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**GALACTIC POT-HEALER**

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## PHILIP K. DICK

### GALACTIC POT-HEALER

Philip K. Dick was born in Chicago in 1928 and lived most of his life in California. He briefly attended the University of California, but dropped out before completing any classes. In 1952, he began writing professionally and proceeded to write thirty-six novels and five short-story collections. He won the Hugo Award for best novel in 1962 for *The Man in the High Castle* and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for best novel of the year in 1974 for *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*. Philip K. Dick died on March 2, 1982, in Santa Ana, California, of heart failure following a stroke.

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PHILIP K. DICK

**GALACTIC  
POT-HEALER**

**VINTAGE BOOKS**

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And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid,

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But even so, honoured still more

That he should seek my hospitality

From out the dark door of the secret earth.

—*D. H. Lawrence*

His father had been a pot-healer before him. And so he, too, healed pots, in fact any kind of ceramic ware left over from the Old Days, before the war, when objects had not always been made out of plastic. A ceramic pot was a wonderful thing, and each that he healed became an object which he loved, which he never forgot; the shape of it, the texture of it and its glaze remained with him on and on.

However, almost no one needed his work, his services. Too few ceramic pieces remained and those persons who owned them took great care to see that they did not break.

I am Joe Fernwright, he said to himself. I am the best pot-healer on Earth. I, Joe Fernwright, am not like other men.

Around in his office, cartons—empty—lay piled. Steel cartons, within which to return the healed pot. But on the incoming side—almost nothing. For seven months his bench had been bare.

During those months he had thought many things. He had thought that he ought to give up and take some other line of work onto himself—any line of work, so that he could go off the war veterans' dole. He had thought, *My work isn't good enough; I have virtually no clients because they are sending their broken pots to other firms to fix.* He had thought of suicide. Once he had thought of a major crime, of killing someone high up in the hierarchy of the Peaceful International World Senate. But what good would that do? And anyhow life wasn't absolutely worth nothing, because there was one good thing which remained, even though everything else had evaded or ignored him. The Game.

On the roof of his rooming house, Joe Fernwright waited, lunch pail in hand, for the rapid transit hover blimp to arrive. The cold morning air nipped and touched him; he shivered. It won't show up any time now, Joe informed himself. Except that it'll be full. And so it won't stop; it'll blipple on by, crammed to the brim. Well, he thought, I can always walk.

He had become accustomed to walking. As in every other field the government had failed miserably in the matter of public transportation. Damn them, Joe said to himself. Or rather he thought, damn us. After all, he, too, was a part of the planet wide Party apparatus, the network of tendrils which had penetrated and then in loving convulsion clasped them in a hug of death as great as the entire world.

"I give up," the man next to him said with an irritable twitch of shaved and perfumed jowls. "I'm going to slide down the slide to ground level and walk. Lots of luck." The man pushed his way through the throng of those waiting for the hover blimp; the throng flowed together once more, behind him, and he was gone from sight.

Me, too, Joe decided. He headed for the slide, and so did several other grumpy commuters.



At street level he straddled a cracked and unrepaired sidewalk, took a deep angry breath and then, via his personal legs, started north.

A police cruiser soared down to linger a little above Joe's head. "You're walking too slow," the uniformed officer informed him, and pointed a Walters & Jones laser pistol at him. "Pick up speed or I'll book you."

"I swear to god," Joe said, "that I'll hurry. Just give me time to pick up my pace; I just now started." He speeded up, phased himself with the other swiftly striding peds—those other lucky enough, like himself, to have jobs, to have somewhere to go on this dingy Thursday morning in early April 2046, in the city of Cleveland in the Communal North American Citizens' Republic. Or, he thought, at least to have something that *looks* like a job anyhow. A place, a talent, experience, and, one day soon, an order to fill.

His office and workroom—a cubicle, really—contained a bench, tools, the piles of empty metal boxes, a small desk, and his ancient chair, a leather-covered rocking chair which had belonged to his grandfather and then, at last, his father. And now he himself sat on that chair—sat day in, day out, month in, month out. He had, also, a single ceramic vase, short and squat, portly, finished in a free-dripping dull blue glaze over the white biscuit; he had found it years ago and recognized it as seventeenth-century Japanese. He loved it. And it had never been broken, not even during the war.

He seated himself now in this chair and felt it give here and there as it adjusted itself to his familiar body. The chair knew him as well as he knew the chair; it had known him all his life. Then he reached to press the button which would bring the morning's mail sliding down the tube to his desk—reached, but then waited. What if there's nothing? he asked himself. There never is. But this could be different; it's like a batter: when he hasn't hit for a long time you say, "He's due any time now," and so he is. Joe pressed the button.

Three bills slid out.

And, with them, the dingy gray packet containing today's government money, his daily dole. Government paper money, in the form of odd and ornate and nearly worthless inflationary trading stamps. Each day, when he received his gray packet of newly printed notes, he hiked as rapidly as possible to GUB, the nearest all-purpose supershopping redemptioncenter, and transacted hasty business: he swapped the notes, while they still had any worth, for food, magazines, pills, a new shirt—*anything*, in fact, tangible. Everyone did it. Everyone had to; holding onto government notes for even twenty-four hours was a self-imposed disaster, a kind of mortal suicide. Roughly, in two days government money dropped eighty percent in its redemptive power.

The man in the cubicle next to his called, "To the President's healthful longevity." a routine greeting.

"Yeah," Joe answered reflexively. Other cubicles, lots of them, level upon level. Suddenly a thought came to him. Exactly how many cubicles were there in the building? A thousand? Two or two-point-five thousand? I can do that today, he said to himself; I can investigate and find out how many other cubicles there are in addition to mine. Then I'll know how many people are with me here in this building...excluding those who are off sick or have died.

But first, a cigarette. He got out a package of tobacco cigarettes—highly illegal, due to the health hazard and the addictive nature of the plant in question—and started to light up.

At that moment his gaze fell, as always, on the smoke sensor mounted on the wall across from him. One puff, ten poscreds, he said to himself. Therefore he returned, then, the cigarettes to his pocket, rubbed his forehead ruthlessly, trying to fathom the craving lodged deep within him, the need which had caused him to break that law several times. What do I really yearn for? he asked himself. That for which oral gratification is a surrogate. Something vast, he decided; he felt the primordial hunger gape, huge-jawed, as if to cannibalize everything around him. To place what was outside inside.

Thus he played; this had created, for him, The Game.

Pressing the red button he lifted the receiver and waited while the creaking, slow relay machinery fed his phone an outside line.

“Squeeg,” the phone said. Its screen displayed nonobjective colors and segments. Electronic crosstalk made blurrily visible.

From memory he dialed. Twelve numbers, starting with the three which connected him with Moscow.

“Vice-Commissioner Saxton Gordon’s staff calling,” he said to the Russian switchboard officer whose face glowered at him from the miniature screen. “More games, I suppose,” the operator said.

Joe said, “A humanoid biped cannot maintain metabolic processes by means of planktonic flour merely.”

After a glare of puritanical disapproval, the officer connected him with Gauk. The leached, bored face of the minor Soviet official confronted him. Boredom at once gave way to interest. “A preslávni vityaz,” Gauk intoned. “Dostoini konovód tolpi byezmózglói, prestóopnaya—”

“Don’t make a speech,” Joe interrupted, feeling impatient. As well as surly. This was his customary morning mood.

“Prostitye,” Gauk apologized.

“Do you have a title for me?” Joe asked; he held his pen ready.

“The Tokyo translating computer has been tied up all morning,” Gauk answered. “So I put it through the smaller one at Kobe. In some respects Kobe is more—how shall I put it?—quaint than Tokyo.” He paused, consulting a slip of paper; his office, like Joe’s, consisted of a cubicle, containing only a desk, a phone, a straight-backed chair made of plastic and a notebook. “Ready?”

“Ready.” Joe made a random scratch-mark with his pen.

Gauk cleared his throat and read from his slip of paper, a taut grin on his face; it was a sleek expression, as if he were certain of himself on this one. “This originated in your language,” Gauk explained, honoring one of the rules which all of them together had made up, the bunch of them scattered here and there across the map of Earth, in little offices, in puny positions, with nothing to do, no tasks or sorrows or difficult problems. Nothing but the harsh vacuity of their collective society, which each in his own way objected to, which all of them, in collaboration, circumvented by means of The Game. “Book title,” Gauk continued.

“That’s the only clue I’ll give you.”

“Is it well known?” Joe asked.

Ignoring his question, Gauk read from the slip of paper. “The Lattice-work Gun-stinging Insect.”

“Gun-slinging?” Joe asked.

“No. Gun-stinging.”

“Lattice-work,” Joe said, pondering. “Network. ‘Stinging Insect.’ Wasp?” He scratched with his pen, stumped. “And you got this from the translation computer at Kobe? Bee,” he decided. “Gun,’ so Gun-bee. Heater-bee. Laser-bee. Rod-bee. *Gat*.” He swiftly wrote them down. “Gat-wasp, gat-bee. Gatsby. ‘Lattice-work.’ That would be a grating. Grate.” He had now. “The *Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald.” He tossed down his pen in triumph.

“Ten points for you,” Gauk said. He made a tally. “That puts you even with Hirshmeier and Berlin and slightly ahead of Smith in New York. You want to try another?”

Joe said, “I have one.” From his pocket he got out a folded sheet; spreading it out on his desk he read from it, “The Male Offspring in Addition Gets Out of Bed.” He eyed Gauk then, feeling the warmth of knowledge that he had gotten a good one—this, from the large language-translating computer in downtown Tokyo.

“A phononym,” Gauk said effortlessly. “Son, sun. *The Sun Also Rises*. Ten points for me.” He made a note of that.

Angrily, Joe said, “Those for Which the Male Homosexual Exacts Transit Tax.”

“Another by Serious Constricting-path,” Gauk said, with a wide smile. “*For Whom the Bell Tolls*.”

“‘Serious Constricting-path’?” Joe echoed wonderingly.

“Ernest Hemingway”

“I give up,” Joe said. He felt weary; Gauk, as usual, was far ahead of him in their mutual game of retranslating computer translations back into the original tongue.

“Want to try another?” Gauk asked silkily, his face bland.

“One more,” Joe decided.

“Quickly Shattered at the Quarreling Posterior.”

“Jesus,” Joe said, with deep and timid bewilderment. It rang no bell, no bell at all. “‘Quickly shattered.’ Broken, maybe. Broke, break. *Quick*—that would be fast. Breakfast. Battle. ‘Quarreling Posterior’?” He cogitated quickly, in the Roman sense. “Fighting. Arguing. Spat. In his mind no solution appeared. “‘Posterior.’ Rear end. Ass. Butt.” For a time he meditated in silence, in the Yoga fashion. “No,” he said finally. “I can’t make it out. I give up.”

“So soon?” Gauk inquired, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, there’s no use sitting here the rest of the day working that one over.”

“Fanny,” Gauk said.

Joe groaned.

“You groan?” Gauk said. “At one you missed that you should have got? Are you tired?”

Fernwright? Does it wear you out to sit there in your cubbyhole, doing nothing hour after hour, like the rest of us? You'd rather sit alone in silence and not talk to us? Not talk anymore?" Gauk sounded seriously upset; his face had become dark.

"It's just that it was an easy one," Joe said lamely. But he could see that his colleague in Moscow was not convinced. "Okay," he continued. "I'm depressed. I can't stand this much longer. Do you know what I mean? You do know." He waited. A faceless moment poured past in which neither of them spoke. "I'm ringing off," Joe said, and began to hang up.

"Wait," Gauk said rapidly. "One more."

Joe said, "No." He hung up, sat emptily staring. On his unfolded sheet of paper he had written several more, but—It's gone, he said to himself, bitterly. The energy, the capacity to fiddle away a lifetime without dignified work, and, in its place, the performance of the trivial, even the voluntarily trivial, as we have constructed here in The Game. Contact with others, but no thought; through The Game our isolation is lanced and its body broken. We peep out, but what do we see, really? Mirror reflections of our own selves, our bloodless, feeble countenances, devoted to nothing in particular, insofar as I can fathom it. Death is very close, he thought. When you think in this manner. I can feel it, he decided. How near I am. Nothing is killing me; I have no enemy, no antagonist; I am merely expiring, like a magazine subscription: month by month. Because, he thought, I am too hollowed out to participate any longer. Even if they—the others who play The Game—need me, need my corny contribution.

And yet, as he gazed sightlessly down at his piece of paper, he felt dim action occurring within him, a kind of photosynthesis. A gathering of remaining powers, on an instinctive basis. Left alone, functioning in its sightless way, the biological effort of his body asserted itself physically; he began to jot a further title.

Dialing his phone, he obtained a satellite relay to Japan; he raised Tokyo and gave the digits for the Tokyo translating computer. With the skill of long habit he obtained a direct line to the great, clanking, booming construct; he bypassed its host of attendants.

"Oral transmission," he informed it.

The hulking GX9 computer clicked over to oral, rather than visual, reception.

"*The Corn Is Green*," Joe said. He turned on the recording unit of his phone.

At once the computer answered, giving the Japanese equivalent.

"Thank you and out," Joe said, and rang off. He then dialed the translating computer in Washington, D.C. Rewinding the tape of his phone recorder he fed the Japanese words—again in oral form—to the computer segment which would translate the Japanese utterance into English.

The computer said, "The cliché is inexperienced."

"Pardon?" Joe said, and laughed. "Repeat, please."

"The cliché is inexperienced," the computer said with godlike nobility and patience.

"That's an exact translation?" Joe inquired.

"The cliché is—"

"Okay," Joe said. "Sign off." He hung up and sat grinning; his energy, aroused by human

amusement, surged up and invigorated him.

For a moment he sat hesitating, deciding, and then he dialed good ol' Smith in New York.

"Office of Procurement and Supply, Wing Seven," Smith said; his beaglelike face, haunted by ennui, manifested itself on the little gray screen. "Oh, hey there, Fernwright. Got something for me?"

"An easy one," Joe said. "The Cliché Is—"

"Wait'll you hear mine," Smith interrupted. "Me first; come on, Joe—this is a great one. You'll never get it. Listen." He read swiftly, stammering over the words. "Bogis. Persistentisms. By Shaft Tackapple."

"No," Joe said.

"No what?" Smith glanced up, frowning. "You haven't tried; you just sit there. I'll give you time. The rules say five minutes; you've got five minutes."

Joe said, "I'm quitting."

"Quitting what? The Game? But you're way up there!"

"I'm quitting my profession," Joe said. "I'm going to give up this work area and I'm going to cancel on my phone. I won't be here; I won't be able to play." He took a plunging breath, then spoke on. "I've saved up sixty-five quarters. Prewar. It took me two years."

"Coins?" Smith gaped at him. "Metal money?"

"It's in an asbestos sack under the radiator in my housing room," Joe said. I'll consult today, he said to himself.

"There's a booth down the street from my room, at the intersection," he said to Smith. wonder, he thought, if in the final analysis I have enough coins. They say Mr. Job gives a little; or, put another way, costs so much. But sixty-five quarters, he thought; that's plenty. That's equal to—he had to calculate it on his note pad. "Ten million dollars in trading stamps," he told Smith. "As per the exchange rate of today, as posted in the morning newspaper...which is official."

After a grinding pause, Smith said slowly, "I see. Well, I wish you luck. You'll get twenty words from it, for what you've saved up. Maybe two sentences. 'Go to Boston. Ask for—' and then it clicks off; then it'll cap the lid. The coinbox will rattle; your quarters will be down there in that maze of viaducts, rolling under hydraulic pressure to the central Mr. Job in Oslo." He rubbed beneath his nose, as if wiping away moisture, like a schoolboy heavy with rote-labor. "I envy you, Fernwright. Maybe two sentences from it will be enough. I consulted it, once. I handed fifty quarters over to it. 'Go to Boston,' it said. 'Ask for—' and then it shut off, and I felt as if it enjoyed it. That it liked to shut off, as if my quarters had stirred it to pleasure, the kind of pleasure a pseudolife-form would relish. But go ahead."

"Okay," Joe said stoically.

"When it's used up your quarters—" Smith continued, but Joe broke in, his voice blistered with harshness.

"I get your point," Joe said.

Smith said, "No prayers—"

“Okay,” Joe said.

There was a pause as the two of them faced each other.

“No prayers,” Smith said at last, “no nothing, will get that godbedamned machine to spout out one additional word.”

“Hmm,” Joe said. He tried to sound casual, but Smith’s words had had their effect; he felt himself cool off. He experienced the winds, the howling gales, of fright. Anticipation, hope, thought, of winding up with nothing. A truncated partial statement from Mr. Job, and then, as Smith says—blam. Mr. Job, turning itself off, is the ultimate visage of black iron, old iron from antediluvian times. The ultimate rebuff. If there is a supernatural deafness, he thought, it is that: when the coins you are putting into Mr. Job run out.

Smith said, “Can I—hurriedly—give you one more I’ve got? This came via the Namanga translator. Listen.” He pawed feverishly with long, classic fingers at his own folded sheet of paper. “‘The Chesspiece Made Insolvent.’ Famous movie circa—”

“*The Pawnbroker*,” Joe said tonelessly.

“Yes! You’re right there on it, Fernwright, really right there and swinging both arms and tail as well. Another? Don’t hang up! I have a truly good one, here!”

“Give it to Hirshmeyer in Berlin,” Joe said, and hung up.

I am dying, he said to himself.

Seated there, in the tattered, antiquated chair, he saw, dully, that the red warning light of his mail tube had come on, presumably as of the last few minutes. Odd, he thought. There is no delivery until one-fifteen this afternoon. He thought, *Special delivery?* And punched the button.

A letter rolled out. Special delivery.

He opened it. Inside, a slip of paper. It said:

POT-HEALER, I NEED YOU. AND I WILL PAY.

No signature. No address except his, as destination. My god, he thought, this is something real and big. I know it.

He carefully moved his chair around so that he faced the red warning light of the mail tube. And prepared to wait. Until it comes, he said to himself. Unless I physically starve to death first. I will not voluntarily die, now, he thought harshly. I want to stay alive. And wait. And wait.

He waited.

Nothing more came down the mail tube that day and Joe Fernwright trudged “home.”

“Home” consisted of a room on a subsurface level of a huge apartment building. Once, the Jiffi-view Company of Greater Cleveland came by every six months and created a 3D projection, animated, of a view of Carmel, California. This “view” filled his room “window,” or ersatz window. However, of late, due to his bad financial situation, Joe had given up trying to imagine that he lived on a great hill with a view of the sea and of towering redwoods; he had become content—or rather resigned—to face blank, inert, black glass. And in addition, if that wasn’t enough, he had let his psycho-lease lapse: the encephalic gadget installed in a closet of his room which, while he was “home,” compelled his brain to believe that his ersatz view of Carmel was authentic.

The delusion was gone from his brain and the illusion was gone from his window. Now “home” from work, he sat in a state of depression, reflecting, as always, on the futile aspect of his life.

Once, the Cleveland Historical Artifacts Museum had sent him regular work. His hot-needle device had melded many fragments, had re-created into a single homogeneous unit one ceramic item after another as his father had before him. But that was over, now; all the ceramic objects owned by the museum had been healed.

Here, in his lonely room, Joe Fernwright contemplated the lack of ornamentation. Time after time, wealthy owners of precious and broken pots had come to him, and he had done what they wanted; he had healed their pots, and they had gone away. Nothing remained after them; no pots to grace his room in place of the window. Once, seated like this, he had pondered the heat-needle which he made use of. If I press this little device against my breast, he had ruminated, and turn it on, and put it near my heart, it would put an end to me in less than a second. It is, in some ways, a powerful tool. The failure which is my life, he had thought again and again, would cease. Why not?

But there was the strange note which he had received in the mail. How had the person—or persons—heard of him? To get clients he ran a perpetual small ad in *Ceramics Monthly*...and via this ad the thin trickle of work, throughout the years, had come. Had come and now really, had gone. But *this*. The strange note!

He picked up the receiver of his phone, dialed, and in a few seconds faced his ex-wife Kate. Blond and hard lined, she glared at him.

“Hi,” he said, in a friendly sort of fashion.

“Where’s last month’s alimony check?” Kate said.

Joe said, “I’m onto something. I’ll be able to pay all my back alimony if this—”

“This what?” Kate interrupted. “Some new nuthead idea dredged out of the depths of what you call your brain?”

“A note,” he said. “I want to read it to you to see if you can infer anything more from than I can.” His ex-wife, although he hated her for it—and for a lot more—had a quick mind. Even now, a year after their divorce, he still relied on her powerful intellect. It was odd, he had once thought, that you could hate a person and never want to see them again, and yet at the same time seek them out and ask their advice. Irrational. Or, he thought, is it a sort of super-rationality? To rise above hate...

Wasn't it the hate which was irrational? After all, Kate had never done anything to him—nothing except make him excessively aware, intently aware, always aware, of his inability to bring in money. She had taught him to loathe himself, and then, having done that, she had left him.

And he still called up and asked for her advice.

He read her the note.

“Obviously it's illegal,” Kate said. “But you know your business affairs don't interest me. You'll have to work it out by yourself or with whoever you're currently sleeping with—probably some eighteen-year-old girl who doesn't know any better, who doesn't have any basis for comparison as an older woman would have.”

“What do you mean ‘illegal’?” he asked. “What kind of pot is illegal?”

“Pornographic pots. The kind the Chinese made during the war.”

“Oh Christ,” he said; he hadn't thought of that. Who but Kate would remember those! She had been lewdly fascinated by the one or two of them which had passed through his hands.

“Call the police,” Kate said.

“Anything else on your mind?” Kate said. “Now that you've interrupted my dinner and the dinner of everyone who's over here tonight?”

“Could I come over?” he said; loneliness crept through him and edged his question with the fear which Kate had always detected: the fear that she would retract into her implacable chesspiece fort, the fort of her own mind and body out of which she ventured to inflict a wound, or two, and then disappear back in, leaving an expressionless mask to greet him. And by means of that mask, she used his own failings to injure him.

“No,” Kate said.

“Why not?”

“Because you have nothing to offer anyone in the way of talk or discussion or ideas. As you've said many times, your talent is in your hands. Or did you intend to come over and break one of my cups, my Royal Albert cups with the blue glaze, and then heal it? As a sort of magical incantation designed to throw everyone into fits of laughter.”

Joe said, “I can contribute verbally.”

“Give me an example.”

“What?” he said, staring at her face on the screen of the phone.

“Say something profound.”

“You mean right now?”

Kate nodded.



“Beethoven’s music is firmly rooted in reality. That’s what makes him unique. On the other hand, genius as he was, Mozart—”

“Shove it,” Kate said and hung up; the screen went blank.

I shouldn’t have asked if I could come over, Joe realized with acute misery. It gave her the opening, that foot-in-the-psychic-door that she uses, that she preys on. Christ, he thought. Why did I ask? He got up and wandered drearily about his room; his motion became more and more aimless until at last he stopped and simply stood. I have to think about what really matters, he told himself. Not that she hung up or said anything nasty, but whether or not the note I got in the mail today means anything. Pornographic pots, he said to himself. She’s probably right. And it’s illegal to heal a pornographic pot, so there goes that.

I should have realized it as soon as I read the note, he said to himself. But that’s the difference between Kate and me. She would know right away. I probably wouldn’t have known until I had finished healing it and then taken a good firm look at it. I’m just not bright, he said to himself. Compared to her. Compared to the world.

“The arithmetical total ejaculated in a leaky flow,” he thought fiercely. My best. At least I’m good at The Game. So what? he asked himself. *So what?*

Mr. Job, he thought, help me. The time has come. Tonight.

Going rapidly into the tiny bathroom attached to his room he grabbed up the lid of the water closet of the toilet. Nobody, he had often thought, looks into a toilet. There hung the asbestos sack of quarters.

And, in addition, a small plastic container floated. He had never seen it before in his life.

Lifting it from the water he saw, with disbelief, that it contained a rolled up piece of paper. A note, floating in the water closet of his toilet, like a bottle launched at sea. Oh, this can’t really be, he thought, and felt like laughing. I mean Christ; it just can’t. But he did not laugh because he felt fear. Fear that bordered on dread. It’s another communication, he said to himself. Like the one in the mail tube today. But nobody communicates this way; it isn’t human!

He unscrewed the lid of the small plastic container and groped the enclosed piece of paper out. Yes, it had writing on it; he was right. He read the writing and then he read it again.

I WILL PAY YOU THIRTY-FIVE THOUSAND CRUMBLES

What in god’s name is a crumble? he asked himself, and the dread sharpened into panic; he felt undernourished, strangulated heat rise to the back of his neck, a weak response somatically: his body, as well as his mind, was trying to adjust to this; it could not be done on a mental level alone, not this.

Returning to the main room he picked up the receiver of the phone and dialed the twenty-four-hour-a-day dictionary service.

“What’s a crumble?” he asked, when the robot monitor answered.

“A crumbling substance,” the computer fed to the monitor. “In other words fine debris. small crumb or particle. Introduced into English 1577.”

“Other languages?” Joe asked.

“Middle English kremelen. Old English gecrymian. Middle High Gothic—”

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“What about non-Terran languages?”

“On Betelgeuse seven in the Urdian tongue it means a small opening of a temporary nature a wedge which—”

“That’s not it,” Joe said.

“On Rigel two it means a small life-form which scuttles—”

“Not that either,” Joe said.

“On Sirius five, in the Plabkian tongue ‘crumble’ is a monetary unit.”

“That’s it,” Joe said. “Now tell me how much in Earth money thirty-five thousand crumbles represents.”

The dictionary robot said, “I am sorry, sir, but you will have to consult the banking service for that answer. Please look in your phone book for the number.” It clicked off; the screen died away.

He looked up the number and dialed the banking service.

“We are closed for the night,” the banking-service robot monitor informed him.

“All over the world?” Joe said in amazement.

“Everywhere.”

“How long do I have to wait?”

“Four hours.”

“My life, my entire future—” But he was talking into a dead phone. The banking-service system had abolished the contact.

• • •

What I’ll do, he decided, is lie down and sleep for four hours. It was now seven o’clock; he could set the alarm for eleven.

A pressing of the proper button brought the bed sliding out from the wall, virtually to fill the room; it had been his living room and now it was his bedroom. Four hours, he said to himself as he set the mechanism of the bed’s clock. He lay down, made himself comfortable—as much so as the inadequate bed permitted—and groped for the toggle switch that induced immediately and powerfully the most profound sleep state possible.

A buzzer sounded.

The damn dream circuit, he said to himself. Even early like this do I have to use it? He leaped up, opened the cabinet beside the bed and got out the instructions. Yes, mandatory dreaming was required at any time he used the bed...unless, of course, he threw the sleep lever. I’ll do that, he said to himself. I’ll tell it I’m having knowledge in the Biblical sense of a female person.

Once more he lay down and activated the sleep switch.

“You weigh one hundred and forty pounds,” the bed said. “And there is exactly that weight extended over me. Therefore you are not engaged in copulation.” The mechanism voided him

throwing of the sleep toggle switch, and at the same time the bed began to warm up; the heating coils in it blatantly glowed beneath him.

He could not argue with an angry bed. So he turned on the sleep-dream interaction and shut his eyes, resignedly.

Sleep came at once; it always did: the mechanism was perfect. And, at once, the dream—which everyone anywhere in the world who was now asleep was also dreaming—clicked on.

One dream for everyone. But, thank god, a different dream each night.

“Hello, there,” a cheerful dream-voice declared. “Tonight’s dream was written by Robert Baker and is called *In Memory Engraved*. Now remember, folks; send in your dream ideas and win huge cash prizes! And if your dream is used you receive an all-expense paid trip off Earth entirely—in any direction you desire!”

The dream began.

Joe Fernwright stood before the Supreme Fiduciary Council in a state of trembling awe. The Secretary of the S.F.C. read from a prepared statement. “Mr. Fernwright,” he declared in a solemn voice, “you have, in your engraving shop, created the plates from which the new money will be printed. Your design, out of over one hundred thousand presented to us, and many of them created with what must be called fantastic cunning, has won. Congratulations, Mr. Fernwright.” The Secretary beamed at him in a fatherly manner, reminding him a little of the Padre presence, which he now and then made use of.

“I am pleased and honored,” Joe responded, “by this award, and I know that I have done my part to restore fiscal stability to the world as we know it. It little matters to me that my face will be pictured on the brightly colored new money, but since it is so, let me express my pleasure at this honor.”

“Your signature, Mr. Fernwright,” the Secretary reminded him, in the fashion of a wise father. “Your signature, not your face, will appear on the currency notes. Where did you get the idea that it would be your likeness as well?”

“Perhaps you don’t understand me,” Joe said. “Unless my face appears on the new currency I will withdraw my design, and the entire economic structure of the Earth will collapse, seeing as how you’ll have to go on using the old inflationary money which has by now become virtually waste paper to be thrown away at the first opportunity.”

The Secretary pondered. “You would withdraw your design?”

“You read me loud and clear,” Joe, in his dream, in *their* dream, said. At this same moment roughly one billion other people on Earth were withdrawing their designs as he now was doing. But of course he had no thought of that; he only knew this: without him the system, the whole nature of their corporate state, would break apart. “And as to my signature, I will do as that great dead hero of the past Ché Guevara did, that noble person, that fine man who died for his friends, because of memory of him I will merely write ‘Joe’ on the bills. But my face must be of several colors. Three at least.”

“Mr. Fernwright,” the Secretary said, “you strike a hard bargain. You are a firm man. You do, in fact, remind me of Ché, and I think all the millions watching on TV will agree. Let us hear it now for Joe Fernwright and Ché Guevara both together!” The Secretary threw aside



highly reputable businessmen—prosperous and responsible, able to make decisions: they were not mere bureaucrats to whom orders were given and who merely carried out orders like pseudorobots...and yet they had an inhumanity about them, for no particular reason that he could make out. But then he thought, Ah—I have it. No one could ever imagine a QCA man holding a door open for a lady; that was it; that explained his feeling. A small thing, perhaps, but it seemed to be a comprehension of the severe essence of the QCA throughout. Never hold a door, Joe thought, never take off your hat in an elevator. The ordinary laws of charity did not apply to them, and these laws they did not follow. Ever. But how well shaved they were. How greatly neat.

Strange, he thought, how thinking this could give me the feeling that at last I understand them. But I do. In symbolic form, maybe. But the comprehension is there and it will never get away.

“I got a note,” Joe said. “I’ll show it to you.” He handed them the note which he had found bobbing about in its plastic bottle in the water closet of his facility.

“Who wrote this?” one of the QCA men asked.

“God knows,” Joe said.

“Is that a joke?”

Joe said, “You mean is the note a joke, or what I said in answer to your question in saying ‘God knows—’” He broke off, because one of the QCA men was bringing out a teep rod, a receptor which would pick up and record his thoughts for police inspection. “You,” Joe said, “will see. That it’s true.”

The rod, wandlike, hovered over his head for several minutes. No one spoke. Then the QCA man returned the rod to his pocket and stuffed a little speaker into his ear; he played back the tape of Joe’s thoughts, listening intently.

“It’s so,” the QCA man said, and stopped the tape transport, which was located, of course, in his briefcase. “He doesn’t know anything about this note, who put it there or why. Sorry, Mr. Fernwright. You know, naturally, that we monitor all phone calls. This one interested us because—as you can probably appreciate—the sum involved is so large.”

His companion cop said, “Report to us once a day about this matter.” He handed Joe a card. “The number you’re to call is on the card. You don’t have to ask for anyone in particular; tell whoever answers the call what’s developed.”

The first QCA man said, “There isn’t anything legal that you could do to get paid thirty-five thousand Plabkian crumbs, Mr. Fernwright. It has to be illegal. That’s how we see it.”

“Maybe there’re a hell of a lot of broken pots on Sirius five,” Joe said.

“Bit of humor, there,” the first QCA man said tartly. He nodded to his companion, and the two of them opened the door and departed from his room. The door closed behind them.

“Maybe it’s one gigantic pot,” Joe said loudly. “A pot the size of a planet. With fifty glazed sides and—” He gave up; they probably couldn’t hear him anyhow. And originally ornamented by the greatest graphic artist in Plabkian history, he thought. And it’s the only product of his genius left, and an earthquake has broken the pot, which is locally worshiped. So the whole Plabkian civilization has collapsed.

Plabkian civilization. Hmm, he thought. Just how far developed are they on Sirius five? He asked himself. A good question.

Going to the phone he dialed the encyclopedia number.

“Good evening,” a robotic voice said. “What info do you require, sir or madam?”

Joe said, “Give me a brief description of the social development on Sirius five.”

Without the passing of even a tenth second the artificial voice said, “It is an ancient society which has seen better days. The current dominant species on the planet consists of what is called a Glimmung. This shadowy, enormous entity is not native to the planet; it migrated there several centuries ago, taking over from the feeble species such as wubs, werjes, klake trobes, and printers left over when the once-ruling master species, the so-called Fog-Things of antiquity, passed away.”

“Glimmung—the Glimmung—is all-powerful?” Joe asked.

“His power,” the encyclopedia’s voice said, “is sharply curtailed by a peculiar book, probably nonexistent, in which, it is alleged, everything which has been, is, and will be, is recorded.”

Joe said, “Where did this book come from?”

“You have used up your allotted quantity of information,” the voice said. And clicked off.

Joe waited exactly three minutes and then redialed the number.

“Good evening. What info do you require, sir or madam?”

“The book on Sirius five,” Joe said. “Which is alleged to tell everything that has been—”

“Oh, it’s you again. Well, your trick won’t work anymore; we store voice patterns now.” The voice rang off.

That’s right, Joe realized. I remember reading in the newspaper about that. It was costing the government too much money the way it was—when we did what I tried to do just now. Nuts, he said to himself. Twenty-four hours before he could get any more free information. Of course, he could go to a private enterprise encyclopedia booth, to Mr. Encyclopedia. But that would cost as much as he had stored in his asbestos bag: the government, when licensing the nonstateowned enterprises such as Mr. Attorney and Mr. Encyclopedia and Mr. Job, had seen to that.

I think I got aced out, Joe Fernwright said to himself. As usual.

Our society, he thought broodingly, is the perfect form of government. *Everyone* is aced out, in the end.

When he reached his work cubicle the next morning he found a second special delivery letter waiting for him.

SHIP OUT TO PLOWMAN'S PLANET, MR. FERNWRIGHT, WHERE YOU ARE NEEDED. YOUR LIFE WILL SIGNIFY SOMETHING; YOU WILL CREATE A PERMANENT ENDEAVOR WHICH WILL OUTLAST ME AS WELL AS YOU.

Plowman's Planet, Joe reflected. It rang a bell, although dimly. Absentmindedly, he dialed the encyclopedia's number.

"Is Plowman's Planet—" he began, but the artificial voice interrupted him.

"Not for another twelve hours. Goodby."

"Just one fact?" he said angrily. "I just want to find out if Sirius five and Plowman's— Click. The robot mechanism had rung off. Bastards, he thought. All robot servo-mechanisms and all computers are bastards.

Who can I ask? he asked himself, that would know, off-hand, if Plowman's Planet is Sirius five? Kate. Kate would know.

But, he thought as he started to dial her office number, if I'm going to emigrate to Plowman's Planet I don't want her to know; she'll be able to trace me re my back alimony payments.

Once more he picked up the unsigned note, studied it. And, in a gradual, seeping fashion, realization concerning it suffused his mind and entered into his field of awareness. There were more words on the note in some kind of semi-invisible ink. Runic writing? he wondered; he felt a sort of wicked, animal excitement, as if he had found a carefully protected trail.

He dialed Smith's number. "If you got a letter," Joe said, "with semi-invisible runic writing on it, how would you—you in particular—go about making it visible?"

"I'd hold it over a heat source," Smith said.

"Why?" Joe said.

"Because it's most likely written in milk. And writing in milk turns black over a heat source."

"Runic writing in *milk*?" Joe said angrily.

"Statistics show—"

"I can't imagine it. I simply can't imagine it. Runic writing in milk." He shook his head. "Anyway, what statistics are there on runic writing? This is absurd." He got out his cigarette lighter and held it beneath the sheet of paper. At once, black letters became visible.

“What’s it say?” Smith asked.

Joe said, “Listen, Smith; you haven’t used the encyclopedia in the last twenty-four hours have you?”

“No,” Smith said.

Joe said, “Call it. Ask it if Plowman’s Planet is another name for Sirius five. And ask what ‘Heldscalla’ consists of.” I guess I could ask the dictionary that, he said to himself. “What a mess,” he said. “Is this any way to conduct business?” He felt fear overlaid with nausea; it did not appeal to him. It did not seem effective nor funny; it was merely strange. And, he thought, I have to report this to the police, so I’ll be back cloistered with them again and now there’s probably already a file on me—hell, he thought, there has been since my birth—but now the file has new entries. Which always was bad. As every citizen knew.

Heldscalla, he thought. An odd and somehow impressive verbal integer. It appealed to him because it seemed totally opposed to such conditions as cubicles, phones, walking to work through endless crowds, fiddling his life away on the veterans’ dole, meanwhile playing The Game. I am here, he thought, when I should be there.

“Call me back, Smith,” he said into the phone. “As soon as you’ve talked to the encyclopedia. Bye.” He rang off, paused, then dialed the dictionary. “Heldscalla,” he said. “What does it mean?”

The dictionary—or rather its artificial voice—said, “Heldscalla is the ancient cathedral of the once-ruling Fog-Things of Sirius five. It sank under the sea centuries ago and has never been placed back, intact and functioning, with its old, holy artifacts and relics, on dry land.”

“Are you hooked into the encyclopedia right now?” Joe asked. “That’s an awful lot of definition.”

“Yes, sir or madam; I am hooked into the encyclopedia.”

“Then can you tell me any more?”

“No more.”

“Thank you,” Joe Fernwright said huskily. And hung up.

He could see it. Glimmung—or *the* Glimmung, if that was correct; evidently there was only one of them—intended to raise the ancient cathedral Heldscalla, and to do so, the Glimmung needed a wide span of skills. Such as his own, for example; his ability to heal ceramic war. Heldscalla obviously contained pots—enough of them to cause the Glimmung to approach him...and to offer him a good sum for his work.

By now he’s probably recruited two hundred skills from two hundred planets, Joe realized. I’m not the only one getting peculiar letters et cetera. He saw in his mind a great cannon being fired, and out of it special delivery letters, thousands of them, addressed to various life forms throughout the galaxy.

And oh god, he thought. The police are spotting it; they barged into my room minutes after I consulted the bank. Last night, those two; they knew already what these letters and weird note floating in the water closet of the toilet mean. They could have told me. But of course they wouldn’t; that would be too natural, too humane.



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