

the ontological basis of two

a story by Michael Houston

Peridot Concord was raised in a glass box by a Harvard professor and is as beautiful as money, as saucy as Hollandaise, as captivating as Pancho Villa. She is also sexless as a Senator. She likes to walk around in mostly her skin, the magnificent flesh tones, ranging from a golden sienna to a sinister umber, filling the air with deadly radiation. You begin, perhaps, to see the outlines of the problem.

Peridot Concord was brought up in what is known as a Skinner box. She inhabited the box until her fourth year, clothed only in layers of warm air. The theory is that the perfect control of the environment made possible by the box produces a healthy, natural child, free of those terrible syndromes set up by damp, dust, sudden loud noises and underwear. This is true. Peridot is indeed healthy and natural. She is as healthy and natural as a shrub.

"Peridot," I ask, "do you remember how it was in the box?"

We are in a park. A light hallucinatory rain is falling upon Peridot's Old Gold head, upon my head, upon the crusty green benches and sparse occasional grass. It is a New York park, filled with mothers and babies and bums. Peridot is wearing her Ford Foundation overcoat with the collar turned up and tight black Billy the Kid pants. I am holding her copy of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* by Karl Popper, and she is holding her right thumb. She raises the thumb to eye level, examines it minutely, and then bites it.

"No," she says, "I don't remember."

"Nothing? You don't remember anything?"

The thumb now has a bite-mark.

She considers its mysteriously changed aspect.

"Generalized sensations of warmth, well-being, that sort of feeling. The rain-on-the-roof feeling. The warm-bath feeling. The *Poet and Peasant Overture* feeling. Euphoria, I guess. Do you know I didn't even itch? I had to be *taught* to scratch when I got out."

Peridot is a small girl about the size of a water cooler in a large building, but exquisitely shaped with a swelling, lovely, young, Maidenform bosom and magnificent flesh tones ranging from a golden sienna to a sinister umber which fill the air with deadly radiation when she removes all her threads as she will do on the least provocation. But she is lacking in sexual impulses. Sexual impulses were, I suspect, filtered out of her, as she had been protected from damp, dust and sudden loud noises during her years in the Skinner box clothed only in layers of warm air.

We have had many long conversations on the topic: *Peridot, why are you so lacking in basic carnality?* These tend to be absolutely circular, interrupted sometimes by long, investigative Cinerama kisses at the conclusion of which Peridot always shakes her head sadly, cleans the geranium lipstick off my honest Brooks Brothers 2nd Lt., USAR, face, and says, "Nope. Not a goddam thing."

"Peridot," I say, "do you love me?"

"Of course," she says wholesomely, "for whatever it's worth."

There is cannibal blood in Peridot, I am sure. The question is: How does one get it circulating? She is as healthy and natural as a White Rock girl, as dangerously innocent as a vacation in Havana. I met her at a swimming party. Someone said,

"Peridot, you go first." Without the smallest hint of good American shame, Peridot walked to the edge of the pool, zipped off her Hunter College clothes like so many artichoke leaves and fell cleanly into the water in a splendid one-and-one-half gainer. The others sat rapt in the deck chairs. Rodney Barrow, the host, turned aside, covering his Madison Avenue eyes. I burned briefly with the Guggenheim-applicant feeling, a kind of academic lust.

"It's always this way," Rodney said. "The point is, *there's nothing wrong with her*. She's not an exhibitionist, she's not a nut, she is perfectly sound of mind and body. As you must have noticed. It's us. *We're* the ones who are all hung up. That girl makes me feel like a monster." His face was stained with a dark misery, like the Marquis de Sade's.

I too feel like a monster when I am with Peridot, rather than the nice, young Ohio State graduate with a degree in economics that I essentially am. Feeling like a monster is hardly a million grins, but on the other hand it is better than feeling nothing at all.

"Peridot, when you walk around without any threads on, like at that swimming party, like at that little beach where we crawled through the barbed wire and I grasped your right breast and then stopped because there seemed to be little point in going on, doesn't anything happen to you? I mean, don't you *feel* anything? A little snake of lust doesn't crawl into your healthy, natural heart? Peridot, is it true that your heart is a rosy red apple? A Northern Delicious?"

She ignores my bitterness. "Sometimes I feel a little bit that way," she says
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amusingly. "But only in Cambridge." There is, unfortunately, one man who is capable of arousing in Peridot a pale passion, a hint of concupis- cence. This is none other than her father, Professor Chapman Concord, that droll dealer in avant-garde scien- tific notions and spells. He is, I will admit, quite a man. At fifty, he runs three miles before breakfast every Cambridge morning in his pin-striped Hathaway shorts. He is frequently mistaken for Walter Pidgeon in elev- ators. His classes boil with healthy young admirers of both sexes. His researches in Lower Mathematics have given him a small but warming fame, and his textbook royalties are appalling. When she speaks of him, Peridot blushes and chokes and breathes heavily. Her swelling, lovely, young, Maidenform bosom rises and falls in an accelerated tempo. Then she becomes languorous and yawn-y, obviously in the grip of the cat-on-a-hot-tin-roof feeling. Watching, I shudder slightly with the Sargenheim-application-denied feel- ing. It is clear that I am witnessing the oedipal romance in a rather ad- vanced stage.

"Peridot," I say, broaching this delicate subject, "do you think it's possible that your father knew what he was doing when he put you in that box?"

"My father," Peridot says stiffly, "loves me very much."

"I know, I know." Despair rains down like political advertising dropped out of airplanes. "I think that's the point."

"Being in the box made me healthy and natural and free of neuroses. I have a very healthy and natural attitude toward the human body, like that swimming party, like at that beach where we crawled through the barbed wire and you stepped my right breast and then stepped because there seemed to be a point in going on. I admit I may be a little lacking in passionate fire, but then you can't have everything."

"The corollary to that is," I say, "only, 'that you can't have any- thing.'"

"My father is a very great man. Everybody knows that. Very im- portant people invite him to dinner.

Supreme Court justices and people like that. Pierre Salinger. Once I sat next to Bernard Baruch. I took all the string beans." She giggles.

"You did what?"

"They passed this very large platter of string beans with this huge pair of tongs in the middle of the platter. I worked the tongs, and the tongs picked up almost all the string beans in the dish. I didn't know what else to do so I put them all on my plate. Then they asked Mr. Baruch if he'd like some string beans, and he said no, he'd have some of Miss Concord's." She giggles again.

"Peridot," I say, "you have problems. We have problems."

"Paul," she replies with string beans or the memory of them still in her eyes, "I love you, but you must leave me here on this New York park bench and find a girl who can give you the warmth and lust you need from life." Back into her mouth goes the thumb already richly striated with teeth marks made by her adorable Pepsodent with Q-39 teeth. "I'm just not very lusty and doubt that I will ever be—no matter what happens." Tears are visible on her Bonwit Teller cheeks. "Besides, I'm supposed to go to Boston this weekend."

"What for?"

"To see father," she says. "He's going to take me to the game."

"Football?"

"No, silly," Peridot says, smiling at my Ohio State naïveté. "They're playing three-dimensional chess with computers. Harvard versus MIT. It's very exciting. Papa is starting for Harvard."

"Peridot, think of the immediate problem. You and me. Don't you realize that if you, to put it coarsely, fink out on this love affair, your chances for a long married life with many children to put in glass boxes and teach three-dimensional chess to will be severely compromised?"

"But it's the biggest game of the year!" Peridot exclaims, and I can see that my words are wasted.

While Peridot is in Boston, I make a desperate move. I seek help. I solicit aid. I consult a savant. The move is a desperate one because the savant in question, Pittsey Logan who knows everything, is an extremely difficult man to approach. The difficulty lies in his odor. Pittsey Logan who knows everything stinks of learning as

saints are said to stink of piety. He reeks of libraries, universities, sym- posia, learned journals, Second Ave- nue bookstores, concordances, Es- kimo poetry, conversations in close, underheated rooms, and unemploy- ment. He is a little, fat Quasimodo with hair curling under his ears sur- rounded by a palpable Emile Zola fog so dense that it is worth your life to attempt to breach it. But he knows, literally, everything.

Once I asked, "Pittsey, what is the national whiskey of Thailand?"

"Mekong," Pittsey replied without an instant's hesitation, "named for the Mekong river which divides the country laterally, from whose waters. . ."

"Enough," I said. "Pittsey, what is a pre-adamite?"

"A pre-adamite," Pittsey replied without an instant's hesitation, "is one who believes that there were men before Adam."

"What is a sciolist?"

"A sciolist," Pittsey replied with- out an instant's hesitation, "is one whose knowledge is superficial; a pretender to learning. Is that a crack?"

"No," I assured him, "a simple in- quiry. Pittsey, you know everything, don't you?"

"Nobody knows everything," Pitt- sey said honestly, "but me."

Pittsey Logan, who knows every- thing, is to be found, usually, in an alley hard by Columbia University. One brushes past Little Orphan Annie vagrants, students, mothers, babies, citizens and various sorts of animals, wades through garbage, lumber, parts of old dead Walter Reuther automobiles and mementos of domestic life (Murphy beds, burnt- out refrigerators, baby carriages with three wheels) to reach his abom- inable lair. He lives at the bottom of a flight of cellar steps, which he has roofed over with half of a gigantic billboard advertising the film *Ben Hur*. Charlton Heston chariots race across Pittsey's ceiling and a wood- burning stove, fed with back numbers of the *Hudson Review*, warms Pitt- sey's scabrous toes. Notes for his projected 200-volume masterwork, *On the Unification of Science*, are stacked in huge cardboard Modess Because cartons everywhere about. The marks of the 34 institutions of upper learn- ing through which Pittsey has

marched like Clark Gable through Georgia, never graduating, never looking back, crosshatch his insufferable, hyperintelligent face. The stench is, as always, phenomenal.

"Pittsey," I say, gagging a little, "what do you do about a beautiful, asexual girl, raised in a glass box, suffering from a possibly or potentially incestuous relationship with her academic hotshot of a father?"

"Reinforcement," Pittsey replies without an instant's hesitation. "Apply the experimental results of Thorndike, Hull, Guthrie, Miller and Dollard."

"I don't follow you," I say, seating myself on Pittsey's tape recorder, into which he pours nightly the product of his day's thought, nourished on Hero sandwiches and fine brandy.

"You don't know about Reinforcement Theory?" Pittsey says incredulously.

"Not a thing."

"How do you make your way in the world without Reinforcement Theory?" Pittsey asks. "If it weren't for RT I'd have to go to work." He looks pained and suspicious, as if I had attempted to hand him an eleven-dollar bill signed by Zero Mostel, treasurer of the United States. "Reinforcement is how you make people do what you want them to do. I reinforce the man at the In and Out in the direction of giving me Hero sandwiches when the owner of the joint is absent and reinforce the man at the Prize Package Store in the direction of keeping me supplied with high-grade cognac and reinforce the cop on the beat not to kick me out of this alley."

"Pittsey, I never heard of Reinforcement Theory. How do you reinforce?"

"It's really very simple," Pittsey begins. As always when he is explaining something, he is very happy. Now he stinks of happiness, a Yellow Cab scent, slightly richer than usual, suggesting brandy and garlic all at once. "There is positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement. You reinforce behavior of which you approve, or which you wish to prolong, positively. The reverse, negatively. That's all there is to it. It's based, of course, on Thorndike's laws, the Law of Effect and the Law of Exercise."

"What are those?"

"The Law of Effect," Pittsey says

dreamily and from memory, "states that: *Of several responses made to the same situation, those which are accompanied or closely followed by satisfaction to the animal will, other things being equal, be more firmly connected with the situation, so that, when it recurs, they will be more likely to recur; those which are accompanied or closely followed by discomfort to the animal will, other things being equal, have their connections with that situation weakened, so that, when it recurs, they will be less likely to occur.* Understand?"

"Peridot," I say with dignity, "is not an animal."

"Don't be silly," Pittsey says sharply. "We are all animals. For the purposes of our project, you're going to have to think of her as a white rat."

"What's the other law?"

"The Law of Exercise. But you don't need to bother with that. Isn't that first one a beauty, though?"

"It's very lovely," I say, "but how does it help me practically? I mean, what should I do?"

"Well," Pittsey says judiciously, "we could build a maze. A T-maze, probably, with electro-shock at one stimulus-extreme and maybe candy at the other. I remember a very interesting paper on the reward value of a nonnutritive sweet taste by Sheffield and Roby in the *Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology* for April 1951 that might have some relevance." He pauses somberly. "Of course, you would have to be in the maze too. You are the situation we are reinforcing her to respond to. It would be kind of awkward, though, a two-people maze. Kind of *big*." His little pinball-machine eyes glow with excitement. I can see he is taken with the idea.

"Pittsey," I say, "I am not going to entice Peridot into any goddamn T-maze with electro-shock at one stimulus-extreme and candy at the other. She's a *human being*. Don't you understand? I *love* her. And besides, she doesn't like candy."

"What does she like?" Pittsey asks.

"She likes," I say dismally, "Daddy-o."

"Could we put *him* in the maze?" Pittsey asks hopefully.

"He would be the reward for responding to me?"

"It's a little rough Freudianly," Pittsey concedes, "although excellent behavioristically. I always like to see two branches of knowledge colliding. Makes me feel that there's hope for science, life in the old concepts yet." He searches his shaggy Oliver Wendell Holmes raincoat for a Hero sandwich.

"No," I say staunchly. "Never. You're going to have to come up with something else."

"It would have been interesting," Pittsey says through the Hero sandwich, "but costly. I guess I'll have to Think."

Pittsey Thinking is a process which I have witnessed on only one previous occasion. It is extremely arduous and harrowing, for both the subject and the beholder. First he crawls into his bed, a Modest Because box of truly generous proportions entirely surrounded by fat, filthy books. He then places his fingers in his nose, one in each nostril, a technique he claims was originated by the great Buddha to stimulate contemplation. Thus prepared, he begins to emit enormously virile aromatic waves, hinting of the combined ratiocinative and other powers of Plotinus, Anselm, Toynbee, Descartes, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Abelard, Joseph Alsop, Pascal and the venerable Bede.

The room trembles, the visitor gasps for breath. Pittsey's muscular brain, that noble instrument, can be heard, sizzling like a fine fourteen-dollar chateaubriand being charcoaled for two in a French-speaking restaurant. Some day I will make a documentary film of Pittsey Thinking and sell it to psychology departments all over the world for the instruction of their students, and become very rich and publish Pittsey's masterwork in 200 volumes and buy him a better box to sleep in, a fine Abercrombie & Fitch box with a warm chamois lining and his initials in gold on the outside.

Pittsey withdraws his fingers from his nostrils.

"Pittsey," I say, "some day I will make a documentary film of you Thinking and sell it to psychology departments all over the world for the instruction of their students, and become very rich and publish your masterwork in 200 volumes and buy you a better box to . . ."

"The answer," he interrupts, "lies

in the introduction of shame."
 "How do you mean?"
 "You say this girl is absolutely healthy and natural?"
 "Absolutely," I say. "To a fault."
 "No conception of such things as evil or wrongdoing in the sexual sphere?"
 "Right."

"Then she must learn shame," Pittsey declares, "she must learn evil. She must be taught that sex is evil, as all other American girls are taught. Then, that which is evil is, ipso facto, desirable. Then, that which is most evil is most desirable. And finally that you, specifically, are more evil and thus more desirable than anything. The way to maturity," he chuckles mordantly, "is through guilt. This is Guilt Reinforcement."

Pittsey leers at me evilly. The clarity of his vision, the stunning rightness of his conceptualization leave me weak. I am flooded with the we-are-in-the-presence-of-a-great-man feeling. Wordlessly, I embrace him, aroma and all. Fondly, I pat him on his Charles Laughton cheeks. Gratefully, I rub his hairy, Mighty Joe Young ears. Pittsey himself is overcome with emotion at his brilliant demonstration of his genius. We weep together, manfully.

The airport is thronged, and the plane from Boston is late. Finally, it arrives, however, and I stand behind the rail trying to find Peridot's face framed in one of its little RCA Television windows. But when she skips down the stairs, she is followed by a tall, handsome man who, I infer, runs three miles before breakfast every Cambridge morning in his pin-striped Hathaway shorts and is frequently mistaken for Walter Pidgeon in elevators. Professor Chapman Concord, sire of the sleeping beauty, has come to town.

"Papa," Peridot says, "this is Paul."
 "Nice to see you, young man," Professor Concord says, looking the other way. "Peridot, I think we'd better find your old dad a hotel room. Nice to have seen you, young man." He then grasps Peridot by her U. S. Choice shoulder and strides away, not less athletically than Arnold Palmer, in the direction of the cabstand, leaving me only a fragment of a forlorn glance from Peridot flung

over her departing shoulder.

"Pittsey, I didn't even get a chance to reinforce her *one little bit!* And I won't get a chance as long as he's around. What can I do?"

"Slay him," Pittsey says finally. "Take up your jawbone and slay him. Let his blood run on the hotel carpet. It's the only way."

"But Pittsey," I say, "I've never slain anybody. I wouldn't know how to go about it. And besides, that's murder. It's considered a crime."

"I mean symbolically," Pittsey says. "Every young man who carries off a father's daughter is symbolically slaying the father, anyhow. One man taking a young female from the other. You'll just have to slay him first and then carry her off. As I read the situation, slaying him would accomplish two objectives: one, getting rid of the father-figure, and, two, making possible a transfer of affection to you. It also reinforces your image as an evil person. Sleeping with the slayer of the father would be, I'd hazard, a very exciting experience for a young girl."

"Pittsey, you're perverse. Are you sure you mean symbolically?"

"Well," Pittsey says peevishly, "of course, it would be better if you could slay him in fact. But you can't, so we'll just have to forget it. The question is, where is he most vulnerable? Where shall we aim the symbolic shaft? How to smash the glass box in which the beautiful princess slumbers?"

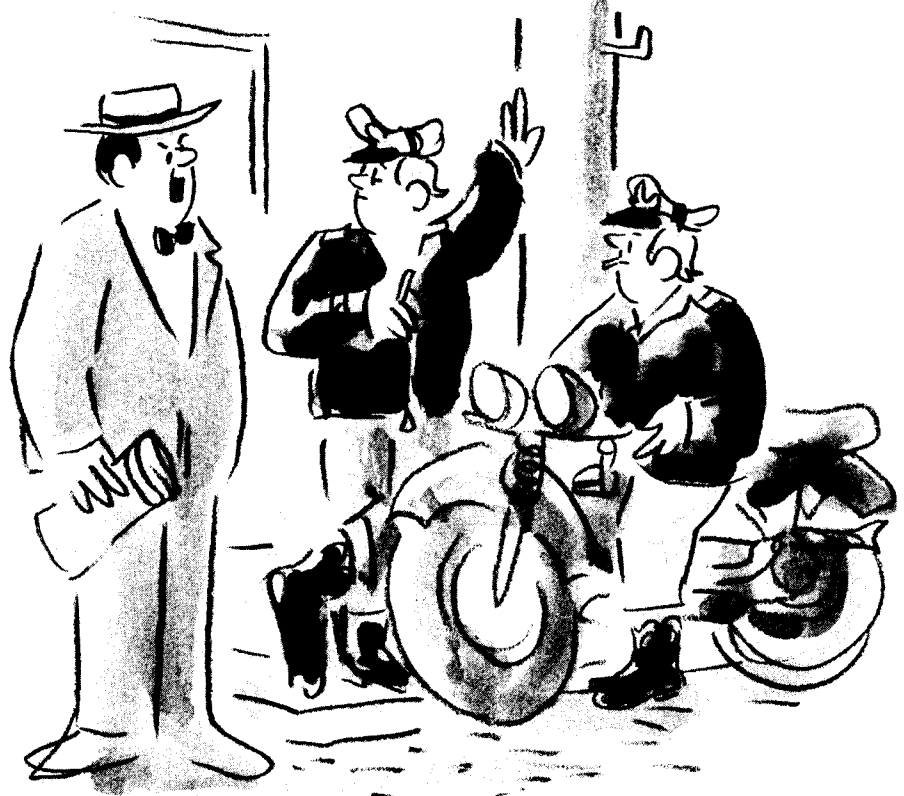
"There will have to be a face-to-face encounter," I say, "and that's going to be tough."

"Let's see, you said he was a mathematician? Then we'll slay him with a boar spear in the self-image. Nobody is more vain than a mathematician. Ask him," Pittsey says wickedly, "about the Metaphor of Five."

"By the way, Professor Concord," I say easily, "what about the Metaphor of Five? I mean, what do you think about it? Frankly?"

"I beg your pardon," Professor Concord says. "Did I misunderstand you?"

Peridot is watching from the couch. We are sitting in her apartment, the darling three of us, as rigid as the axioms governing the square of the hypotenuse, as unbending as



"All right, so my generation was wild, too. At least it brought jazz up the river."

the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

"The Methaphor of Five," I repeat. "I was wondering if you knew about it."

"That's a mathematical term?" Professor Concord says incredulously. "Are you sure you've got it right?"

"I think so," I say modestly. "It emerges from the work of Thorndike, Hull, Guthrie, Miller and Dollard. I thought we could kind of kick it around for a bit. You being a distinguished mathematician and everything."

"Thorndike, Hull, Guthrie, Miller and Dollard?" Professor Concord says unpleasantly. "Never heard of them."

"Their field is Lower Mathematics, I believe. Haven't you done some work in that area?"

"Quite a bit of work," Concord snaps. "All of which has been reported in the appropriate journals. And I've never seen anything in the journals about Thorndike or any of these other people."

"Of course, it is rather an advanced concept," I say. "It was by means of the Metaphor of Five that Pittsey and Logan were enabled to discover the Ontological Basis of Two."

"You're making this up," Concord says. He is beginning to bleed now, just a little under the heart. "Pittsey and Logan?"

"As reported in *Australian Journal of Sub-Critical Mathematics* for April 1951."

"Peridot," Concord says (Does he hear the hounds yet, at his heels?), "I won't sit here and listen to any more of this nonsense. You may tell this young man to leave."

"But Papa," Peridot implores, her face flushed, "I want to hear about it. It's interesting."

"The Ontological Basis of Two," I continue inexorably, "will, in the opinion of many scholars, be to mathematics what the Rosetta Stone was to linguistics."

Professor Concord is sagging in his American Council of Learned Societies tweed jacket, the wound under his heart is bigger and bloodier. "Are you a mathematician, young man?" he demands weakly.

"I like to think of myself as a citizen of the world," I say spaciouly, "the world of the mind. I think everyone should know a little something about everything."

"The Metaphor of Five?" he repeats dazedly. "*The Ontological Basis of Two?*"

"Of course," I say, "I admit these ideas are a little hard to grasp, a little abstruse. But then we're not exactly laymen, are we, Professor?"

"No," Professor Concord says. "No, not exactly. Peridot, will you excuse me? I'm feeling a little unwell. I want to go back to my hotel."

"Papa, you look awful," Peridot says helpfully. "You look like a ghost." This is true, Professor Chapman Concord, runner of three Cambridge miles before breakfast every morning, is an absolute bloody Cambridge corpse. The door closes upon his J. Press shade.

I then grasp Peridot by that part by which I grasped her on the little beach where we crawled through the barbed wire and I grasped her right breast and then stopped because there seemed to be little point in going on. But now, strangely, there does seem to be some point in going on. Peridot blushes and chokes and breathes heavily and her swelling, lovely, young, Maidenform bosom (that which I am grasping a part of) rises and falls in an accelerated tempo, and she has become languorous and yawn-y, and somewhere off in the distance I seem to hear a glass box breaking, very musically, like an overture. □

"SANTA CLAUS NOT A PEEPING TOM"

(continued from page 56)

Listen, I think they're figuring on sacking me."

I could feel the outline of my stomach. I couldn't say anything.

"You see, Mulvany, they always get a thing about fleas. They want to get rid of the fleas and they think it's easier a lot of times to get rid of the dog."

I started toward him, but then I saw the sneer under his painted, grinning mouth.

"It's a mistake, Mulvany. Those kids have got something out there in the dark now. They know and I know it isn't real, just a substitute, but it's better than nothing." He rubbed his hand over the mirror. "That's the terrible thing. To be out there alone in the dark with nothing, nobody. You're scared. You cry and cry. Nobody comes. Finally, you don't cry anymore. You can't. You don't care, and it's too late anyway."

Then I heard him laugh for the first time off camera. It was surprisingly loud and strong with a ring of challenge. But it seemed to strip the face in the mirror of all form.

"They don't care about the audience, but they had better not sack me. Tell them that, Mr. Mulvany. The kids know. You tell the big shots. Tell them they'll never find another like me. They never will, either. It's the truth. I'm one of a kind. A collector's item. Nobody else can ever be Bongo when I'm gone. If they don't believe it, tell them to ask any kid on the street!"

The grooved map of that loveless mask slipped under the light. His arms flopped, bells jangled, glass crashed as the jester collapsed on the floor smiling.

I put him on the couch in the next room and covered him with a blanket. The walls were covered with autographed pictures of Bongo, with his arms around kids, dogs, horses, cats. No adults. No women. Where had he

ever really lived? Someone had been to his apartment and said that it was about as warm and personal as the men's room in Radio City Music Hall.

I didn't go back home to Westchester that night. It wasn't the first time, and Ruth said she would try to live without me until the next day or the next week. I could, she said, say hello to the kids, but they were locked in the TV room and wouldn't come out. "Working on some Bongo ritual. You know what came with the last box of Crackles? A sign saying PARENTS, KEEP OUT. They put it on the door."

She hung up, laughing thinly. I stayed in a hotel room on 43rd Street with the lights out and drank until I knew that even if I had bad dreams I wouldn't remember them.

The next day was Friday in the second week of a muggy, oppressive August. It has since been labeled by the trade, Doomsday.

I didn't get into my office at Amalgamated until after noon. There