insisted on thinking of her as a person who had come into his custody and for whom he was responsible. For a long time all he felt toward her was pity; no desire. And for that reason he also pitied himself.

Because she was what she was, it would be unthinkable for her to touch him in any but the most innocent of ways, as she would one of her animal friends.

And when she called him anything but Mr. Ralph, using a word like honey, he was not flattered because he had heard her apply it also to a squirrel, a blue jay and a field mouse.

"Mr. Ralph, can I ask you a favor? Would you mind if you took me for a ride?"

It wasn't that she particularly wanted to go anywhere; apparently her enjoyment lay in sharing the front seat with him; he noticed that she sat very close to him, in almost the exact center of the seat and did not, as he had speculated she might, sit at the far right, next to the window.

For her ride she chose an ornate costume which included a hat, a silk scarf, dark glasses, jacket, blouse and skirt, stockings and half-heel shoes.

She picked the costume at what she called the Monkey Ward store while he shopped down the block for a fairly clean convertible with sound tires and a fair amount of gas in the tank.

They rode out past the quarry. Long ago he had stored away the fact that Quarry Road was the highway probably least littered with debris.

There was one bad place where he had to get off into a field to skirt what looked as if it had been a 50-car chain-reaction smashup. Otherwise, it was good driving all the way to the lake.

He parked near the old boat-launching site and automatically scanned the watery horizon for any sign of sail or smoke. He had never entirely abandoned hopes of finding other people.

He had brought from the liquor store (catty-corner from Monkey Ward's) a fifth of a high-priced Scotch and as they sat looking out over the lake he carefully opened it, preserving the tinfoil for her.

Then he ceremoniously offered her a drink. She declined, as he knew she would, saying:

"Not now, thanks. Maybe some other time." Apparently a piece of etiquette she'd learned was that it was bad manners to refuse anything outright especially something to eat or drink.

Rolfe said: "I'll have one, though, if you don't mind." And she replied, in what must have been a half-remembered witticism, "Take two, they're small."

He took two in succession, neither small.

The lake was serene, the sun was warm but not hot, a breeze blew from the east and the bugs were infrequent.

"Doesn't it bother you that there's nobody else?" he asked her. "Don't you get *lonesome*?"

But she said: "I'm always lonesome. I was. Now I'm less lonesome than I was. Thanks to you, Mr. Ralph."

Now what could he say to that? So he sat there, touched but scowling out at the horizon, and then he reached for the very old Scotch (the world had still lived when it was hot-tied) and took a very big swallow. Only later did he think to offer her one.

"Some other time, maybe," she said. "Not right now."

There came a day when her last brassiere lost its hooks and she obtained his dispensation to stop wearing it. And another when her blouses lost their buttons and refused to stay closed by the mere tucking of their tails into her skirts, and he told her it didn't matter in the least; until finally her last rags fell from her.

She said to him: "You're my Mr. Ralph, honey, and it's not wrong to be this way with you, is it, Mr. Ralph?"

This touched him so that he took her naked innocent body in his arms and kissed the top of her clean, sweet head and he said:

"You're my big little girl and you couldn't do anything wrong if you tried."

And only then, for the first time, he felt a desire for this waif -this innocent in whom the seeds of the whole human race were locked.

She gave him a quick daring kiss on the cheek and ran off, saying: "It's time I started supper now. My gosh, we have to get you fed."

He remembered with shame a pathetic scene early in their life together. They had gone to Monkey Ward's and dressed from the skin out in brand-new evening clothes. He'd had to help her cancel some tasteless combinations but at last she stood before him like an angel. Or, as he'd said: "Damned if you don't look like a Madison Avenue model-."

"You shouldn't swear, Mr. Ralph," she'd said. "But thanks anyhow."

"And you shouldn't talk. You're welcome. Look, we're going to play a game. We're going to a fancy night club. We're going to make believe you're a mute -that you can't talk. No matter what, you must not say a word. Not a word."

"All right, Mr. Ralph."

"Starting right now, damn it! I'm sorry. I mean starting right now. All you can do is nod or smile. You can touch me if you want to. But you can't talk at all. That's part of the game. Do you understand?"

She started to say yes, then caught herself and nodded.

The silent nod from this beautifully gowned woman immediately made her ten times more attractive. Pleased with himself and with her, he gave her his arm and bowed her into the front seat of the Bentley he had searched out for this evening.

The night club had once been a major one, with a resident big-name band. Changing fashion had turned it into a discotheque, so that it had a juke box. He fed it a handful of coins to pay his way into a night of illusion. But the tables were bare and therefore wrong. He found a linen closet and set them with tablecloths and silverware, glasses, candlesticks.

The illusion grew. He found a switch that set in motion a set of colored lights which played on multi-faceted colored globes which hung from the ceiling. Another switch set them spinning slowly.

"What do you do in your spare time?" he asked her, knowing she wouldn't reply but wanting to see how she would react.

She shrugged, smiled a little and shook her head in what he tried to imagine was an attitude that she had so little spare time that it was negligible.

She was carrying out her part of the bargain. She did it extremely well. She listened without a word to his conversation, looking into his eyes as he pretended they were two among hundreds of elegant diners. He reconstructed talk from pre-holocaust nights out. He pretended she was a girl he had once been engaged to and told her extravagant things. She looked back at him and smiled, as if mockingly, as the old girl would have done. He pretended it was a later time, with the engagement in ruins and him solacing himself with the wife of his best friend, with the best friend's knowledge and consent, and the girl across from him gave him silent looks of profound sympathy. He pretended he had hired a call girl and spoke foully to her. She smiled bravely, her lips quivering, saying nothing.

Angered by the illusion which he had created and which mocked him, he drank too much and continued to abuse her for herself, now; for doing as he had asked, for remaining silent.

The juke box was playing "Begin the Beguine" and ghostly dancers danced inside the circle of tables, under the soft colored lights. He saw them and cursed them for their non-existence. He got up, knocking his chair over backwards, and shouted at her.

"Speak!" he said. "I release you from your muteness."

She shook her head, no longer smiling.

"Speak! You misbegotten halfwit! You monstrous bird-brained imposter! You scullery maid in a Schiaparelli gown! Speak, you mental case."

But still she said nothing; merely looked at him with those deep eyes that seemed to understand and forgive.

Only at the very end of their evening out, when he had drunk himself into a stupor and stared across the room over her right shoulder, as if transfixed by his misery, did she speak. And then she said only:

"We better go home, Mr. Ralph, honey."

Then with a strength greater than his she half carried him there to the car and drove him home and put him to bed. It was a good thing he'd taught her to drive.

He woke up contrite, half remembering that he'd behaved unforgivably.

But she forgave him, as perhaps no one else ever would have, using these words:

"I forgive you, Mr. Ralph. You knewd not what you dood."

He was delighted. "Do not what I would," he said. "Had I but dood what I could, who knew what would have been dood?"

"I don't think that's very nice, Mr. Ralph. I said I forgive you. You're supposed to say thank you and say you're sorry, even if you're not sorry."

He was still laughing at her, even after the realization that he had a hangover.

"Okay, I'm sorry even if I'm not sorry and it's very good of you to forgive me for my insufferable behavior, even if nobody asked you to."

"Thank you for saying that, Mr. Ralph. Now I'll fix you a hangover remedy."

"Where did you learn to concoct a hangover remedy, for God's sake?"

"I was a working girl once for a poor man who got intoxicated and his wife. I learned it there."

She gave him no magic potion but an ordinary tomatoey thing laced with pepper and Worcestershire sauce. He drank it down but stubbornly declined to feel better for a full hour.

By then he had persuaded Siss he needed a cold beer and she'd brought him one disapproving but proud of her ingenuity in having produced it, since they kept no store of alcoholic beverages. She must have made an ingenious search to find a cold beer; he was suddenly proud of her.

But, remembering his performance of the night before, he hated himself.

From the holding of hands to the kiss is not so far a thing as from the not holding of hands to the holding.

One thinks of the innocence of holding hands (children do it; men shake hands) but it is a vast journey from a platonic handclasp, over which there is no lingering, to the clasp which is so intense and telegraphic (accompanied, as it may be, by ardent gazing) that it would be a great surprise if the kiss to which it soon led were rebuffed.

And a kiss may lead anywhere. This he knew. He wondered how much she knew, or felt or surmised.

Dared he take her hand to help her across a stream or a rocky place? So far he had taken her arm, holding her firmly just above the elbow as if she were an elderly woman and he a large Boy Scout. He had no wish yet for anything more intimate.

It was a hesitant, tentative beginning to their romance.

"Do you mind my touching you?" he asked. Lately he had found that it gave him pleasure to touch her hair or trace the outline of her ear, or run his finger along her breastbone. Nothing carnal.

"No; I enjoy it."

And so they married. He arranged a ceremony, not only for her sense of propriety but to satisfy his demand for a kind of stability amid chaos.

He made it as elaborate as possible. He found a big flat rock to be the altar. He picked flowers and garlanded them into a headpiece for her. Let her head be covered, though her body was not.

She surprised him with a piece of writing. Crudely written in pencil on a sheet from a lined pad, it said:

"To my Mr. Ralph

"This is our day to marry to-gether. My day and your day. I feel real good about it even if nobody else cant come. I'll try and make you a good wife with all my heart. .

"I know you do the same thing for me because you are kind and good dear Mr. Ralph.

"Your freind and wife

"Cecelia Beamer"

It was the first time he knew what Siss was the nickname for.

Never before a sentimental man, Martin took his wife, Cecelia Beamer Rolfe, in his arms and kissed her with tenderness and affection.

He put her wedding-letter, as he thought of it, away in his desk, where it would be safe.

He wanted to consummate the marriage outdoors. It was a perfect June day, the sun warm, the grass soft, a breeze gentle. Lord knew they could not have asked for greater privacy than that of their own planet. But he felt Siss would have been, if not shocked, embarrassed unless four walls surrounded them.

Therefore he took her indoors, where she removed her flowery hat and put it in water, in a bowl.

Then she returned to him and said: "Tell me what to do, Mr. Ralph. I don't know what to do for you."

"For us, child," he said. "What we do whatever we do from now on, is for us. Together."

"I like you saying that. Tell me what I should do."

"You don't have to do anything except be loved and love back in whatever way you feel. Anything you feel and do is right because you're my wife and I'm your husband."

"Would it be wrong for me to want you to hold me here?" she asked. Eyes cast down, she touched her breasts. "I feel as if I'm bursting. I'm so full of love for my Mr. Ralph. I never thought back then, that"

He had to stop her talking and kissed her.

For a ring he had made a circlet of grass. When it broke apart or fell to pieces he made her another. In a way, he thought sometimes, it was like renewing the vows.

Once, years later, when he was looking for a pencil he found in the back of her drawer a collection of hundreds of wisps of strands of dried grass. She had saved each of the worn-out rings, obviously. She had kept them in a cheaply-manufactured container of plastic masquerading as leather which said in gaudy lettering "My Jewel Box." These were her gems, her only treasure.

He sometimes asked Siss, suddenly, intently: "Are you my friend?" And she would reply: "Yes, I am. Didn't you think so?" And he would be ashamed, but also gratified, and his heart would swell because she had said more than just Yes.

A woman is a race apart, a friend had told him once. "But," Rolfe added to himself, "this is ridiculous." He and Siss could not have been more unlike mentally.

Well, of course. That could have been true even if he'd had the whole world to choose from. Suppose she had been a selfish, empty-headed teenager; how long could he have stood someone like that? Or she could have been a crone, a hag; work-worn, fat, diseased, crippled. You're a pretty lucky guy, Martin Rolfe; Mr. Ralph, sir!

Sexually they were complementary, for instance. But was that enough? Except for little bits of time, no. But those are very important little bits of time, aren't they, Marty? Precious) even. Each a potential conception, a possible person.

But aside from that, no; it was not enough.

But because her entire existence was one of trying to please him, she learned eventually to make acceptable verbal responses and their mating became more satisfactory to him. His stomach ached less frequently.

By trial and error and by diligence, as she learned any task, she learned to speak to him in bed with an approximation of high intelligence, murmuring words of sympathy, approval, surprise, delight, playfulness, even shock at appropriate times. She learned that a few words, sincerely but carefully expressed, did more for their mutual happiness than a babble, or an ungrammatical gush.

Her physical responses, as of a slave to a beloved master, had always been gratifying to him, except for her one unbreakable habit -her tendency to say "Oh, praise God!" whenever she achieved orgasm, or whenever she thought he had.

Once she had asked him to tell her about his life.

"What about it?" he had asked.

"All about it," she'd said.

"That would be a lot to tell."

"As much as you want to, then, Mr. Ralph."

Without a word of introduction he would start: "I was sixteen when I first kissed a girl. Awfully old . . ."

He'd always thought it shameful that he'd been unknissed so long and had never confessed it before. It was years later before Siss got up the courage to say: "Mr. Ralph, you told me once you didn't get a kiss till you were sixteen and that's

too bad, but do you know how old I was?"

And he had said No, he didn't and she'd said:

"Twenty-eight, Mr. Ralph: that's how old. So don't you feel so bad."

And he'd asked her, though he was practically certain:

"You mean I was the first one ever to kiss you?"

"The first man, except my father, yes, sir, Mr. Ralph. And do you know what? I'm awfully glad it was you that was the first, and that now nobody else ever will. I'm glad of that."

And so he had to postpone his confession. He had been on the point of telling Siss about his previous marriage how he had chosen his wife from those available for matrimony among the fairly large number of women he had known.

What a fantastically wide choice he had had! The irony of now, with no choice at all, made him marvel to think that he could have picked from among millions, had he known doom was to come and that he and his mate, if she too were saved, would be parents to the entire human race. With what care he would have searched, what exacting tests he would have applied, to screen the mass of womanhood for a fitting mate for the last man!

But because he had expected all life to continue he had chosen from an extremely small sample. Nevertheless he had chosen well.

Later he would tell Siss; not now. He would not hurt her at this time with talk about what, by hindsight, had been a perfect marriage; nor did he feel like hurting himself by contrasting a happy past marriage to an intelligent woman with what he had now.

Now he would tell Siss about another time in his adult past, a sad interlude during which he and his perfect wife had separated and he was living alone.

How foolish to have had that quarrel with his dead perfect wife, he thought. How senseless to have lost all the time that they might have had together.

Yet he had achieved a certain peace in his solitude. And their marriage had been stronger when he returned to her.

"I'm going to tell you about a time I was living all alone in a little trailer in the woods," he told Siss.

He had been a free-lance editor in those days, doctoring doddering magazines, doing articles for his editor friends, and reading for a publishing house, and so was able to avoid the frenzied daily commute. He used the mails and phone and got into, the city a couple of times a month.

He enjoyed an occasional dinner or cocktail party in his exurb; but he valued his privacy enough to decline many invitations and to withdraw to his trailer.

Rolfe himself never entertained. His truck-back trailer home was unsuited for anything but the shortest of visits. He'd have the mailman in for a drink of bourbon on Christmas Eve, or chat with the man who came around to collect for the volunteer ambulance corps, or play ten-second-move chess with the route man who delivered the only food Rolfe ate at home eggs, and the butter he fried them in.

The truck-back home normally sat in the middle of Rolfe's eighteen acres far enough out of town so that there were woods to surround him and a damned-up stream in which to swim, but close enough for an electric power line to be run in.

If Rolfe's choice of this way to live during his separation was an eccentricity, then he was eccentric. One other thing about him was a little odd. He had nailed a sign to a tree at the beginning of the track which led off the county road to his place. It said:

PRIVATE ROAD  
MINED



The police came around after he put up the sign, which he'd burned into the end of an egg crate with an electric pen. The policemen, a lieutenant and a sergeant, left their car at the county road and walked carefully along the edge of Rolfe's track to the pickup truck in the clearing near the dammed-up stream. A pheasant moved without haste into some undergrowth as they came up to the door over the tailgate.

Rolfe invited them in, making room for them to sit down by lifting a manuscript off the one easy chair and motioning the sergeant to the camp chair in front of the typewriter on the bracket that folded down from the wall. Rolfe sat on the single bunk along the driver's side, having first got cokes out of the tiny refrigerator. He knew better than to offer liquor to policemen on duty. They chatted for a while before the lieutenant said: "About your sign, Mr. Rolfe; we've had some complaints."

"Call me Martin. Complaints? I like my privacy, that's all."

"My name's Sol," the lieutenant said, "and this is Eric."

They shook hands all round again, now that the first-name basis had been established, and Sol said: "About the road being mined. Sure it's private property and nobody respects the principle of that more than I do, but somebody might get hurt. Somebody who couldn't read, maybe, or who wandered in after dark not really meaning to trespass, you know."

"Sure," Rolfe said. "I can understand that."

"Besides," the sergeant Eric said, "anybody with war surplus ammunition was supposed to have turned it in years ago. It's the law."

"I don't know what you mean," Rolfe said. "I haven't booby-trapped the road. I wouldn't hurt a rabbit, much less a human being. Why, I'm so soft-hearted I don't even fish the stream."

Sol said: "I get it. You just put up the sign to keep people away like 'Beware of the Dog,' even if you don't have a dog."

"And there really aren't any bouncing Bettys out there then?" Eric said. "I'm relieved. Believe me, we walked mighty easy along the edge."

Martin Rolfe grinned. "Gentlemen, I think I begin to understand. And it's all my fault because I'm such a poor speller. What I was trying to do was to call attention to the fact that it isn't a public road or a hiking trail or a place for young vandals to go if they have a hankering to break windows or set fires in out-of-the-way places. I believe there've been a few such incidents around town."

"Too many," Sol said. "But I still don't know what you mean about being a poor speller."

"What I intended to say on the sign, I guess, was 'Mind you, this is a private road.' It's a kind of New England expression."

"I've heard it," Eric said. "They have signs like that in London, where my wife's from she was a war bride, you know. Lieutenant that say 'Mind the step.'"

"That's m-i-n-d,' not m-i-n-e-d," Sol said.

"Is that right?" Rolfe asked with a grin. "I told you I wasn't much of a speller. I'd better change the sign, then, hadn't I?"

Instead of replying directly, Sol asked: "Ever have trouble with kids back in here?"

"Kids and grown-ups both," Rolfe said. "Different kinds of trouble. Kids broke a window one night. I was asleep and got a shower of broken glass all over my face. Another time a big brave man with a gun shot the hell out of a mother

partridge and her brood and left them flopping around. He wasn't even planning to eat them. Did you ever put a living thing out of its misery with your bare hands, Sol? That same day I put up the sign. The partridges and I haven't been bothered since."

Sol got up and let himself out into the clearing. "I had to kill a doe once that some mighty hunter put a hole into but didn't think worth following into the brush." Eric went out with Martin Rolfe behind him and all three walked along the middle of the track to the county road. Birds chirped at them and a leisurely rabbit hopped away.

At the blacktopped road Martin Rolfe went to his sign. He took a pencil out of his shirt pocket and scratched a vertical line through the *E* in *mined*. Then he joined the *N* and *D* with a copyreader's mark.

The sergeant said, "I don't know that that's too highly visible. Besides, a couple of rains'll wash it off."

"Oh, come on, Eric," the lieutenant said, getting into the car. "It's as plain as day."

"Thanks, Lieutenant," Martin said, going over to the police car to say goodbye. "I never could spell worth a damn."

"Oh, yeah?" Eric said. "I'll bet you can out spell both of us any day." He was looking back at the sign as he got into the car and he tripped, so that he had to grab for the door to steady himself.

"Mind the step," Martin said.

It was achingly poignant for him to leaf through the pages of a copy he'd saved of *The New York Times Magazine*.

How lovable and childlike seemed the people doing the weird things fashion advertising demanded of them! How earnest were the statements made in the articles and the letter pages. For example, there was the ironic, the heart-breakingly laughable article about the population explosion about the insupportable hundreds of millions there soon would be in India, or the six billion there'd be on Earth in just a few more years.

Would that there were only as many people as had read that particular Sunday issue of the *Times*. A million and a half? World enough. Or even if there existed on Earth only the few hundred people it had taken to write, edit and print that particular issue of *The New York Times Magazine*. Even if there were only *one* other than Siss and himself. One man to play chess with, or to philosophize with.

He thrust away from him the thought that the third person on Earth might be another woman. It was too dangerous, too explosive a thought. Would he betray Siss for a normal woman? Certainly he would never abandon her, but betrayal was certain she would be so easy to fool. What form, other than an intellectual one, would it take? Would he take the new woman blatantly as his mate, with a facile explanation. to Siss? Would the new one try to banish Siss (he'd never stand for that would he?), or decree a demeaning role for her in a reorganized household something he might rationalize himself into accepting? (He could hear the new one saying: "You want our children-Earth's only children to be intelligent, don't you? You don't want the new world peopled by feeble-minded brats, do you?")

His thoughts went back to the possible consequences if a third person were male. Suppose the man were not a chess player? Suppose he were a mere brute, with brutish instincts? Would Martin have to share Siss with him, Eskimo style? Even if he could bring himself (or Siss) to accept such an arrangement, how long could it continue without an explosion?

No, as long as he was fantasizing it would be simpler

to dream up two other people, a man and a woman who had already arranged their own lives, who had made the adjustment.

Still how long could two couples and only two live side by side without something boiling over? Wife-swapping was too prevalent an institution in the bad old days, when there was all kinds of other entertainment, not to be a daily temptation in an all-but-depopulated world.

No it would be best to have no third or fourth person not unless there could be an infinity of others besides . . .

Ah, but he was so *lonely!*

"I'm going to the city," he told Siss.

They had done without the city for a long time. They had made do with the things they had, or could make; they'd let their clothing drop away and hadn't replaced it; they'd grown their own food; made their country house the center of their universe. But now he wanted to go back.

She must have seen something in his eyes. "Let me go for you," she said. "Just tell me what you want."

Sometimes she chose such an ironic way of saying things that he fleetingly suspected her of having not only intelligence but wit.

"Just tell you what I want! As if" He stopped. As if he could tell her. As if he knew.

He knew only that he had to get away for a little while. He wanted to be alone, with his own memories of a populated Earth.

He also wanted a drink.

Long ago he had made it a rule never to have liquor in the house. It would be too great a temptation to have it handy. He could see himself degenerating into a drunken bum. With an unlimited supply close at hand and a devoted woman to do all the work that needed to be done, he could easily slip into an animalistic role become a creature with a whiskey-sodden, atrophied brain.

A fitting father and mother to the world such a pair would be!

And so he had made his rule: drink all you want when you have to in the city but never bring it home.

And so he had told Siss: "I don't know what I want, exactly. I just want to go to the city."

And she had said: "All right, Mr. Ralph, if you have to."

There was her perception again, if that's what it was. "If you have to," she'd said, though he'd talked of want, not need.

"I do," he said. "But I'll come back. Is there anything I can bring you?" She looked around the kitchen and began to say something, then stopped and said instead: "Nothing we really need. You just go, Mr. Ralph, and take as long as you have to. It'll give me a chance to go do that berry-picking I been wanting to."

She was so sweet that he almost decided not to go. But then he kissed her very thankful, just then, that she was his Siss and not some too-bright shrew of a problem wife and went. He drove in, naked in a Cadillac.

He had rolled the swivel chair out of the store onto the sidewalk and was sitting in it in the afternoon' sunshine. Beside him on the pavement were half a dozen bottles, each uncapped. He was talking to himself.

"As the afternoon sun, blood-red through the haze of the remnants of a once overpopulated world, imperceptibly glides to its bed, one of the two known survivors becomes quietly plastered." He had a drink on that, then went on:

"What thoughts pass through the mind of this pitiful

creature, this naked relic of a man left to eke out the rest of his days on a ruined planet?

"Does he ever recall the glory that once was his and that of his fellows? Or is he so sunk in misery in the mere scratching of a bare existence from an arid soil that he has forgotten the heights to which his kind once had risen?

Subject pauses in thought and reaches for bottle. Drinks deeply from bottle, but not so deeply as to induce drunken sickness. Aim of Subject is quiet plasterization, happy drunkdom, a nonceness of Nirvana, with harm to none and bitterness never. Sicken drunkenness?

"A respite of reverie, perhaps, as subject casts mind back to happy past. Mr. Martin Rolfe in Happier Days."

He picked up his *New York Times Magazine* and leafed through it. It was almost as good as having another drink. There they were they couldn't have been more than 17 leaping in their panty girdles to show the freedom of action and the elasticity of the crotch. He remembered once having heard a newsman, waiting in the rain for the arrival of a President, say: "Being a reporter is essentially an undignified occupation." So had been being a model, obviously.

Things of the past . . . He thought: "A title for my memoirs *Things of the Past*." He took up the *Times* again and turned to an ad of a debonair young man in a revolving door holding a copy of the *Wall Street Journal*. "I dreamt I was trapped in a revolving door in my Arctieweave tropical worsted," Rolfe said, summing up the situation. He looked like the 28-year-old Larchmont type; five years out of college, with a Master's, two kids, wife beginning to drink a little bit too much. "If he's trapped there long enough he may read the paper right through to the shipping pages and ship out to the islands."

Rolfe looked pityingly at the trapped Larchmont type, armed against his predicament only with his Arctieweave suit, his *Wall Street Journal* and, presumably, a wallet full of wife-and-baby pictures, credit cards and a commutation ticket issued by a railroad company petitioning to suspend passenger service.

"You poor bastard," Rolfe said.

Of course he was saying it to himself, too. He said it all the way home: "You poor bastard. You poor bastard."

Siss was waiting for him in the cool garden. Gently she led him indoors. She said, with only the slightest hint of reproach (he could stand that much he deserved more): "You been drinking too much again, Mr. Ralph. You know it's bad for you."

"You're right, Siss. Absolutely right."

"You got to take care of yourself. I try to, but you got to try, too."

Tenderly she put him to bed. He knew then, among other times, how much he needed her, and he struggled to say something nice to her before he dropped off to sleep. Finally he said: "You know, Siss, you're nicer than all those crazy leaping girls in the York Times." That's what she called it, the York Times. "You got a lot more sense, too, than they look as if they had."

*From his notebooks:*

Got drunk saft. Downtown. Dangerous. Not fair to Siss. Liable get et up by dogs while stinko. Bad show.

Can't bring bottle home, tho. Too great a temptation to get sozzled daily and twice on Sunday.

Why is Sunday worse than other days? I tried to rename it but Siss insisted we keep it. She also demanded it come every seven days, just like in good old days. Had to give in.

So much for calendar reform.

He sought other ways of escaping. He hiked and climbed and explored.

Once he found a spot on the brow of a hill from which one (that is, he) could see for miles but from which no work of man was visible except the top of a silo at the top of a similar hill across a wide valley.

Having found the spot, he cleared wild strawberry plants from beneath a young maple tree, leaving the ferns and the cushiony moss, and lay down to rest. It had been a strenuous climb, and hot, and now the insects were upon him. But though the flies buzzed they did not often land and the mosquitoes were torpid and easily slapped. After a while it was almost noon (as if the hour mattered) he had a couple of swallows from the flask in his rucksack and ate some cheese. He thought of the flask as his iron rations.

As he rummaged in the rucksack he found a roll of plastic tape he'd brought along to help him blaze a trail. He hadn't needed it; instead he'd marked his way by cutting branches with a long-banded pruning tool,

But as he lay in the solitude he had sought out and found (how odd to seek solitude in an empty world), under one of a myriad of trees, where the only sounds were of buzzing insects, chirping birds, the sighing of trees in a soft wind he knew what to do with the plastic tape. He printed something on a little square of paper, small but legible, and, with the tape, attached it to the lowest bough of his young maple. Now he lay under it, savoring what he had done.

The little sign said: THIS TREE RESERVED.

One June night it rained in great, warm, wind-driven sheets. He had not experienced such a storm since a visit a decade earlier to the tropics.

The pleasure he took in the soaking, bath-temperature rain was enhanced by the danger from the lightning. It stabbed down from the sky as if seeking him out, destroying and burning only yards away, as if it would be a great cosmic joke to strike that one spot on the surface of the Earth and kill the last man.

He defied it, prancing wildly, then halting deliberately as if transfixed when it flashed, posing with outthrust or up thrust arms, yelling, defying the thing or Being that had sent the storm, loosing his pent-up frustrations, his disappointments and hates in the elemental power of the storm.

He had trapped the beast in a pit, unfairly. It had nearly exhausted itself in attempts to leap the sheer walls. At least he hadn't lined the bottom with spikes.

Rolfe could have killed it from above, poisoned it, let it starve. Instead he jumped into the pit, armed with two knives, to risk mauling and death.

He realized his folly instantly. The creature was far from helpless. Its claws were sharp, though its movements were clumsy in the cramped pit-bottom, and its fetid breath was as much a weapon as its fangs.

Only by the sheerest of luck, he felt, did he avoid the claws and fangs long enough to plunge first one knife then the other into the beast's heart.

As its death struggles subsided he lay there, his face buried in the back of its neck, bugging the thing he'd killed, a sadness coming over him as he felt the fading heartbeat.

Later he skinned the beast. He and Siss ate the meat and slept under the pelt. But first he had buried the head, in tribute to a worthy antagonist, a kind of salute to another male.

And unto them was born a son.

Siss seemed to know just what to do, by instinct. Clumsily he helped. He cut the umbilical with a boiled pair of scissors. Made a knot. Washed the red little thing.

Eventually Siss lay quiet, dry, serene, holding her swaddled child. He sat on the floor next to the bed and looked and looked at the mother and child. A holy picture, he thought. He sat for hours, staring, wondering. She looked at him, silent, wondering.

The new human being slept, serene.

It could not have been more perfect.

His son. His boy. His and hers but, he felt it fair enough to say, mostly his.

His son Adam. What else had there been to name him? Adam. Trite but noble. He had considered calling him Ralph, but only briefly. It would be too comical to have his mother go around introducing him to their near circle of friends relatives all, come to think of it as Ralph Ralph.

There'd be no need for introductions for many years, of course, in a closed society such as theirs. The years did pass.

There was his son, tall for his age, straight, brown, good with his hands . . .

But bright? Intelligent? How was a father to know? A prejudiced parent sees only the good, ignores what he doesn't want to accept, can be oblivious to faults obvious to anyone else.

He talked to him and got gratifying responses. But wouldn't almost any response be gratifying to a parent? Parents are easily satisfied. Especially fathers of sons.

Had he conditioned himself to the point where he would be satisfied if his son showed more than animal intelligence? The conditioning encompassed an agony of watching as his son grew watching for signs of mental retardation, of idiocy, of dullness, of bigheadedness, of torpor.

And then they had a daughter.

*From his notebook:*

My son. Brown as a penny. Naked as a jaybird. Slender, muscled, handsome, active, good with his hands.

Bright? Seems so. Obviously too soon to really tell.

Five years old and just made his first kill. Wild dog, attacking our goat. Got him in the right eye with a .30-30 at \_\_\_\_\_ yards (measure and fill in).

Strong and brave and skilled and good looking.

Let's hope intelligent, too.

Please, God.

My daughter. My precious, my beauty. What a delight you are, with your serene smile and your loving way of wrapping your arms around my leg and looking up at Old Daddy. You're your mother's child, aren't you? So good, so quiet. But you're quick on your feet and your reflexes (I've tested them) are sound. I think we're all right.

#### *The Diary of Siss*

(Siss was not very faithful about her diary. The printed word was not her medium. Although her intentions were obviously good, there are fewer than a dozen entries in all, and they are reproduced below. She did not date them. The handwriting in the last entry is slightly better than that of the first, but maybe only because she was using a sharper pencil. A more revealing diary probably would be found in her heart, if that could be read, or in her children.)

Mr. Ralph told me write things down when they big & important I will start now. Today Mr. Ralph married me.

Very happy today. Learning to please my husband.

Very very happy. Today moved to our country house. I like it better than the big city.

Today I had a baby, a boy.  
My word for today is contentment. I have to spell it and tell what it means. Mr. Ralph says I need an education, he will educate me.

My word for today *is* education. Mr. Ralph seen what I wrote in my dairy yestdy.  
I have 2 words for today diary & yesterday. Also saw not seen.

Today I had a baby, a girl. Ralph said now everything is going to be alright.

And presumably it was. Having doubled the population, the human race seemed to be on a firm footing. There was love in the world; a growing, proud family, and a new self-assurance in Sis note that he was Ralph now, not Mr. Ralph. We may be sure, though, that the strict if loving father gave her two words for tomorrow: all right. 'A father, a mother, a son, a daughter. A little learning, a lot of love.

In the summer of his eighth year Adam and his father were in the woods back of the pasture, in the little clearing at the side of the stream that ran pure and sparkling before it broadened into the shallow muddy pond the livestock used. Martin and the boy were eating lunch after a morning of woodcutting and conversation.

Adam, naked like his father, had asked: "Am I going to grow some more hair, like you?"

And Martin said: "Sure, when you get bigger. When you begin to be a man."

And Adam had compared his smooth skin with his father's hard, muscled, hairy body and said: "Morn's got hair in that place, too, but she's different."

So Martin explained, sweating even though he was sitting still now, and his son took it all in, nodding, just as if it were no more important than knowing why the cow had her calf. It was obvious that until now Adam had not connected the function of the bull with the dropping of the calf. Martin explained, in human terms.

"That's pretty neat," Adam said. "When do I get to do it?"

Martin tried to keep his voice matter-of-fact. How do you instruct your son in incest?

The explanation was completed, finally, and it was Martin's turn to ask a question. "Think carefully about this, son. If you could save the life of one person your mother or me but not the other which would you save?"

Adam answered without hesitation. "I'd save Mother, of course."

Martin looked hard at his strong, handsome son and asked the second part of the question. "Why?"

Adam said: "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, Dad. I'd save both of you if I could"

"I know you would. You've been a crack shot since you were five. But there might be only one chance. Your answer is the only possible one, but I have to know why you gave it."

The boy frowned as he struggled to reason out the reply he had made instinctively. "Because it necessary she and I could" Then it came out in a rush: "Because she could be the mother to the world and I could be the father."

Martin shuddered as if a long chill had just passed. It was all right. He embraced his fine, strong, *intelligent* son and wept.

After a little while Sis appeared, walking the path beside the stream, naked as the two of them but different, as Adam had said, and riding the naked baby on her hip.

"Thought we'd join the men folks for lunch," she said. "I picked SOIT15 berries for dessert." She carried the blackberries in a mesh bag and some had been bruised, staining the tanned skin a delicate blue just below her slim waist.

Martin sa'd: "You sure make a good-looking picture, you two. Come here and give me a kiss."

The baby kissed h'm first, then toddled off to smooth up for Adam, who gave her a dutiful peck.

Their father held open his arms and Siss sat beside him, putting her berries aside. She rested her head on his shoulder, serene. Martin folded her to him and kissed her eyes and cheeks and hair and neck and finally her lips, there in the sunshine, by the side of the pure stream, in' the presence of all the world.

"Do you th"nk" she started to say, but Martin said, "Hush, now. It's all right. Everything's all right, Siss darling." She sighed and relaxed against him. He had never called her darling before. He kissed her again for a long time and she gradually lay back on the soft ground and raised one knee and bent the o'her to accommodate her husband.

The baby lost interest and went to wade in the stream but Adam watched, his elbow on his knee, and once he said, "Don't crush the blackberries," and reached out to get them. He ate a handful, slowly.

Then he heard his mother gasp, "Oh, praise God!" and after a moment both his parents became still. And after a little while longer he looked to see that the baby was okay and then went to the intertwined, gently-breathing bodies, which were more beautiful than anything he had ever seen.

Adam knelt beside them and kissed his father's neck and his mother's lips. Siss opened her arms and enfolded her son, too.

And Adam asked, with his face against his mother's cheek, which was wet and warm, "Is this what love is?"

And his mother answered, "Yes, honey," and his father said, in a muffled kind of way, "It's everything there is, son."

Adam reached out for the berries and put one in his mother's mouth and one in his father's and one in his. Then he got up to give one to the baby.