

WINNER OF THE TURNER TOMORROW FELLOWSHIP

ISHMAEL

An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit



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I have read into two categories—the ones
I read before *Ishmael* and those read after."
—Jim Britell, *Whole Earth Review*

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ONE

1

The first time I read the ad, I choked and cursed and spat and threw the paper to the floor. Since even this didn't seem to be quite enough, I snatched it up, marched into the kitchen, and shoved it into the trash. While I was there, I made myself a little breakfast and gave myself some time to cool down. I ate and thought about something else entirely. That's right.

Then I dug the paper out of the trash and turned back to the Personals section, just to see if the damn thing was still there and just the way I remembered it. It was.

TEACHER seeks pupil. Must have an earnest desire to save the world. Apply in person.

An earnest desire to save the world! Oh, I liked that. That was rich indeed. An earnest desire to save the world—yes, that was splendid. By noon, two hundred mooncalfs, softheads, boobies, ninnyhammers, noodleheads, gawkies, and assorted oafs and thickwits would doubtless be lined up at the address given, ready to turn over all their worldlies for the rare privilege of sitting at the feet of some guru pregnant with the news that all will be well if everyone will just turn around and give his neighbor a big hug. You will wonder: Why is this man so indignant? So bitter? It's a fair question. In fact, it's a question I was asking myself.

The answer goes back to a time, a couple decades ago, when I'd had the silly notion that the thing I most wanted to do in the world was . . . to find a teacher. That's right. I imagined I wanted a teacher—needed a teacher. To show me how one goes about doing something that might be called . . . saving the world.

Stupid, no? Childish. Naïve. Simple. Callow. Or just fundamentally dumb. In one so manifestly normal in other respects, it needs explaining.

It came about in this way.

During the children's revolt of the sixties and seventies, I was just old enough to understand what these kids had in mind—they meant to turn the world upside down—and just young enough to believe they might actually succeed. It's true. Every morning when I opened my eyes, I expected to see that the new era had begun, that the sky was a brighter blue and the grass a brighter green. I expected to hear laughter in the air and to see people dancing in the streets, and not just kids—everyone! I won't apologize for my naïveté; you only have to listen to the songs to know that I wasn't alone.

Then one day when I was in my mid-teens I woke up and realized that the new era was never going to begin. The revolt hadn't been put down, it had just dwindled away into a fashion statement. Can I have been the only person in the world who was disillusioned by this? Bewildered by this? It seemed so. Everyone else seemed to be able to pass it off with a cynical grin that said, "Well, what did you really expect? There's never been any more than this and never will be any more than this. Nobody's out to save the world, because nobody gives a damn about the world, that was just a

bunch of goofy kids talking. Get a job, make some money, work till you're sixty, then move to Florida and die."

I couldn't shrug it away like this, and in my innocence I thought there had to be *someone* out there with an unknown wisdom who could dispel my disillusionment and bewilderment: a teacher.

Well, of course there wasn't.

I didn't want a guru or a kung fu master or a spiritual director. I didn't want to become a sorcerer or learn the zen of archery or meditate or align my chakras or uncover past incarnations. Arts and disciplines of that kind are fundamentally selfish; they're all designed to benefit the pupil—not the world. I was after something else entirely, but it wasn't in the Yellow Pages or anywhere else that I could discover.

In Hermann Hesse's *The Journey to the East*, we never find out what Leo's awesome wisdom consists of. This is because Hesse couldn't tell us what he himself didn't know. He was like me—he just yearned for there to be someone in the world like Leo, someone with a secret knowledge and a wisdom beyond his own. In fact, of course, there is no secret knowledge; no one knows anything that can't be found on a shelf in the public library. But I didn't know that then.

So I looked. Silly as it sounds now, I looked. By comparison, going after the Grail would have made more sense. I won't talk about it, it's too embarrassing. I looked until I wised up. I stopped making a fool of myself, but something died inside of me—something that I'd always sort of liked and admired. In its place grew a scar—a tough spot but also a sore spot.

And now, years after I'd given up the search, here was some charlatan advertising in the newspaper for the very same young dreamer that I'd been fifteen years ago.

But this still doesn't explain my outrage, does it?

Try this: You've been in love with someone for a decade—someone who barely knows you're alive. You've done everything, tried everything to make this person see that you're a valuable, estimable person, and that your love is worth something. Then one day you open up the paper and glance at the Personals column, and there you see that your loved one has placed an ad . . . seeking someone worthwhile to love and be loved by.

Oh, I know it's not exactly the same. Why should I have expected this unknown teacher to have contacted me instead of advertising for a pupil? Contrariwise, if this teacher was a charlatan, as I assumed, why would I have *wanted* him to contact me?

Let it go. I was being irrational. It happens, it's allowed.

I had to go down there, of course—had to satisfy myself that it was just another scam. You understand. Thirty seconds would do it, a single look, ten words out of his mouth. Then I'd know. Then I could go home and forget about it.

When I got there, I was surprised to find it was a very ordinary sort of office building, full of second-rate flacks, lawyers, dentists, travel agents, a chiropractor, and a private investigator or two. I'd expected something a little more atmospheric—a brown-stone with paneled walls, high ceilings, and shuttered windows, perhaps. I was looking for Room 105, and I found it in the back, where a window would overlook the alley. The door was uninformative. I pushed it open and stepped into a large, empty room. This uncommon space had been created by knocking down interior partitions, the marks of which could still be seen on the bare hardwood floor.

That was my first impression: emptiness. The second was olfactory; the place reeked of the circus—no, not the circus, the menagerie: unmistakable but not unpleasant. I looked around. The room was not entirely empty. Against the wall at the left stood a small bookcase containing thirty or forty volumes, mainly on history, prehistory, and anthropology. A lone overstuffed chair stood in the middle, facing away, toward the wall at the right, and looking like something the movers had left behind. Doubtless this was reserved for the master; his pupils would kneel or crouch on mats arranged in a semicircle at his knee.

And where were these pupils, who I had predicted would be present by the hundreds? Had they perhaps come and been led away like the children of Hamelin? A film of dust lay undisturbed on the floor to disprove this fancy.

There was something odd about the room, but it took me another look round to figure out what it was. In the wall opposite the door stood two tall casement windows admitting a feeble light from the alley; the wall to the left, common with the office next door, was blank. The wall to the right was pierced by a very large plate-glass window, but this was plainly not a window to the outside world, for it admitted no light at all; it was a window into an adjacent room, even dimmer than the one I occupied. I wondered what object of piety was displayed there, safely beyond the touch of inquisitive hands. Was it some embalmed Yeti or Bigfoot, made of cat fur and papier-mâché? Was it the body of a UFO-naut cut down by a National Guardsman before he could deliver his sublime message from the stars (“We are brothers. Be nice.”)?

Because it was backed by darkness, the glass in this window was black—opaque, reflective. I made no attempt to see beyond it as I approached; I was the spectacle under observation. On arrival, I continued to gaze into my own eyes for a moment, then rolled the focus forward beyond the glass—and found myself looking into another pair of eyes.

I fell back, startled. Then, recognizing what I'd seen, I fell back again, now a little frightened.

The creature on the other side of the glass was a full-grown gorilla.

Full-grown says nothing, of course. He was terrifyingly enormous, a boulder, a sarsen of Stonehenge. His sheer mass was alarming in itself, even though he wasn't using it in any menacing way. On the contrary, he was half-sitting, half-reclining most placidly, nibbling delicately on a slender branch he carried in his left hand like a wand.

I did not know what to say. You will be able to judge how unnerved I was by this fact: that it seemed to me I should speak—excuse myself, explain my presence, justify my intrusion, beg the creature’s pardon. I felt it was an affront to gaze into his eyes, but I was paralyzed, helpless. I could look at nothing else in the world but his face, more hideous than any other in the animal kingdom because of its similarity to our own, yet in its way more noble than any Greek ideal of perfection.

There was in fact no obstacle between us. The pane of glass would have parted like a tissue had he touched it. But he seemed to have no idea of touching it. He sat and gazed into my eyes and nibbled the end of his branch and waited. No, he wasn’t waiting; he was merely *there*, had been there before I arrived and would be there when I’d left. I had the feeling I was of no more significance to him than a passing cloud is to a shepherd resting on a hillside.

As my fear began to ebb, consciousness of my situation returned. I said to myself that the teacher was plainly not on hand, that there was nothing to keep me there, that I should go home. But I didn’t like to leave with the feeling that I’d accomplished nothing at all. I looked around, thinking I’d leave a note, if I could find something to write on (and with), but there was nothing. Nevertheless, this search, with the thought of written communication in mind, brought to my attention something I’d overlooked in the room that lay beyond the glass; it was a sign or poster hanging on the wall behind the gorilla. It read:

WITH MAN GONE,
WILL THERE
BE HOPE
FOR GORILLA?

This sign stopped me—or rather, this text stopped me. Words are my profession; I seized these and demanded that they explain themselves, that they cease to be ambiguous. Did they imply that hope for gorillas lay in the extinction of the human race or in its survival? It could be read either way.

It was, of course, a koan—meant to be inexplicable. It disgusted me for that reason, and for another reason: because it appeared that this magnificent creature beyond the glass was being held in captivity for no other reason than to serve as a sort of animate *illustration* for this koan.

You really ought to do something about this, I told myself angrily. Then I added: *It would be best if you sat down and were still.*

I listened to the echo of this strange admonishment as if it were a fragment of music I couldn’t quite identify. I looked at the chair and wondered: *Would* it be best to sit down and be still? And if so, why? The answer came readily enough: *Because, if you are still, then you will be better able to hear.* Yes, I thought, that is undeniably so.

For no conscious reason, I lifted my eyes to those of my beastly companion in the next room. As everyone knows, eyes *speak*. A pair of strangers can effortlessly reveal their mutual interest and attraction in a single glance. *His* eyes spoke, and I understood. My legs turned to jelly, and I barely managed to reach the chair without collapsing.

“But how?” I said, not daring to speak the words aloud.

“What does it matter?” he replied as silently. “It’s so, and nothing more needs to be said.”

“But you—” I sputtered. “You are . . .”

I found that, having come to the word, and with no other word to put in its place, I could not speak it.

After a moment he nodded, as if in acknowledgment of my difficulty. “I am the teacher.”

For a time, we gazed into each other’s eyes, and my head felt as empty as a derelict barn.

Then he said: “Do you need time to collect yourself?”

“Yes!” I cried, speaking aloud for the first time.

He turned his massive head to one side to peer at me curiously. “Will it help you to listen to my story?”

“Indeed it will,” I said. “But first—if you will—please tell me your name.”

He stared at me for a while without replying and (as far as I could tell at that time) without expression. Then he proceeded as if I hadn’t spoken at all.

“I was born somewhere in the forests of equatorial West Africa,” he said. “I’ve never made any effort to find out exactly where, and see no reason to do so now. Do you happen to know anything about animal collecting for zoos and circuses?”

I looked up, startled. “I know nothing at all about animal collecting.”

“At one time, or at least during the thirties, the method commonly used with gorillas was this: On finding a band, collectors would shoot the females and pick up all the infants in sight.”

“How terrible,” I said, without thinking.

The creature replied with a shrug. “I have no actual memory of the event—though I have memories of still earlier times. In any case, the Johnsons sold me to a zoo in some small northeastern city—I can’t say which, for I had no awareness of such things as yet. There I lived and grew for several years.”

He paused and nibbled absentmindedly on his branch for a while, as if gathering his thoughts.

3

In such places (he went on at last), where animals are simply penned up, they are almost always more thoughtful than their cousins in the wild. This is because even the dimmest of them cannot help but sense that something is very wrong with this style of living. When I say that they are more

thoughtful, I don't mean to imply that they acquire powers of ratiocination. But the tiger you see madly pacing its cage is nevertheless preoccupied with something that a human would certainly recognize as a thought. And this thought is a question: *Why?* "Why, why, why, why, why, why?" the tiger asks itself hour after hour, day after day, year after year, as it treads its endless path behind the bars of its cage. It cannot analyze the question or elaborate on it. If you were somehow able to ask the creature, "Why *what?*" it would be unable to answer you. Nevertheless this question burns like an unquenchable flame in its mind, inflicting a searing pain that does not diminish until the creature lapses into a final lethargy that zookeepers recognize as an irreversible rejection of life. And of course this questioning is something that no tiger does in its normal habitat.

Before long I too began to ask myself *why*. Being neurologically far in advance of the tiger, I was able to examine what I meant by the question, at least in a rudimentary way. I remembered a different sort of life, which was, for those who lived it, interesting and pleasant. By contrast, this life was agonizingly boring and never pleasant. Thus, in asking *why*, I was trying to puzzle out why life should be divided in this way, half of it interesting and pleasant and half of it boring and unpleasant. I had no concept of myself as a captive; it didn't occur to me that anyone was preventing me from having an interesting and pleasant life. When no answer to my question was forthcoming, I began to consider the differences between the two life-styles. The most fundamental difference was that in Africa I was a member of a family—of a sort of family that the people of your culture haven't known for thousands of years. If gorillas were capable of such an expression, they would tell you that their family is like a hand, of which they are the fingers. They are fully aware of being a family but are very little aware of being individuals. Here in the zoo there were other gorillas—but there was no family. Five severed fingers do not make a hand.

I considered the matter of our feeding. Human children dream of a land where the mountains are ice cream and the trees are gingerbread and the stones are bonbons. For a gorilla, Africa is just such a land. Wherever one turns, there is something wonderful to eat. One never thinks, "Oh, I'd better look for some food." Food is everywhere, and one picks it up almost absent-mindedly, as one takes a breath of air. In fact, one does not think of feeding as a distinct activity at all. Rather, it's like a delicious music that plays in the background of all activities throughout the day. In fact, feeding became feeding for me only at the zoo, where twice daily great masses of tasteless fodder were pitched into our cages.

It was in puzzling out such small matters as these that my interior life began—quite unnoticed.

Although naturally I knew nothing of it, the Great Depression was taking its toll on all aspects of American life. Zoos everywhere were being forced to economize, reducing the number of animals to be maintained and thereby reducing expenses of all kinds. A great many animals were simply put down, I believe, for there was no market in the private sector for animals that were neither easy to keep nor very colorful or dramatic. The exceptions were, of course, the big cats and the primates.

To make a long story short, I was sold to the owner of a traveling menagerie with an empty wagon to fill. I was a large and impressive adolescent and doubtless represented a sensible long-term investment.

You might imagine that life in one cage is like life in any other cage, but this is not at all the case. Take the matter of human contact, for example. At the zoo, all the gorillas were aware of our human visitors. They were a curiosity for us, worth watching, in the way that birds or squirrels around a

house might seem worth watching to a human family. It was clear that these strange creatures were there looking at us, but it never crossed our minds that they had come for that express purpose. At the menagerie, however, I quickly came to a true understanding of this phenomenon. Indeed, my education in this regard began from the moment I was first put on display. A small group of visitors approached my wagon and after a moment began *speaking to me*. I was astounded. At the zoo, visitors had talked to *one another*—never to us. “Perhaps these people are confused,” I said to myself. “Perhaps they’ve mistaken me for one of themselves.” My wonderment and perplexity grew as, one after another, every group that visited my wagon behaved in the same way. I simply didn’t know what to make of it.

That night, without thinking of it as such, I made my first real attempt to marshal my thoughts to solve a problem. Was it possible, I wondered, that changing my location had somehow changed *me*? I didn’t feel in the least changed, and certainly nothing in my appearance seemed to have changed. Perhaps, I thought, the people who visited me that day belonged to a different species from those who had come to the zoo. This reasoning did not impress me; the two groups were identical in every way but this: that one group talked among themselves and the other talked to me. Even the sound of the talking was the same. It had to be something else.

The following night I attacked the problem again, reasoning in this way: If nothing has changed in me and nothing has changed in them, then *something else* must have changed. I am the same and they are the same, therefore something else is *not* the same. Looking at the matter this way, I could see only one answer: At the zoo there were many gorillas; here there was only one. I felt the force of this but could not imagine why visitors would behave one way in the presence of many gorillas and a different way in the presence of one gorilla.

The next day I tried to pay more attention to what my visitors were saying. I soon noticed that, although every speech was different, there was one sound that occurred over and over, and it seemed to be intended to attract my attention. Of course I was unable to hazard a guess as to its meaning; I possessed nothing that would serve as a Rosetta Stone.

The wagon to the right of mine was occupied by a female chimpanzee with an infant, and I had already observed that visitors spoke to her in the same way they spoke to me. Now I noticed that visitors employed a different recurrent sound to attract her attention. At her wagon, visitors called out, “Zsa–Zsa! Zsa–Zsa! Zsa–Zsa!” At my wagon, they called out, “Goliath! Goliath! Goliath!”

By small steps such as these, I soon understood that these sounds in some mysterious way attached directly to the two of us *as individuals*. You, who have had a name from birth and who probably think that even a pet dog is aware of having a name (which is untrue), cannot imagine what a revolution in perception the acquisition of a name produced in me. It would be no exaggeration to say that I was truly born in that moment—born as a person.

From the realization that I had a name to the realization that *everything* has a name was not a great leap. You might think a caged animal would have little opportunity to learn the language of its visitors, but this is not so. Menageries attract families, and I soon discovered that parents are incessantly schooling their children in the arts of language: “Look, Johnny, there’s a duck! Can you say *duck*? D–u–u–c–k! Do you know what a duck says? A duck says *quack quack*!”

Within a couple of years I was able to follow most conversations within earshot, but I found that puzzlement kept pace with comprehension. I knew by now that I was a gorilla and that Zsa–Zsa was a chimpanzee. I also knew that all the inhabitants of the wagons were *animals*. But I could not quite make out the constitution of an animal; our human visitors clearly distinguished between themselves and animals, but I was unable to figure out why. If I understood what made us animals (and I thought I did), I couldn't understand what made them *not* animals.

The nature of our captivity was no longer a mystery, for I had heard it explained to hundreds of children. All the animals of the menagerie had originally lived in something called The Wild, which extended all over the world (whatever a “world” might be). We had been taken from The Wild and brought together in one place, because, for some strange reason, people found us interesting. We were kept in cages because we were “wild” and “dangerous”—terms that baffled me, because they evidently referred to qualities I epitomized in myself. I mean that when parents wanted to show their children a particularly wild and dangerous creature, they would point at me. It's true that they would also point at the big cats, but since I'd never seen a big cat outside a cage, this was not enlightening.

On the whole, life at the menagerie was an improvement over life at the zoo, because it was not so oppressively boring. It didn't occur to me to be resentful of my keepers. Although they had a greater range of movement, they seemed as much bound to the menagerie as the rest of us, and I had no inkling that they lived an entirely different sort of life on the outside. It would have been as plausible for Boyle's law to have popped into my head as the notion that I had been unjustly deprived of some inborn right, such as the right to live as I pleased.

Perhaps three or four years passed. Then one rainy day, when the lot was deserted, I received a peculiar visitor: a lone man, who looked to be ancient and shriveled to me, but who I later learned was only in his early forties. Even his approach was distinctive. He stood at the entrance to the menagerie, glanced methodically at each wagon in turn, and then headed straight for mine. He paused at the rope slung some five feet away, planted the tip of his walking stick in the mud just ahead of his shoes, and peered intently into my eyes. I have never been disconcerted by a human gaze, so I placidly returned his stare. I sat and he stood for several minutes without moving. I remember feeling an unusual admiration for this man, so stoically enduring the drizzle that was streaming down his face and soaking his clothes.

At last he straightened up and gave me a nod, as if he'd come to some carefully considered conclusion.

“You are *not* Goliath,” he said.

At that, he turned and marched back the way he'd come, without a look to right or left.

4

I was thunderstruck, as you may well imagine. *Not* Goliath? What could it possibly mean to be *not* Goliath?

It didn't occur to me to say, "Well, if I'm not Goliath, then who *am* I?" A human would ask this question, because he would know that, whatever his name, he is assuredly *someone*. I did not.

On the contrary, it seemed to me that if I was not Goliath, then I must be no one at all.

Though this stranger had never laid eyes on me before that day, I didn't doubt for a moment that he spoke with an unquestionable authority. A thousand others had called me by the name of Goliath—even those who, like the workers at the menagerie, knew me well—but that was clearly not the point, counted for nothing. The stranger hadn't said, "Your *name* is not Goliath." He had said, "*You* are not Goliath." There was a world of difference. As I felt it (though I could not have expressed it this way at the time), my awareness of selfhood had been pronounced a delusion.

I drifted into a sort of fugue state, neither aware nor unconscious. An attendant came round with food, but I ignored him. Night fell, but I didn't sleep. The rain stopped and the sun rose without my noticing. Soon there were the usual crowds of visitors calling out, "Goliath! Goliath! Goliath!" but I paid no attention.

Several days passed in this way. Then one evening after the menagerie had closed for the day, I took a long drink from my bowl and soon fell asleep—a powerful sedative had been added to my water. At dawn I awoke in an unfamiliar cage. At first, because it was so large and so strangely shaped, I didn't even recognize it as a cage. In fact, it was circular, and open to the air on all sides; as I later understood, a gazebo had been modified to serve the purpose. Except for a large white house nearby, it stood alone in the midst of an attractive park that I imagined must extend to the ends of the earth.

It was not long before I'd conceived an explanation for this strange translocation: The people who visited the menagerie came, at least in part, with the expectation of seeing a gorilla named Goliath; how they came to have this expectation I could not guess, but they certainly seemed to have it; and when the owner of the menagerie learned that I was in fact *not* Goliath, he could scarcely go on exhibiting me as such, and so had no real choice but to send me away. I didn't know whether to be sorry about this or not; my new home was far more pleasant than anything I'd seen since leaving Africa, but without the daily stimulation of the crowds, it would soon become even more excruciatingly boring than the zoo, where at least I'd had the company of other gorillas. I was still pondering these matters when, around midmorning, I looked up and saw that I was not alone. A man was standing just beyond the bars, blackly silhouetted against the sunlit house in the distance. I approached cautiously and was astonished to recognize him.

As if reenacting our former encounter, we gazed into each other's eyes for several minutes, I sitting on the floor of my cage, he leaning on his walking stick. I saw that, dry and freshly dressed, he was not the elderly person I'd first taken him for. His face was long and dark and bony, his eyes burned with a strange intensity, and his mouth seemed set in an expression of bitter mirth. At last he nodded, exactly as before, and said:

"Yes, I was right. You are not Goliath. You are Ishmael." Once again, as if everything that mattered was now finally settled, he turned and walked away.

And once again I was thunderstruck—but this time by a feeling of profound relief, for I had been redeemed from oblivion. More, the error that caused me to live as an unwitting impostor for so

many years had been corrected at last. I had been made whole as a person—not again but for the very first time.

I was consumed with curiosity about my savior. I didn't think to associate him with my removal from the menagerie to this charming belvedere, for I was as yet incapable of even that most primitive of fallacies: *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. He was to me a supernal being. To a mind ready for mythology, he was the beginning of what is meant by *godlike*. He had twice made a brief appearance in my life—and twice, with a single utterance, had transformed me. I tried to search for the underlying meaning of these appearances, but found only questions. Had this man come to the menagerie in search of Goliath or in search of me? Had he come because he *hoped* I was Goliath or because he suspected I was *not* Goliath? How had he so promptly found me in my new location? I had no measure of the extent of human information; if it was common knowledge that I could be found at the menagerie (as it had seemed to be), was it also common knowledge that I could now be found here? Despite all these unanswerable questions, the overwhelming fact remained that this uncanny creature had twice sought me out in order to address me in an unprecedented way—as a person. I was certain that, having finally settled the matter of my identity, he would vanish from my life forever; what more was there for him to do?

Doubtless you will have surmised that all these breathless apperceptions were just so much moonshine. Nonetheless the truth (as I later learned it) was not much less fantastic.

My benefactor was a wealthy Jewish merchant of this city, a man by the name of Walter Sokolow. On the day he discovered me at the menagerie, he'd been out walking in the rain, in a kind of suicidal gloom that had descended on him a few months before, when he learned beyond any doubt that his entire family had been swallowed up in the Nazi holocaust. His wanderings led him to a carnival set up at the edge of town, and he went in with nothing in particular on his mind. Because of the rain, most of the booths and rides were shut down, giving the place an air of abandonment that accorded well with his melancholy. At last he came to the menagerie, whose chief attractions were advertised in a series of lurid paintings. One of these, more lurid than the rest, depicted the gorilla Goliath brandishing the broken body of an African native as if it were a weapon. Walter Sokolow, perhaps thinking that a gorilla named Goliath was an apt symbol for the Nazi giant that was then engaged in crushing the race of David, decided it would be satisfying to behold such a monster behind bars.

He went in, approached my wagon, and by gazing into my eyes, soon realized that I was no relation to the bloodthirsty monster in the painting—and indeed no relation to the Philistine tormentor of his race. He found it gave him no satisfaction whatever to see me behind bars. On the contrary, in a quixotic gesture of guilt and defiance, he decided to rescue me from my cage and fashion me into a dreadful substitute for the family he had failed to rescue from the cage of Europe. The owner of the menagerie was agreeable to a sale; he was even glad to let Mr. Sokolow hire away a handler who had looked after me since my arrival. The owner was a realist; with America's inevitable entrance into the war, traveling shows like his were either going to spend the duration in winter quarters or simply become extinct.

After letting me settle in for a day in my new surroundings, Mr. Sokolow returned to begin to make my acquaintance. He wanted the handler to show him how everything was done, from mixing my feed to cleaning my cage. He asked him if he thought I was dangerous. The handler said I was like a piece of heavy machinery—dangerous not by disposition but by dint of sheer size and power.

After an hour or so, Mr. Sokolow sent him away, and we gazed at each other in a long silence as we had already done twice before. Finally—reluctantly, as if surmounting some daunting interior barrier—he began to speak to me, not in the jocular way of visitors to the menagerie but rather as one speaks to the wind or to the waves crashing on a beach, uttering that which must be said but which must not be heard by anyone. As he poured out his sorrows and self-recriminations, he gradually forgot the need for caution. By the time an hour had passed, he was propped up against my cage with a hand wrapped around a bar. He was looking at the ground, lost in thought, and I used this opportunity to express my sympathy, reaching out and gently stroking the knuckles of his hand. He leaped back, startled and horrified, but a search of my eyes reassured him that my gesture was as innocent of menace as it seemed.

Alerted by this experience, he began to suspect that I possessed real intelligence, and a few simple tests were enough to convince him of this. Having proved that I understood his words, he leaped to the conclusion (as others were later to do in working with other primates) that I should be able to produce some of my own. In short, he decided to teach me to talk. I will pass over the painful and humiliating months that followed. Neither one of us understood that the difficulty was unsurmountable, owing to a lack of basic phonic equipment on my part. In the absence of that understanding, we both labored on under the impression that the knack would someday magically manifest itself in me if we persevered. But at last there came a day when I couldn't go on, and in my anguish at not being able to *tell* him this, I *thought* him this, with all the mental power I possessed. He was stunned—as was I when I saw that he'd heard my mental cry.

I won't burden you with all the steps of our progress once full communication was established between us, since they are easily imagined, I believe. Over the next decade, he taught me all he knew of the world and the universe and human history, and when my questions went beyond his knowledge, we studied side by side. And when my studies carried me beyond his own interests at last, he cheerfully became my research assistant, tracking down books and information in places that were of course beyond my reach.

With the new interest of my education to absorb his attention, my benefactor soon forgot to torment himself with remorse and so gradually recovered from his gloom. By the early sixties I was like a houseguest who needed very little attention from his host, so Mr. Sokolow began to allow himself to be rediscovered in social circles, with the not-unpredictable result that he soon found himself in the hands of a young woman of forty who saw no reason why he could not be made into a satisfactory sort of husband. In fact, he was not at all averse to marriage, but he made a terrible mistake in anticipation of it: He decided that our special relationship should be kept a secret from his wife. It was not an extraordinary decision for those times, and I was not sufficiently experienced in such matters to recognize it for the error it was. I moved back into the gazebo as soon as it had been renovated to accommodate the civilized habits I'd acquired. From the first, however, Mrs. Sokolow viewed me as a peculiar and alarming pet and began agitating for my speedy removal or disposal. Luckily, my benefactor was used to having his own way and made it clear that no amount of pleading or coercion would change the situation he'd created for me.

A few months after the wedding, he dropped in to tell me that his wife, like Abraham's Sarah, was soon going to present him with a child of his old age.

"I anticipated nothing like this when I named you Ishmael," he told me. "But rest assured that I won't let her cast you out of my house the way Sarah cast your namesake out of Abraham's house." Nevertheless, it amused him to say that, if it was a boy, he would name him Isaac. As matters turned out, however, it was a girl, and they named her Rachel.

5

At that, Ishmael paused for so long, with his eyes closed, that I began to wonder if he'd fallen asleep. But at last he went on.

"Wisely or foolishly, my benefactor decided that I would be the girl's mentor, and (wisely or foolishly) I was delighted to have a chance to please him in this way. In her father's arms, Rachel spent nearly as much time with me as with her mother—which of course did nothing to improve my standing with that person. Because I was able to speak to her in a language more direct than speech, I could soothe and amuse her when others failed, and a bond gradually developed between us that might be likened to the one that exists between identical twins—except that I was brother, pet, tutor, and nurse all rolled into one.

"Mrs. Sokolow looked forward to the day when Rachel would begin school, for then new interests would make her a stranger to me. When this result didn't occur, she renewed her campaign to have me sent away, predicting that my presence would stunt the child's social growth. Her social growth remained unstunted, however, even though she skipped no fewer than three grades in elementary school and one grade in high school; she had a master's degree in biology before her twentieth birthday. Nonetheless, after so many years of being thwarted in a matter that pertained to the management of her own home, Mrs. Sokolow no longer needed any particular reason to wish me gone.

"On the death of my benefactor in 1985, Rachel herself became my protector. There was no question of my remaining in the gazebo. Using funds provided for this purpose in her father's will, Rachel moved me to a retreat that had been prepared in advance."

Once again Ishmael fell silent for several minutes. Then he went on: "In the years that followed, nothing worked out as it had been planned or hoped for. I found I was not content to 'retreat'; having spent a lifetime in retreat, I now wanted somehow to advance into the very center of your culture, and I proceeded to exhaust my new protector's patience by trying one bothersome arrangement after another to achieve this end. At the same time, Mrs. Sokolow was not content to leave things as they were and persuaded a court to cut in half the funds that had been allocated to my support for life.

"It was not until 1989 that things came clear at last. In that year I finally comprehended that my unfulfilled vocation was to teach—and finally devised a system that would enable me to exist in tolerable circumstances in this city."

He nodded to let me know this was the end of his story—or was as much of it as he meant to tell.

6

There are times when having too much to say can be as dumbfounding as having too little. I could think of no way to respond adequately or gracefully to such a tale. Finally I asked a question that seemed no more or less inane than the dozens of others that occurred to me.

“And have you had many pupils?”

“I’ve had four, and failed with all four.”

“Oh. Why did you fail?”

He closed his eyes to think for a moment. “I failed because I underestimated the difficulty of what I was trying to teach—and because I didn’t understand the minds of my pupils well enough.”

“I see,” I said. “And what *do* you teach?”

Ishmael selected a fresh branch from a pile at his right, examined it briefly, then began to nibble at it, gazing languidly into my eyes. At last he said, “On the basis of my history, what subject would you say I was best qualified to teach?”

I blinked and told him I didn’t know.

“Of course you do. My subject is: *captivity*.”

“Captivity.”

“That’s correct.”

I sat there for a minute, then I said, “I’m trying to figure out what this has to do with saving the world.”

Ishmael thought for a moment. “Among the people of your culture, which want to destroy the world?”

“Which *want* to destroy it? As far as I know, no one specifically *wants* to destroy the world.”

“And yet you do destroy it, each of you. Each of you contributes daily to the destruction of the world.”

“Yes, that’s so.”

“Why don’t you stop?”

I shrugged. “Frankly, we don’t know how.”

“You’re captives of a civilizational system that more or less compels you to go on destroying the world in order to live.”

“Yes, that’s the way it seems.”

“So. You are captives—and you have made a captive of the world itself. That’s what’s at stake, isn’t it?—your captivity and the captivity of the world.”

“Yes, that’s so. I’ve just never thought of it that way.”

“And you yourself are a captive in a personal way, are you not?”

“How so?”

Ishmael smiled, revealing a great mass of ivory-colored teeth. I hadn’t known he could, until then.

I said: “I have an *impression* of being a captive, but I can’t explain why I have this impression.”

“A few years ago—you must have been a child at the time, so you may not remember it—many young people of this country had the same impression. They made an ingenuous and disorganized effort to escape from captivity but ultimately failed, because they were unable to find the bars of the cage. If you can’t discover what’s keeping you in, the will to get out soon becomes confused and ineffectual.”

“Yes, that’s the sense I have of it.”

Ishmael nodded.

“But again, how does this relate to saving the world?”

“The world is not going to survive for very much longer as humanity’s captive. Does that need explication?”

“No. At least not to me.”

“I think there are many among you who would be glad to release the world from captivity.”

“I agree.”

“What prevents them from doing this?”

“I don’t know.”

“This is what prevents them: They’re unable to find the bars of the cage.”

“Yes,” I said. “I see.” Then: “What do we do next?”

Ishmael smiled again. “Since I have told you a story that explains how I come to be here, perhaps you will do the same.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, perhaps you will tell me a story that explains how *you* come to be here.”

“Ah,” I said. “Give me a moment.”

“You may have any number of moments,” he replied gravely.

7

“Once when I was in college,” I told him at last, “I wrote a paper for a philosophy class. I don’t remember exactly what the assignment was—something to do with epistemology. Here’s what I said in the paper, roughly: Guess what? The Nazis didn’t lose the war after all. They won it and nourished. They took over the world and wiped out every last Jew, every last Gypsy, black, East Indian, and American Indian. Then, when they were finished with that, they wiped out the Russians and the Poles and the Bohemians and the Moravians and the Bulgarians and the Serbians and the Croatians—all the Slavs. Then they started in on the Polynesians and the Koreans and the Chinese and the Japanese—all the peoples of Asia. This took a long, long time, but when it was all over, everyone in the world was one hundred percent Aryan, and they were all very, very happy.

“Naturally the textbooks used in the schools no longer mentioned any race but the Aryan or any language but German or any religion but Hitlerism or any political system but National Socialism. There would have been no point. After a few generations of that, no one could have put anything different into the textbooks even if they’d wanted to, because they didn’t *know* anything different.

“But one day two young students were conversing at the University of New Heidelberg in Tokyo. Both were handsome in the usual Aryan way, but one of them looked vaguely worried and unhappy. That was Kurt. His friend said, ‘What’s wrong, Kurt? Why are you always moping around like this?’ Kurt said, ‘I’ll tell you, Hans. There *is* something that’s troubling me—and troubling me deeply.’ His friend asked what it was. ‘It’s this,’ Kurt said. ‘I can’t shake the crazy feeling that there is some small thing that we’re being *lied* to about.’

“And that’s how the paper ended.”

Ishmael nodded thoughtfully. “And what did your teacher think of that?”

“He wanted to know if I had the same crazy feeling as Kurt. When I said I did, he wanted to know what I thought we were being lied to about. I said, ‘How could I know? I’m no better off than Kurt.’ Of course, he didn’t think I was being serious. He assumed it was just an exercise in epistemology.”

“And do you still wonder if you’ve been lied to?”

“Yes, but not as desperately as I did then.”

“Not as desperately? Why is that?”

“Because I’ve found out that, as a practical matter, it doesn’t make any difference. Whether we’re being lied to or not, we still have to get up and go to work and pay the bills and all the rest.”

“Unless, of course, you *all* began to suspect you were being lied to—and *all* found out what the lie was.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you alone found out what the lie was, then you’re probably right—it would make no great difference. But if you *all* found out what the lie was, it might conceivably make a very great difference indeed.”

“True.”

“Then that is what we must hope for.”

I started to ask him what he meant by that, but he held up a leathery black hand and told me: “Tomorrow.”

8

That evening I went for a walk. To walk for the sake of walking is something I seldom do. Inside my apartment I’d felt inexplicably anxious. I needed to talk to someone, to be reassured. Or perhaps I needed to confess my sin: I was once again having impure thoughts about saving the world. Or it was neither of these—I was afraid I was dreaming. Indeed, considering the events of the day, it was likely that I was dreaming. I sometimes fly in my dreams, and each time I say to myself, “At last—it’s happening *in reality* and not in a dream!”

In any case, I needed to talk to someone, and I was alone. This is my habitual condition, by choice—or so I tell myself. Mere acquaintanceship leaves me unsatisfied, and few people are willing to accept the burdens and risks of friendship as I conceive of it.

People say that I’m sour and misanthropic, and I tell them they’re probably right. Argument of any sort, on any subject, has always seemed like a waste of time to me.

The next morning I woke and thought: “Even so, it *could* be a dream. One can sleep in a dream, even have dreams in a dream.” As I went through the motions of making breakfast, eating, and washing up, my heart was pounding furiously. It seemed to be saying, “How can you pretend not to be terrified?”

The time passed. I drove downtown. The building was still there. The office at the end of the hall on the ground floor was still there and still unlocked.

When I opened the door, Ishmael's huge, meaty aroma came down on me like a thunderclap. On wobbly legs, I walked to the chair and sat down.

Ishmael studied me gravely through the dark glass, as if wondering if I was strong enough to be taxed with serious conversation. When he made up his mind, he began without preamble of any kind, and I came to know that this was his usual style.

TWO

1

"Oddly enough," he said, "it was my benefactor who awakened my interest in the subject of captivity and not my own condition. As I may have indicated in yesterday's narrative, he was obsessed by the events then taking place in Nazi Germany."

"Yes, that's what I gathered."

"From your story about Kurt and Hans yesterday, I take it that you're a student of the life and times of the German people under Adolf Hitler."

"A student? No, I wouldn't go as far as that. I've read some of the well-known books—Speer's memoirs, *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, and so on—and a few studies of Hitler."

"In that case, I'm sure you understand what Mr. Sokolow was at pains to show me: that it was not only the Jews who were captives under Hitler. The entire German nation was a captive, including his enthusiastic supporters. Some detested what he was doing, some just shambled on as best they could, and some positively thrived on it—but they were all his captives."

"I think I see what you mean."

"What was it that held them captive?"

"Well . . . terror, I suppose."

Ishmael shook his head. "You must have seen films of the prewar rallies, with hundreds of thousands of them singing and cheering as one. It wasn't terror that brought them to those feasts of unity and power."

"True. Then I'd have to say it was Hitler's charisma."

"He certainly had that. But charisma only wins people's attention. Once you have their attention, you have to have something to tell them. And what did Hitler have to tell the German people?"

I pondered this for a few moments without any real conviction. “Apart from the Jewish business, I don’t think I could answer that question.”

“What he had to tell them was a story.”

“A story.”

“A story in which the Aryan race and the people of Germany in particular had been deprived of their rightful place in the world, bound, spat upon, raped, and ground into the dirt under the heels of mongrel races, Communists, and Jews. A story in which, under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, the Aryan race would burst its bonds, wreak vengeance on its oppressors, purify mankind of its defilements, and assume its rightful place as the master of all races.”

“True.”

“It may seem incredible to you now that any people could have been captivated by such nonsense, but after nearly two decades of degradation and suffering following World War I, it had an almost overwhelming appeal to the people of Germany, and it was reinforced not only through the ordinary means of propaganda but by an intensive program of education of the young and reeducation of the old.”

“True.”

“As I say, there were many in Germany who recognized this story as rank mythology. They were nevertheless held captive by it simply because the vast majority around them thought it sounded wonderful and were willing to give their lives to make it a reality. Do you see what I mean?”

“I think so. Even if you weren’t personally captivated by the story, you were a captive all the same, because the people around you *made* you a captive. You were like an animal being swept along in the middle of a stampede.”

“That’s right. Even if you privately thought the whole thing was madness, you had to play your part, you had to take your place in the story. The only way to avoid that was to escape from Germany entirely.”

“True.”

“Do you understand why I’m telling you this?”

“I think so, but I’m not sure.”

“I’m telling you this because the people of your culture are in much the same situation. Like the people of Nazi Germany, they are the captives of a story.”

I sat there blinking for a while. “I know of no such story,” I told him at last.

“You mean you’ve never heard of it?”

“That’s right.”

Ishmael nodded. “That’s because there’s no *need* to hear of it. There’s no need to name it or discuss it. Every one of you knows it by heart by the time you’re six or seven. Black and white, male and female, rich and poor, Christian and Jew, American and Russian, Norwegian and Chinese, you all hear it. And you hear it incessantly, because every medium of propaganda, every medium of education pours it out incessantly. And hearing it incessantly, you don’t listen to it. There’s no *need* to listen to it. It’s always there humming away in the background, so there’s no need to attend to it at all. In fact, you’ll find—at least initially—that it’s *hard* to attend to it. It’s like the humming of a distant motor that never stops; it becomes a sound that’s no longer heard at all.”

“This is very interesting,” I told him. “But it’s also a little hard to believe.”

Ishmael’s eyes closed gently in an indulgent smile. “Belief is not required. Once you know this story, you’ll hear it everywhere in your culture, and you’ll be astonished that the people around you don’t hear it as well but merely take it in.”

2

“Yesterday you told me you have the *impression* of being a captive. You have this impression because there is enormous pressure on you to take a place in the story your culture is enacting in the world—any place at all. This pressure is exerted in all sorts of ways, on all sorts of levels, but it’s exerted most basically this way: Those who refuse to take a place do not get fed.”

“Yes, that’s so.”

“A German who couldn’t bring himself to take a place in Hitler’s story had an option: He could leave Germany. You don’t have that option. Anywhere you go in the world, you’ll find the same story being enacted, and if you don’t take a place in it you won’t get fed.”

“True.”

“Mother Culture teaches you that this is as it should be. Except for a few thousand savages scattered here and there, all the peoples of the earth are now enacting this story. This is the story man was born to enact, and to depart from it is to resign from the human race itself, is to venture into oblivion. Your place is *here*, participating in this story, putting your shoulder to the wheel, and as a reward, being fed. There is no ‘something else.’ To step out of this story is to fall off the edge of the world. There’s no way out of it except through death.”

“Yes, that’s the way it seems.”

Ishmael paused to think for a bit. “All this is just a preface to our work. I wanted you to hear it because I wanted you to have at least a vague idea of what you’re getting into here. Once you learn to discern the voice of Mother Culture humming in the background, telling her story over and over again to the people of your culture, you’ll never stop being conscious of it. Wherever you go for the rest of your life, you’ll be tempted to say to the people around you, ‘How can you listen to this stuff

and not recognize it for what it is?’ And if you do this, people will look at you oddly and wonder what the devil you’re talking about. In other words, if you take this educational journey with me, you’re going to find yourself alienated from the people around you—friends, family, past associates, and so on.”

“That I can stand,” I told him, and let it go at that.

3

“It is my most heartfelt and unattainable fantasy to travel once in your world as you do, freely and unobtrusively—to step out onto a street and flag down a taxi to take me to the airport, where I would board a flight to New York or London or Florence. Much of this fantasy is spent in making delicious preparations for the journey, in pondering what must accompany me in my luggage and what may be safely left behind. (You understand that I would of course be traveling in human disguise.) If I take too much, dragging it from place to place will be tiresome; on the other hand, if I take too little, I will forever be having to break my journey to pick up things along the way—and that will be even more tiresome.”

“True,” I said, just to be agreeable.

“That’s what today is for: We’re packing a bag for our journey together. I’m going to throw into this bag some things I won’t want to stop and pick up later on. These things will mean little or nothing to you right now. I’ll just show them to you briefly and then toss them into the bag. That way you’ll recognize them when I take them out later on.”

“Okay.”

“First, some vocabulary. Let’s have some names so we don’t have to go on talking about ‘the people of your culture’ and ‘the people of all other cultures.’ I’ve used various names with various pupils, but I’m going to try a new pair with you. You’re familiar with the expression ‘Take it or leave it.’ Using them in this sense, do the words *takers* and *leavers* have any heavy connotation for you?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I mean, if I call one group Takers and the other group Leavers, will this sound like I’m setting up one to be good guys and the other to be bad guys?”

“No. They sound pretty neutral to me.”

“Good. So henceforth I’m going to call the people of your culture Takers and the people of all other cultures Leavers.”

I hmm’ed a bit. “I have a problem with that.”

“Speak.”

“I don’t see how you can lump everyone else in the world into one category like that.”

“This is the way it’s done in your own culture, except that you use a pair of heavily loaded terms instead of these relatively neutral terms. You call yourselves *civilized* and all the rest *primitive*. You are universally agreed on these terms; I mean that the people of London and Paris and Baghdad and Seoul and Detroit and Buenos Aires and Toronto all know that—whatever else separates them—they are united in being *civilized* and distinct from Stone Age peoples scattered all over the world; you consider or recognize that, whatever their differences, these Stone Age peoples are likewise united in being *primitive*.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Would you be more comfortable if we used these terms, *civilized* and *primitive*?”

“Yes, I suppose I would be, but only because I’m used to them. Takers and Leavers is fine with me.”

4

“Second: the map. I have it. You don’t have to memorize the route. In other words, don’t worry if, at the end of any day, you suddenly realize that you can’t remember a word I’ve said. That doesn’t matter. It’s the journey itself that’s going to change you. Do you see what I mean?”

“I’m not sure.”

Ishmael thought for a moment. “I’ll give you a general idea of where we’re heading, then you’ll understand.”

“Okay.”

“Mother Culture, whose voice has been in your ear since the day of your birth, has given you an explanation of *how things came to be this way*. You know it well; everyone in your culture knows it well. But this explanation wasn’t given to you all at once. No one ever sat you down and said, ‘Here is how things came to be this way, beginning ten or fifteen billion years ago right up to the present.’ Rather, you assembled this explanation like a mosaic: from a million bits of information presented to you in various ways by others who share that explanation. You assembled it from the table talk of your parents, from cartoons you watched on television, from Sunday School lessons, from your textbooks and teachers, from news broadcasts, from movies, novels, sermons, plays, newspapers, and all the rest. Are you with me so far?”

“I think so.”

“This explanation of *how things came to be this way* is ambient in your culture. Everyone knows it and everyone accepts it without question.”

“Okay.”

“As we make our journey here, we’re going to be reexamining key pieces of that mosaic. We’re going to be taking them out of your mosaic and fitting them into an entirely different mosaic: into an entirely different explanation of *how things came to be this way*.”

“Okay.”

“And when we’re finished, you’ll have an entirely new perception of the world and of all that’s happened here. And it won’t matter in the least whether you remember how that perception was assembled. The journey itself is going to change you, so you don’t have to worry about memorizing the route we took to accomplish that change.”

“Right. I see what you mean now.”

5

“Third,” he said, “definitions. These are words that will have a special meaning in our discourse here. First definition: *story*. A story is a scenario interrelating man, the world, and the gods.”

“Okay.”

“Second definition: *to enact*. To enact a story is to live so as to make the story a reality. In other words, to enact a story is to strive to make it come true. You recognize that this is what the people of Germany were doing under Hitler. They were trying to make the Thousand Year Reich a reality. They were trying to make the story he was telling them come true.”

“Right.”

“Third definition: *culture*. A culture is a people enacting a story.”

“A people enacting a story. And a story again is . . . ?”

“A scenario interrelating man, the world, and the gods.”

“Okay. So you’re saying that the people of my culture are enacting their own story about man, the world, and the gods.”

“That’s right.”

“But I still don’t know what that story is.”

“You will. Don’t fret about it. For the moment all you have to know is that two fundamentally different stories have been enacted here during the lifetime of man. One began to be enacted here some two or three million years ago by the people we’ve agreed to call Leavers and is still being enacted by them today, as successfully as ever. The other began to be enacted here some ten or twelve thousand years ago by the people we’ve agreed to call Takers, and is apparently about to end in catastrophe.”

“Ah,” I said, meaning I know not what.

6

“If Mother Culture were to give an account of human history using these terms, it would go something like this: ‘The Leavers were chapter one of human history—a long and uneventful chapter. Their chapter of human history ended about ten thousand years ago with the birth of agriculture in the Near East. This event marked the beginning of chapter two, the chapter of the Takers. It’s true there are still Leavers living in the world, but these are anachronisms, fossils—people living in the past, people who just don’t realize that their chapter of human history is over.’ ”

“Right.”

“This is the general shape of human history as it’s perceived in your culture.”

“I would say so.”

“As you’ll come to see, what I’m saying is quite different from this. The Leavers are not chapter one of a story in which the Takers are chapter two.”

“Say that again?”

“I’ll say it differently. The Leavers and the Takers are enacting two separate stories, based on entirely different and contradictory premises. This is something we’ll be looking at later, so you don’t have to understand it right this second.”

“Okay.”

7

Ishmael scratched the side of his jaw thoughtfully. From my side of the glass, I heard nothing of this; in imagination it sounded like a shovel being dragged across gravel.

“I think our bag is packed. As I said, I don’t expect you to remember everything I’ve thrown into it today. When you leave here, everything will probably all just turn into one great muddle.”

“I believe you,” I said with conviction.

“But that’s all right. If I pull something from our bag tomorrow that I put in today, you’ll recognize it instantly, and that’s all that matters.”

“Okay. I’m glad to hear it.”

“We’ll make this a short session today. The journey itself begins tomorrow. Meanwhile, you can spend the rest of today groping for the story the people of your culture have been enacting in the world for the past ten thousand years. Do you remember what it’s about?”

“About?”

“It’s about the meaning of the world, about divine intentions in the world, and about human destiny.”

“Well, I can tell you *stories* about these things, but I don’t know any *one* story.”

“It’s the one story that everyone in your culture knows and accepts.”

“I’m afraid that doesn’t help much.”

“Perhaps it’ll help if I tell you that it’s an *explaining* story, like ‘How the Elephant Got Its Trunk’ or ‘How the Leopard Got Its Spots.’ ”

“Okay.”

“And what do you suppose this story of yours explains?”

“God, I have no idea.”

“That should be clear from what I’ve already told you. It explains *how things came to be this way*. From the beginning until now.”

“I see,” I said, and stared out the window for a while. “I’m certainly not aware of knowing such a story. As I said, *stories*, yes, but nothing like a *single* story.”

Ishmael pondered this for a minute or two. “One of the pupils I mentioned yesterday felt obliged to explain to me what she was looking for, and she said, ‘Why is it that no one is excited? I hear people talking in the Laundromat about the end of the world, and they’re no more excited than if they were comparing detergents. People talk about the destruction of the ozone layer and the death of all life. They talk about the devastation of the rain forests, about deadly pollution that will be with us for thousands and millions of years, about the disappearance of dozens of species of life every day, about the end of speciation itself. And they seem perfectly calm.’ ”

“I said to her, ‘Is this what you want to know then—why people aren’t excited about the destruction of the world?’ She thought about that for a while and said, ‘No, I know why they’re not excited. They’re not excited because they believe what they’ve been told.’ ”

I said, “Yes?”

“What have people been told that keeps them from becoming excited, that keeps them relatively calm when they view the catastrophic damage they’re inflicting on this planet?”

“I don’t know.”

“They’ve been told an explaining story. They’ve been given an explanation of *how things came to be this way*, and this stills their alarm. This explanation covers everything, including the deterioration of the ozone layer, the pollution of the oceans, the destruction of the rain forests, and even human extinction—and it satisfies them. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it *pacifies* them. They put their shoulders to the wheel during the day, stupefy themselves with drugs or television at night, and try not to think too searchingly about the world they’re leaving their children to cope with.”

“Right.”

“You yourself were given the same explanation of *how things came to be this way* as everyone else—but it apparently doesn’t satisfy you. You’ve heard it from infancy but have never managed to swallow it. You have the feeling something’s been left out, glossed over. You have the feeling you’ve been lied to about something, and if you can, you’d like to know what it is—and that’s what you’re doing here in this room.”

“Let me think about this for a second. Are you saying that this explaining story contains the lies I was talking about in my paper about Kurt and Hans?”

“That’s right. That’s it exactly.”

“This boggles my mind. I don’t know any such story. Not any *single* story.”

“It’s a single, perfectly unified story. You just have to think mythologically.”

“What?”

“I’m talking about your culture’s mythology, of course. I thought that was obvious.”

“It wasn’t obvious to me.”

“Any story that explains the meaning of the world, the intentions of the gods, and the destiny of man is bound to be mythology.”

“That may be so, but I’m not aware of anything remotely like that. As far as I know, there’s nothing in our culture that could be called mythology, unless you’re talking about Greek mythology or Norse mythology or something like that.”

“I’m talking about *living* mythology. Not recorded in any book—recorded in the minds of the people of your culture, and being enacted all over the world even as we sit here and speak of it.”

“Again, as far as I know, there’s nothing like that in our culture.”

Ishmael’s tarry forehead crinkled into furrows as he gave me a look of amused exasperation. “This is because you think of mythology as a set of fanciful tales. The Greeks didn’t think of their mythology this way. Surely you must realize that. If you went up to a man of Homeric Greece and asked him what fanciful tales he told his children about the gods and the heroes of the past, he

wouldn't know what you were talking about. He'd say what you said: 'As far as I know, there's nothing like that in our culture.' A Norseman would have said the same."

"Okay. But that doesn't exactly help."

"All right. Let's cut the assignment down to a more modest size. This story, like every story, has a beginning, a middle, and an end. And each of these parts is a story in itself. Before we get together tomorrow, see if you can find the beginning of the story."

"The beginning of the story."

"Yes. Think . . . anthropologically."

I laughed. "What does that mean?"

"If you were an anthropologist after the story being enacted by the Alawa aborigines of Australia, you would expect to hear a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end."

"Okay."

"And what would you expect the beginning of the story to be?"

"I have no idea."

"Of course you do. You're just playing dumb."

I sat there for a minute, trying to figure out how to stop playing dumb. "Okay," I said at last. "I guess I'd expect it to be their creation myth."

"Of course."

"But I don't see how that helps me."

"Then I'll spell it out. You're looking for your own culture's creation myth."

I stared at him balefully. "We *have* no creation myth," I said. "That's a certainty."

THREE

1

"What's that?" I said when I arrived the following morning. I was referring to an object resting on the arm of my chair.

“What does it look like?”

“A tape recorder.”

“That’s exactly what it is.”

“I mean, what’s it for?”

“It’s for recording for posterity the curious folktales of a doomed culture, which you are going to tell me.”

I laughed and sat down. “I’m afraid I haven’t as yet found any curious folktales to tell you.”

“My suggestion that you look for a creation myth bore no fruit?”

“We have no creation myth,” I said again. “Unless you’re talking about the one in Genesis.”

“Don’t be absurd. If an eighth–grade teacher invited you to explain how all this began, would you read the class the first chapter of Genesis?”

“Certainly not.”

“Then what account *would* you give them?”

“I could give them an account, but it certainly wouldn’t be a *myth*.”

“Naturally you wouldn’t consider it a myth. No creation story is a myth to the people who tell it. It’s just *the story*.”

“Okay, but the story I’m talking about is definitely not a myth. Parts of it are still in question, I suppose, and I suppose later research might make some revisions in it, but it’s certainly not a myth.”

“Turn on the tape recorder and begin. Then we’ll know.”

I gave him a reproachful look. “You mean you actually want me to . . . uh . . .”

“To tell the story, that’s right.”

“I can’t just reel it off. I need some time to get it together.”

“There’s plenty of time. It’s a ninety–minute tape.”

I sighed, turned on the recorder, and closed my eyes.

“It all started a long time ago, ten or fifteen billion years ago,” I began a few minutes later. “I’m not current on which theory is in the lead, the steady-state or the big-bang, but in either case the universe began a long time ago.”

At that point I opened my eyes and gave Ishmael a speculative look.

He gave me one back and said, “Is that it? Is that the story?”

“No, I was just checking.” I closed my eyes and began again. “And then, I don’t know—I guess about six or seven billion years ago—our own solar system was born. . . . I have a picture in my mind from some childhood encyclopedia of blobs being thrown out or blobs coalescing . . . and these were the planets. Which, over the next couple billion years, cooled and solidified. . . . Well, let’s see. Life appeared in the chemical broth of our ancient oceans about what—five billion years ago?”

“Three and a half or four.”

“Okay. Bacteria, microorganisms evolved into higher forms, more complex forms, which evolved into still more complex forms. Life gradually spread to the land. I don’t know . . . slimes at the edge of the oceans . . . amphibians. The amphibians moved inland, evolved into reptiles. The reptiles evolved into mammals. This was what? A billion years ago?”

“Only about a quarter of a billion years ago.”

“Okay. Anyway, the mammals . . . I don’t know. Small critters in small niches—under bushes, in the trees. . . . From the critters in the trees came the primates. Then, I don’t know—maybe ten or fifteen million years ago—one branch of the primates left the trees and . . .” I ran out of steam.

“This isn’t a test,” Ishmael said. “The broad outlines will do—just the story as it’s generally known, as it’s known by bus drivers and ranch hands and senators.”

“Okay,” I said, and closed my eyes again. “Okay. Well, one thing led to another. Species followed species, and finally man appeared. That was what? Three million years ago?”

“Three seems pretty safe.”

“Okay.”

“Is that it?”

“That’s it in outline.”

“The story of creation as it’s told in your culture.”

“That’s right. To the best of our present knowledge.”

Ishmael nodded and told me to turn off the tape recorder. Then he sat back with a sigh that rumbled through the glass like a distant volcano, folded his hands over his central paunch, and gave me a

long, inscrutable look. “And you, an intelligent and moderately well-educated person, would have me believe that this isn’t a myth.”

“What’s mythical about it?”

“I didn’t say there was anything mythical *about* it. I said it was a myth.”

I think I laughed nervously. “Maybe I don’t know what you mean by a myth.”

“I don’t mean anything you don’t mean. I’m using the word in the ordinary sense.”

“Then it’s not a myth.”

“Certainly it’s a myth. Listen to it.” Ishmael told me to rewind the tape and play it back.

After listening to it, I sat there looking thoughtful for a minute or two, for the sake of appearances. Then I said, “It’s not a myth. You could put that in an eighth-grade science text, and I don’t think there’s a school board anywhere that would quibble with it—leaving aside the Creationists.”

“I agree wholeheartedly. Haven’t I said that the story is ambient in your culture? Children assemble it from many media, including science textbooks.”

“Then what are you saying? Are you trying to tell me that this isn’t a factual account?”

“It’s full of facts, of course, but their arrangement is purely mythical.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’ve obviously turned off your mind. Mother Culture has crooned you to sleep.”

I gave him a hard look. “Are you saying that evolution is a myth?”

“No.”

“Are you saying that man did not evolve?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

Ishmael looked at me with a smile. Then he shrugged his shoulders. Then he raised his eyebrows.

I stared at him and thought: *I’m being teased by a gorilla*. It didn’t help.

“Play it again,” he told me.

When it was over, I said, “Okay, I heard one thing, the word *appeared*. I said that finally man *appeared*. Is that it?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. I’m not quibbling over a word. It was clear from the context that the word *appeared* was just a synonym for *evolved*.”

“Then what the hell is it?”

“You’re really not thinking, I’m afraid. You’ve recited a story you’ve heard a thousand times, and now you’re listening to Mother Culture as she murmurs in your ear: ‘There, there, my child, there’s nothing to think about, nothing to worry about, don’t get excited, don’t listen to the nasty animal, this is no myth, nothing I tell you is a myth, so there’s nothing to think about, nothing to worry about, just listen to my voice and go to sleep, go to sleep, go to sleep. . . .’”

I chewed on a lip for a while, then I said, “That doesn’t help.”

“All right,” he said. “I’ll tell you a story of my own, and maybe that’ll help.” He nibbled for a moment on a leafy wand, closed his eyes, and began.

3

This story (Ishmael said) takes place half a billion years ago—an inconceivably long time ago, when this planet would be all but unrecognizable to you. Nothing at all stirred on the land, except the wind and the dust. Not a single blade of grass waved in the wind, not a single cricket chirped, not a single bird soared in the sky. All these things were tens of millions of years in the future. Even the seas were eerily still and silent, for the vertebrates too were tens of millions of years away in the future.

But of course there was an anthropologist on hand. What sort of world would it be without an anthropologist? He was, however, a very depressed and disillusioned anthropologist, for he’d been everywhere on the planet looking for someone to interview, and every tape in his knapsack was as blank as the sky. But one day as he was moping along beside the ocean he saw what seemed to be a living creature in the shallows off shore. It was nothing to brag about, just a sort of squishy blob, but it was the only prospect he’d seen in all his journeys, so he waded out to where it was bobbing in the waves.

He greeted the creature politely and was greeted in kind, and soon the two of them were good friends. The anthropologist explained as well as he could that he was a student of life–styles and customs, and begged his new friend for information of this sort, which was readily forthcoming. “And now,” he said at last, “I’d like to get on tape in your own words some of the stories you tell among yourselves.”

“Stories?” the other asked.

“You know, like your creation myth, if you have one.”

“What is a creation myth?” the creature asked.

“Oh, you know,” the anthropologist replied, “the fanciful tale you tell your children about the origins of the world.”

Well, at this, the creature drew itself up indignantly—at least as well as a squishy blob can do—and replied that his people had no such fanciful tale.

“You have no account of creation then?”

“Certainly we have an account of creation,” the other snapped. “But it is definitely not a *myth*.”

“Oh, certainly not,” the anthropologist said, remembering his training at last. “I’ll be terribly grateful if you share it with me.”

“Very well,” the creature said. “But I want you to understand that, like you, we are a strictly rational people, who accept nothing that is not based on observation, logic, and the scientific method.”

“Of course, of course,” the anthropologist agreed.

So at last the creature began its story. “The universe,” it said, “was born a long, long time ago, perhaps ten or fifteen billion years ago. Our own solar system—this star, this planet and all the others—seem to have come into being some two or three billion years ago. For a long time, nothing whatever lived here. But then, after a billion years or so, life appeared.”

“Excuse me,” the anthropologist said. “You say that life appeared. Where did that happen, according to your myth—I mean, according to your scientific account.”

The creature seemed baffled by the question and turned a pale lavender. “Do you mean in what precise spot?”

“No. I mean, did this happen on the land or in the sea?”

“Land?” the other asked. “What is land?”

“Oh, you know,” he said, waving toward the shore, “the expanse of dirt and rocks that begins over there.”

The creature turned a deeper shade of lavender and said, “I can’t imagine what you’re gibbering about. The dirt and rocks over there are simply the lip of the vast bowl that holds the sea.”

“Oh yes,” the anthropologist said, “I see what you mean. Quite. Go on.”

“Very well,” the other said. “For many millions of centuries the life of the world was merely microorganisms floating helplessly in a chemical broth. But little by little, more complex forms appeared: single-celled creatures, slimes, algae, polyps, and so on.

“But finally,” the creature said, turning quite pink with pride as he came to the climax of his story, “but finally *jellyfish appeared!*”

4

Nothing much came out of me for ninety seconds or so, except maybe waves of baffled fury. Then I said, "That's not fair."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't exactly know what I mean. You've made some sort of point, but I don't know what it is."

"You don't?"

"No, I don't."

"What did the jellyfish mean when it said 'But finally jellyfish appeared'?"

"It meant . . . that is what it was all leading up to. This is what the whole ten or fifteen billion years of creation were leading up to: jellyfish."

"I agree. And why doesn't *your* account of creation end with the appearance of jellyfish?"

I suppose I tittered. "Because there was more to come beyond jellyfish."

"That's right. Creation didn't end with jellyfish. Still to come were the vertebrates and the amphibians and the reptiles and the mammals, and of course, finally, man."

"Right."

"And so your account of creation ends, 'And finally man appeared.' "

"Yes."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that there was no more to come. Meaning that creation had come to an end."

"This is what it was all leading up to."

"Yes."

"Of course. Everyone in your culture knows this. The pinnacle was reached in man. Man is the climax of the whole cosmic drama of creation."

"Yes."

"When man finally appeared, creation came to an end, because its objective had been reached. There was nothing left to create."

“That seems to be the unspoken assumption.”

“It’s certainly not always unspoken. The religions of your culture aren’t reticent about it. Man is the end product of creation. Man is the creature for whom all the rest was made: this world, this solar system, this galaxy, the universe itself.”

“True.”

“Everyone in your culture knows that the world wasn’t created for jellyfish or salmon or iguanas or gorillas. It was created for man.”

“That’s right.”

Ishmael fixed me with a sardonic eye. “And this is not mythology?”

“Well . . . the facts are facts.”

“Certainly. Facts are facts, even when they’re embodied in mythology. But what about the rest? Did the entire cosmic process of creation come to an end three million years ago, right here on this little planet, with the appearance of man?”

“No.”

“Did even the planetary process of creation come to an end three million years ago with the appearance of man? Did evolution come to a screeching halt just because man had arrived?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then why did you tell it that way?”

“I guess I told it that way, because that’s the way it’s told.”

“That’s the way it’s told among the Takers. It’s certainly not the only way it can be told.”

“Okay, I see that now. How would you tell it?”

He nodded toward the world outside his window. “Do you see the slightest evidence anywhere in the universe that creation came to an end with the birth of man? Do you see the slightest evidence anywhere out there that man was the climax toward which creation had been straining from the beginning?”

“No. I can’t even imagine what such evidence would look like.”

“That should be obvious. If the astrophysicists could report that the fundamental creative processes of the universe came to a halt five billion years ago, when our solar system made its appearance, that would offer at least some support for these notions.”

“Yes, I see what you mean.”

“Or if the biologists and paleontologists could report that speciation came to a halt three million years ago, this too would be suggestive.”

“Yes.”

“But you know that neither of these things happened in fact. Very far from it. The universe went on as before, the planet went on as before. Man’s appearance caused no more stir than the appearance of jellyfish.”

“Very true.”

Ishmael gestured toward the tape recorder. “So what are we to make of that story you told?”

I bared my teeth in a rueful grin. “It’s a myth. Incredibly enough, it’s a myth.”

5

“I told you yesterday that the story the people of your culture are enacting is about the meaning of the world, about divine intentions in the world, and about human destiny.”

“Yes.”

“And according to this first part of the story, what is the meaning of the world?”

I thought about that for a moment. “I don’t quite see how it explains the meaning of the world.”

“Along about the middle of your story, the focus of attention shifted from the universe at large to this one planet. Why?”

“Because this one planet was destined to be the birthplace of man.”

“Of course. As you tell it, the birth of man was a central event—indeed *the* central event—in the history of the cosmos itself. From the birth of man on, the rest of the universe ceases to be of interest, ceases to participate in the unfolding drama. For this, the earth alone is sufficient; it is the birthplace and home of man, and that’s its meaning. The Takers regard the world as a sort of human life-support system, as a machine designed to produce and sustain human life.”

“Yes, that’s so.”

“In your telling of the story, you naturally left out any mention of the gods, because you didn’t want it to be tainted with mythology. Since its mythological character is now established, you no longer have to worry about that. Supposing there is a divine agency behind creation, what can you tell me about the gods’ intentions?”

“Well, basically, what they had in mind when they started out was man. They made the universe so that our galaxy could be in it. They made the galaxy so that our solar system could be in it. They

made our solar system so that our planet could be in it. And they made our planet so that we could be in it. The whole thing was made so that man would have a hunk of dirt to stand on.”

“And this is generally how it’s understood in your culture—at least by those who assume that the universe is an expression of divine intentions.”

“Yes.”

“Obviously, since the entire universe was made so that man could be made, man must be a creature of enormous importance to the gods. But this part of the story gives no hint of their intentions toward him. They must have some special destiny in mind for him, but that’s not revealed here.”

“True.”

6

“Every story is based on a premise, is the *working out* of a premise. As a writer, I’m sure you know that.”

“Yes.”

“You’ll recognize this one: *Two children of warring families fall in love.*”

“Right. *Romeo and Juliet.*”

“The story being enacted in the world by the Takers also has a premise, which is embodied in the part of the story you told me today. See if you can figure out what it is.”

I closed my eyes and pretended I was working hard, when in fact I knew I didn’t stand a chance.
“I’m afraid I don’t see it.”

“The story the Leavers have enacted in the world has an entirely different premise, and it would be impossible for you to discover it at this point. But you should be able to discover the premise of your own story. It’s a very simple notion and the most powerful in all of human history. Not necessarily the most beneficial but certainly the most powerful. Your entire history, with all its marvels and catastrophes, is a working out of this premise.”

“Truthfully, I can’t even imagine what you’re getting at.”

“Think. . . . Look, the world wasn’t made for jellyfish, was it?”

“No.”

“It wasn’t made for frogs or lizards or rabbits.”

“No.”

VTN

“Of course not. The world was made for man.”

“That’s right.”

“Everyone in your culture knows that, don’t they? Even atheists who swear there is no god know that the world was made for man.”

“Yes, I’d say so.”

“All right. That’s the premise of your story: *The world was made for man.*”

“I can’t quite grasp it. I mean, I can’t quite see why it’s a premise.”

“The people of your culture *made* it a premise—took it as a premise. They said: *What if* the world was made for *us*?”

“Okay. Keep going.”

“Think of the consequences of taking that as your premise: If the world was made for you, *then what?*”

“Okay, I see what you mean. I think. If the world was made for us, then it *belongs* to us and we can do what we damn well please with it.”

“Exactly. That’s what’s been happening here for the past ten thousand years: You’ve been doing what you damn well please with the world. And of course you mean to go right on doing what you damn well please with it, because the whole damn thing *belongs to you.*”

“Yes,” I said, and thought for a second. “Actually, that’s pretty amazing. I mean, you hear this fifty times a day. People talk about *our* environment, *our* seas, *our* solar system. I’ve even heard people talk about *our wildlife.*”

“And just yesterday you assured me with complete confidence that there was nothing in your culture remotely resembling mythology.”

“True. I did.” Ishmael continued to stare at me morosely. “I was wrong,” I told him. “What more do you want?”

“Astonishment,” he said.

I nodded. “I’m astonished, all right. I just don’t let it show.”

“I should have gotten you when you were seventeen.”

I shrugged, meaning that I wished he had.

7

“Yesterday I told you that your story provides you with an explanation of *how things came to be this way*.”

“Right.”

“What contribution does this first part of the story make to that explanation?”

“You mean . . . what contribution does it make to explaining how things came to be the way they are right now?”

“That’s right.”

“Offhand, I don’t see how it makes *any* contribution to it.”

“Think. Would things have come to be this way if the world had been made for jellyfish?”

“No, they wouldn’t.”

“Obviously not. If the world had been made for jellyfish, things would be entirely different.”

“That’s right. But it wasn’t made for jellyfish, it was made for man.”

“And this partly explains *how things came to be this way*.”

“Right. It’s sort of a sneaky way of blaming everything on the gods. If they’d made the world for jellyfish, then none of this would have happened.”

“Exactly,” Ishmael said. “You’re beginning to get the idea.”

8

“Do you have a feeling now for where you might find the other parts of this story—the middle and the end?”

I gave this some thought. “I’d watch *Nova*, I think.”

“Why?”

“I’d say that if *Nova* was doing the story of creation, the story I told today would be the outline. All I have to do now is figure out how they’d do the rest.”

“Then that’s your next assignment. Tomorrow I want to hear the middle of the story.”

FOUR

1

“Okay,” I said. “I think I have the middle and the end of the story down pat.”

Ishmael nodded and I started the tape recorder.

“What I did was start with the premise: The world was made for man. Then I asked myself how I would write the story as a treatment for *Nova*. It came out like this:

“The world was made for man, but it took him a long, long time to figure that out. For nearly three million years he lived as though the world had been made for jellyfish. That is, he lived as though he were just like any other creature, as though he were a lion or a wombat.”

“What exactly does it mean to live like a lion or a wombat?”

“It means . . . to live at the mercy of the world. It means to live without having any control over your environment.”

“I see. Go on.”

“Okay. In this condition, man could not be truly man. He couldn’t develop a truly human way of life—a way of life that was distinctively human. So, during the early part of his life—actually the greater part of his life—man just fozzled along getting nowhere and doing nothing.

“As it happened, there was a key problem to be solved, and it was this that took me a long time to work out: what the problem was. Man could get nowhere living like a lion or a wombat, because if you’re a lion or a wombat. . . . In order to accomplish anything, man had to settle down in one place where he could get to work, so to speak. I mean that it was impossible for him to get beyond a certain point living out in the open as a hunter–gatherer, always moving from place to place in search of food. To get beyond that point, he had to settle down, had to have a permanent base from which he could begin to master his environment.

“Okay. Why not? I mean, well, what was stopping him from doing that? What was stopping him was the fact that if he settled down in one place for more than a few weeks, he’d starve. As a hunter–gatherer, he would simply clean the place out—there would be nothing left to hunt and gather. In order to achieve settlement, man had to learn one fundamental manipulation. He had to learn how to manipulate his environment so that this food–exhaustion didn’t occur. He had to manipulate it so that it produced *more human food*. In other words, he had to become an agriculturalist.

“This was the turning point. The world had been made for man, but he was unable to take possession of it until this problem was cracked. And he finally cracked it about ten thousand years ago, back there in the Fertile Crescent. This was a very big moment—the biggest in human history up to this point. Man was at last free of all those restraints that. . . . The limitations of the hunting–gathering life had kept man in check for three million years. With agriculture, those limitations vanished, and his rise was meteoric. Settlement gave rise to division of labor. Division of labor gave rise to technology. With the rise of technology came trade and commerce. With trade and commerce came mathematics and literacy and science, and all the rest. The whole thing was under way at last, and the rest, as they say, is history.

“And that’s the middle of the story.”

2

“Very impressive,” Ishmael said. “I’m sure you realize that the ‘big moment’ you’ve just described was in fact the birth of your culture.”

“Yes.”

“It should be pointed out, however, that the notion that agriculture spread across the world from a single point of origin is distinctly old hat. Nevertheless the Fertile Crescent remains the *legendary* birthplace of agriculture, at least in the West, and this has a special importance that we’ll look at later on.”

“Okay.”

“Yesterday’s part of the story revealed the meaning of the world as it’s understood among the Takers: The world is a human life–support system, a machine designed to produce and sustain human life.”

“Right.”

“Today’s part of the story seems to be about the destiny of man. Obviously it was not man’s destiny to live like a lion or a wombat.”

“That’s right.”

“What is man’s destiny then?”

“Hm,” I said. “Well. Man’s destiny is . . . to achieve, to accomplish great things.”

“As it’s known among the Takers, man’s destiny is more specific than that.”

“Well, I suppose you could say that his destiny is to build civilization.”

“Think mythologically.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know how that’s done.”

“I’ll demonstrate. Listen.”

I listened.

3

“As we saw yesterday, creation wasn’t complete when jellyfish appeared or when amphibians appeared or when reptiles appeared or even when mammals appeared. According to your mythology, it was complete only when man appeared.”

“Right.”

“Why was the world and the universe incomplete without man? Why did the world and the universe *need* man?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, think about it. Think about the world without man. *Imagine* the world without man.”

“Okay,” I said, and closed my eyes. A couple minutes later I told him I was imagining the world without man.

“What’s it like?”

“I don’t know. It’s just the world.”

“Where are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Where are you looking at it from?”

“Oh. From above. From outer space.”

“What are you doing up there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why aren’t you down on the surface?”

“I don’t know. Without man on it . . . I’m just a visitor, an alien.”

“Well, go on down to the surface.”

“Okay,” I said, but after a minute I went on to say, “That’s interesting. I’d rather *not* go down there.”

“Why? What’s down there?”

I laughed. “The *jungle* is down there.”

“I see. You mean, ‘Nature, red in tooth and claw . . . Dragons of the prime that tare each other in their slime.’ ”

“That’s it.”

“And what would happen if you did go down there?”

“I’d be one of the ones the dragons were tearing in their slime.”

I opened my eyes in time to see Ishmael nodding. “And it is at this point that we begin to see where man fits into the divine scheme. The gods didn’t mean to leave the world a jungle, did they?”

“You mean in our mythology? Certainly not.”

“So: Without man, the world was unfinished, was just nature, red in tooth and claw. It was in chaos, in a state of primeval anarchy.”

“That’s right. That’s it exactly.”

“So it needed what?”

“It needed someone to come in and . . . straighten it out. Someone to put it in order.”

“And what sort of person is it who straightens things out? What sort of person takes anarchy in hand and puts it in order?”

“Well . . . a ruler. A king.”

“Of course. The world needed a ruler. It needed man.”

“Yes.”

“So now we have a clearer idea what this story is all about: *The world was made for man, and man was made to rule it.*”

“Yes. That’s very obvious now. Everyone understands that.”

“And this is what?”

“What?”

“Is this fact?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s mythology,” I said.

“Of which no trace is to be found in your culture.”

“That’s right.”

Once again Ishmael stared at me glumly through the glass.

“Look,” I said after a bit. “The things you’re showing me, the things you’re doing, are . . . almost beyond belief. I know that. But it’s just not in me to leap up out of my chair while striking my brow and crying, ‘My God, this is incredible!’ ”

He wrinkled his forehead thoughtfully for a moment before saying: “What’s *wrong* with you then?”

He seemed so genuinely concerned that I had to smile. “All frozen inside,” I told him. “An iceberg.”

He shook his head, sorry for me.

4

“To return to our subject. . . . As you say, it took man a long, long time to tumble to the fact that he was meant for greater things than he could achieve living like a lion or a wombat. For some three million years he was just part of the anarchy, was just one more creature rolling around in the slime.”

“Right.”

“It was only about ten thousand years ago that he finally realized that his place was not in the slime. He had to lift himself out of the slime and take this place in hand and straighten it out.”

“Right.”

“But the world didn’t meekly submit to human rule, did it?”

“No.”

“No, the world defied him. What man built up, the wind and rain tore down. The fields he cleared for his crops and his villages, the jungle fought to reclaim. The seeds he sowed, the birds snatched away. The shoots he nurtured, the insects nibbled. The harvest he stored, the mice plundered. The animals he bred and fed, the wolves and foxes stole away. The mountains, the rivers, and the oceans

stood in their places and would not make way for him. The earthquake, the flood, the hurricane, the blizzard, and the drought would not disappear at his command.”

“True.”

“The world would not meekly submit to man’s rule, so he had to do what to it?”

“What do you mean?”

“If the king comes to a city that will not submit to his rule, what does he have to do?”

“He has to conquer it.”

“Of course. In order to make himself the ruler of the world, man first had to conquer it.”

“Good lord,” I said—and nearly leaped up out of my chair while striking my brow and all the rest.

“Yes?”

“You hear this fifty times a day. You can turn on the radio or the television and hear it every hour. Man is conquering the deserts, man is conquering the oceans, man is conquering the atom, man is conquering the elements, man is conquering outer space.”

Ishmael smiled. “You didn’t believe me when I said that this story is ambient in your culture. Now you see what I mean. The mythology of your culture hums in your ears so constantly that no one pays the slightest bit of attention to it. Of course man is conquering space and the atom and the deserts and the oceans and the elements. According to your mythology, this is what he was *born* to do.”

“Yes. That’s very clear now.”

5

“Now the first two parts of the story have come together: The world was made for man, and man was made to conquer and rule it. And how does the second part contribute to your explanation of *how things came to be this way?*”

“Let me think about that. . . . Once again this is a sort of sneaky way of blaming the gods. They made the world for man, and they made man to conquer and rule it—which he eventually did. And this is how things came to be the way they are.”

“Nail it down. Go a little deeper.”

I closed my eyes and gave it a couple of minutes, but nothing came.

Ishmael nodded toward the windows. “All this—all your triumphs and tragedies, all your marvels and miseries—are a direct result of . . . what?”

I chewed on it for a while, but I still couldn’t see what he was getting at.

“Try it this way,” Ishmael said. “Things wouldn’t be the way they are if the gods had meant man to live like a lion or a wombat, would they?”

“No.”

“Man’s destiny was to conquer and rule the world. So things came to be this way as a direct result of . . . ?”

“Of man fulfilling his destiny.”

“Of course. And he *had* to fulfill his destiny, didn’t he?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“So what is there to get excited about?”

“Very true, very true.”

“As the Takers see it, all this is simply the price of becoming human.”

“How do you mean?”

“It wasn’t possible to become fully human living beside the dragons in the slime, was it?”

“No.”

“In order to become fully human, man had to pull himself out of the slime. And all this is the result. As the Takers see it, the gods gave man the same choice they gave Achilles: a brief life of glory or a long, uneventful life in obscurity. And the Takers chose a brief life of glory.”

“Yes, that’s certainly how it’s understood. People just shrug and say, ‘Well, this is the price that had to be paid for indoor plumbing and central heating and air conditioning and automobiles and all the rest.’ ” I gave him a quizzical look. “And what are *you* saying?”

“I’m saying that the price you’ve paid is not the price of becoming human. It’s not even the price of having the things you just mentioned. It’s the price of enacting a story that casts mankind as the enemy of the world.”

FIVE

“We have the beginning and middle of the story together,” Ishmael said when we started the next day. “Man is finally beginning to fulfill his destiny. The conquest of the world is under way. And how does the story end?”

“I guess I should have kept on going yesterday. I’ve sort of lost the thread.”

“Perhaps it would help to listen to the way the second part ends.”

“Good idea.” I rewound a minute or so of tape and let it play: “Man was at last free of all those restraints that. . . . The limitations of the hunting–gathering life had kept man in check for three million years. With agriculture, those limitations vanished, and his rise was meteoric. Settlement gave rise to division of labor. Division of labor gave rise to technology. With the rise of technology came trade and commerce. With trade and commerce came mathematics and literacy and science, and all the rest. The whole thing was under way at last, and the rest, as they say, is history.”

“Right,” I said. “Okay. Man’s destiny was to conquer and rule the world, and this is what he’s done—almost. He hasn’t quite made it, and it looks as though this may be his undoing. The problem is that man’s conquest of the world has itself devastated the world. And in spite of all the mastery we’ve attained, we don’t have enough mastery to *stop* devastating the world—or to repair the devastation we’ve already wrought. We’ve poured our poisons into the world as though it were a bottomless pit—and we *go on* pouring our poisons into the world. We’ve gobbled up irreplaceable resources as though they could never run out—and we *go on* gobbling them up. It’s hard to imagine how the world could survive another century of this abuse, but nobody’s really doing anything about it. It’s a problem our children will have to solve, or their children.

“Only one thing can save us. We have to *increase* our mastery of the world. All this damage has come about through our conquest of the world, but we have to *go on* conquering it until our rule is *absolute*. Then, when we’re in *complete* control, everything will be fine. We’ll have fusion power. No pollution. We’ll turn the rain on and off. We’ll grow a bushel of wheat in a square centimeter. We’ll turn the oceans into farms. We’ll control the weather—no more hurricanes, no more tornadoes, no more droughts, no more untimely frosts. We’ll make the clouds release their water over the land instead of dumping it uselessly into the oceans. All the life processes of this planet will be where they belong—where the gods meant them to be—in our hands. And we’ll manipulate them the way a programmer manipulates a computer.

“And that’s where it stands right now. We have to carry the conquest forward. And carrying it forward is either going to destroy the world or turn it into a paradise—into the paradise it was meant to be under human rule.

“And if we manage to do this—if we finally manage to make ourselves the absolute rulers of the world—then nothing can stop us. Then we move into the *Star Trek* era. Man moves out into space to conquer and rule the entire universe. And that may be the ultimate destiny of man: to conquer and rule the entire universe. That’s how wonderful man is.”

To my astonishment, Ishmael picked up a wand from his pile and waved it at me in an enthusiastic gesture of approval. “Once again, that was excellent,” he said, neatly biting off its leafy head.

“But you realize, of course, that if you’d been telling this part of the story a hundred years ago—or even fifty years ago—you would have spoken only of the paradise to come. The idea that man’s conquest of the world could be anything but beneficial would have been unthinkable to you. Until the last three or four decades, the people of your culture had no doubt that things were just going to go on getting better and better and better forever. There was no conceivable end in sight.”

“Yes, that’s so.”

“There is, however, one element of the story that you’ve left out, and we need it to complete your culture’s explanation of *how things came to be this way*.”

“What element is that?”

“I think you can figure it out. So far we have this much: *The world was made for man to conquer and rule, and under human rule it was meant to become a paradise*. This clearly has to be followed by a ‘but.’ It has *always* been followed by a ‘but.’ This is because the Takers have always perceived that the world was far short of the paradise it was meant to be.”

“True. Let me see . . . How’s this: The world was made for man to conquer and rule, but his conquest turned out to be more destructive than was anticipated.”

“You’re not listening. The ‘but’ was part of the story long before your conquest became globally destructive. The ‘but’ was there to explain all the flaws in your paradise—warfare and brutality and poverty and injustice and corruption and tyranny. It’s still there today to explain famine and oppression and nuclear proliferation and pollution. It explained World War II, and if it ever has to, it will explain World War III.”

I looked at him blankly.

“This is a commonplace. Any third-grader could supply it.”

“I’m sure you’re right, but I don’t see it yet.”

“Come, think. What went wrong here? What has *always* gone wrong here? Under human rule, the world should have become a paradise, but . . .”

“But people screwed it up.”

“Of course. And why did they screw it up?”

“Why?”

“Did they screw it up because they didn’t *want* a paradise?”

“No. The way it’s seen is . . . they were *bound* to screw it up. They wanted to turn the world into a paradise, but, being human, they were bound to screw it up.”

“But why? Why, being human, were they bound to screw it up?”

“It’s because there’s something fundamentally *wrong* with humans. Something that definitely works against paradise. Something that makes people stupid and destructive and greedy and shortsighted.”

“Of course. Everyone in your culture knows this. Man was born to turn the world into a paradise, but tragically he was born flawed. And so his paradise has always been spoiled by stupidity, greed, destructiveness, and shortsightedness.”

“That’s right.”

3

Having second thoughts, I gave him a long incredulous stare. “Are you suggesting that this explanation is *false*?”

Ishmael shook his head. “It’s pointless to argue with mythology. Once upon a time, the people of your culture believed that man’s home was the center of the universe. Man was the reason the universe had been created in the first place, so it made sense that his home should be its capital. The followers of Copernicus didn’t argue with this. They didn’t point at people and say, ‘You’re wrong.’ They pointed at the heavens and said, ‘Look at what’s actually *there*.’ ”

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at.”

“How did the Takers come to the conclusion that there’s something fundamentally wrong with humans? What evidence were they looking at?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think you’re being purposely dense. They were looking at the evidence of human history.”

“True.”

“And when did human history begin?”

“Well . . . three million years ago.”

Ishmael gave me a disgusted look. “Those three million years were only very recently tacked onto human history, as you very well know. Before that, it was universally assumed that human history began when?”

“Well, just a few thousand years ago.”

“Of course. In fact, among the people of your culture, it was assumed that the whole of human history was *your* history. No one had the slightest suspicion that human life extended beyond your reign.”

“That’s so.”

“So when the people of your culture concluded that there’s something fundamentally wrong with humans, what evidence were they looking at?”

“They were looking at the evidence of their own history.”

“Exactly. They were looking at a half of one percent of the evidence, taken from a single culture. Not a reasonable sample on which to base such a sweeping conclusion.”

“No.”

“There’s nothing fundamentally wrong with people. Given a story to enact that puts them in accord with the world, they will live in accord with the world. But given a story to enact that puts them at odds with the world, as yours does, they will live at odds with the world. Given a story to enact in which they are the lords of the world, they will *act* like lords of the world. And, given a story to enact in which the world is a foe to be conquered, they will conquer it like a foe, and one day, inevitably, their foe will lie bleeding to death at their feet, as the world is now.”

4

“A few days ago,” Ishmael said, “I described your explanation of *how things came to be this way* as a mosaic. What we’ve looked at so far is only the cartoon of the mosaic—the general outline of the picture. We’re not going to fill in the cartoon here. That’s something you can easily do for yourself when we’re finished.”

“Okay.”

“However, one major element of the cartoon remains to be sketched in before we go on. . . . One of the most striking features of Taker culture is its passionate and unwavering dependence on prophets. The influence of people like Moses, Gautama Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, and Muhammad in Taker history is simply enormous. I’m sure you’re aware of that.”

“Yes.”

“What makes it so striking is the fact that there is absolutely nothing like this among the Leavers—unless it occurs as a response to some devastating contact with Taker culture, as in the case of Wovoka and the Ghost Dance or John Frumm and the Cargo Cults of the South Pacific. Aside from these, there is no tradition whatever of prophets rising up among the Leavers to straighten out their lives and give them new sets of laws or principles to live by.”

“I was sort of vaguely aware of that. I suppose everyone is. I think it’s . . . I don’t know.”

“Go on.”

“I think the feeling is, what the hell, who cares about these people? I mean, it’s no great surprise that savages have no prophets. God didn’t really get interested in mankind until those nice white neolithic farmers came along.”

“Yes, that’s well perceived. But what I want to look at right now is not the absence of prophets among the Leavers but the enormous influence of prophets among the Takers. Millions have been willing to back their choice of prophet with their very lives. What makes them so important?”

“It’s a hell of a good question, but I don’t think I know the answer.”

“All right, try this. What were the prophets trying to accomplish here? What were they here to do?”

“You said it yourself a minute ago. They were here to straighten us out and tell us how we ought to live.”

“Vital information. Worth dying for, evidently.”

“Evidently.”

“But why? Why do you need *prophets* to tell you how you ought to live? Why do you need *anyone* to tell you how you ought to live?”

“Ah. Okay, I see what you’re getting at. We need prophets to tell us how we ought to live, because otherwise we wouldn’t know.”

“Of course. Questions about how people ought to live always end up becoming religious questions among the Takers—always end up being arguments among the prophets. For example, when abortion began to be legalized in this country, it was initially treated as a purely civil matter. But when people began to have second thoughts about it, they turned to their prophets, and it soon became a religious squabble, with both sides lining up clergy to back them. In the same way, the question of legalizing drugs like heroin and cocaine is now being debated in primarily practical terms—but if it ever becomes a serious possibility, people of a certain turn of mind will undoubtedly begin combing scriptures to see what their prophets have to say on the subject.”

“Yes, that’s so. This is such an automatic response that people just take it for granted.”

“A minute ago you said, ‘We need prophets to tell us how we ought to live, because otherwise we wouldn’t know.’ Why is that? Why wouldn’t you know how to live without your prophets?”

“That’s a good question. I’d say it’s because . . . Look at the case of abortion. We can *argue about it* for a thousand years, but there’s never going to be an argument powerful enough to *end* the argument, because every argument has a counterargument. So it’s impossible to *know* what we should do. That’s why we need the prophet. The prophet *knows*.”

“Yes, I think that’s it. But the question remains: Why don’t *you* know?”

“I think the question remains because I can’t answer it.”

“You know how to split atoms, how to send explorers to the moon, how to splice genes, but you don’t know how people ought to live.”

“That’s right.”

“Why is that? What does Mother Culture have to say?”

“Ah,” I said, and closed my eyes. And after a minute or two: “Mother Culture says it’s possible to have *certain* knowledge about things like atoms and space travel and genes, but there’s no such thing as certain knowledge about how people should live. It’s just not available, and that’s why we don’t have it.”

“I see. And having listened to Mother Culture, what do *you* say?”

“In this case, I have to say that I agree. Certain knowledge about how people ought to live is just not *out there*.”

“In other words, the best you can do—since there’s nothing ‘out there’—is to consult the insides of your heads. That’s what’s being done in the debate about legalizing drugs. Each side is preparing a case based on what’s *reasonable*, and whichever way you actually jump you still won’t know whether you did the right thing.”

“That’s absolutely right. It won’t be a question of doing what ought to be done, because there’s no way of finding that out. It’ll just be a question of taking a vote.”

“You’re quite sure about all this. There’s simply no way to obtain any certain knowledge about how people ought to live.”

“Absolutely sure.”

“How do you come by this assurance?”

“I don’t know. Certain knowledge about how to live is . . . unobtainable in any of the ways we derive certain knowledge. As I say, it’s just not *out there*.”

“Have any of you ever *looked* out there?”

I snickered.

“Has anyone ever said, ‘Well, we have certain knowledge about all these other things, why don’t we see if any such knowledge can be found about how to live?’ Has anyone ever done that?”

“I doubt it.”

“Doesn’t that seem strange to you? Considering the fact that this is by far the most important problem mankind has to solve—has ever had to solve—you’d think there would be a whole branch of science devoted to it. Instead, we find that not a single one of you has ever wondered whether any such knowledge is even out there to be obtained.”

“We know it’s not there.”

“In advance of looking, you mean.”

“That’s right.”

“Not a very scientific procedure for such a scientific people.”

“True.”

5

“We now know two highly important things about people,” Ishmael said, “at least according to Taker mythology. One, there’s something fundamentally wrong with them, and, two, they have no certain knowledge about how they ought to live—and never will have any. It seems as though there should be a connection between these two things.”

“Yes. If people knew how to live, then they’d be able to handle what was wrong with human nature. I mean, knowing how to live would have to include knowing how to live as flawed beings. If it didn’t, then it wouldn’t be the real McCoy. Do you see what I mean?”

“I think so. In effect, you’re saying that if you knew how you ought to live, then the flaw in man could be controlled. If you knew how you ought to live, you wouldn’t be forever screwing up the world. Perhaps in fact the two things are actually one thing. Perhaps the flaw in man is exactly this: that he doesn’t know how he ought to live.”

“Yes, there’s something to that.”

6

“We now have in place all the major elements of your culture’s explanation of *how things came to be this way*. The world was given to man to turn into a paradise, but he’s always screwed it up, because he’s fundamentally flawed. He might be able to do something about this if he knew how he ought to live, but he doesn’t—and he never will, because no knowledge about that is obtainable. So, however hard man might labor to turn the world into a paradise, he’s probably just going to go on screwing it up.”

“Yes, that’s the way it seems.”

“It’s a sorry story you have there, a story of hopelessness and futility, a story in which there is literally *nothing to be done*. Man is flawed, so he keeps on screwing up what should be paradise, and there’s nothing you can do about it. You don’t know how to live so as to *stop* screwing up paradise, and there’s nothing you can do about that. So there you are, rushing headlong toward catastrophe, and all you can do is watch it come.”

“Yes, that’s the way it seems.”

“With nothing but this wretched story to enact, it’s no wonder so many of you spend your lives stoned on drugs or booze or television. It’s no wonder so many of you go mad or become suicidal.”

“True. But is there another one?”

“Another what?”

“Another story to be in.”

“Yes, there is another story to be in, but the Takers are doing their level best to destroy that along with everything else.”

7

“Have you done much sightseeing in your travels?”

I blinked at him stupidly. “Sightseeing?”

“Have you gone out of your way to have a look at the local sights?”

“I guess so. Sometimes.”

“I’m sure you’ve noticed that *only* tourists really look at local landmarks. For all practical purposes, these landmarks are invisible to the natives, simply because they’re always there in plain sight.”

“Yes, that’s so.”

“This is what we’ve been doing in our journey so far. We’ve been wandering around your cultural homeland looking at the landmarks the natives never see. A visitor from another planet would find them remarkable, even extraordinary, but the natives of your culture take them for granted and don’t even notice them.”

“That’s right. You’ve had to clamp my head between your hands and point it in one direction and say, ‘Don’t you *see* that?’ And I’d say, ‘See what? There’s nothing there to see.’ ”

“We’ve spent a lot of today looking at one of your most impressive monuments—an axiom stating that there is no way to obtain any certain knowledge about how people ought to live. Mother

Culture offers this for acceptance on its own merits, without proof, since it is inherently unprovable.”

“True.”

“And the conclusion you draw from this axiom is . . . ?”

“Therefore there’s no point in looking for such knowledge.”

“That’s right. According to your maps, the world of thought is coterminous with your culture. It ends at the border of your culture, and if you venture beyond that border, you simply fall off the edge of the world. Do you see what I mean?”

“I think so.”

“Tomorrow we’ll screw up our courage and cross that border. And as you’ll see, we will not fall off the edge of the world. We’ll just find ourselves in new territory, in territory never explored by anyone in your culture, because your maps say it isn’t there—and indeed *can’t* be there.”

SIX

1

“And how are you feeling today?” Ishmael asked. “Palms sweating? Heart going pit-a-pat?”

I gazed at him thoughtfully through the glass that separated us. This twinkle-eyed playfulness was something new, and I wasn’t sure I liked it. I was tempted to remind him that he was a *gorilla*, for God’s sake, but I held it in and muttered:

“Relatively calm, so far.”

“Good. Like the Second Murderer, you are one whom the vile blows and buffets of the world have so incens’d that you are reckless what you do to spite the world.”

“Absolutely.”

“Then let’s begin. We confront a wall at the boundary of thought in your culture. Yesterday I called it a monument, but I suppose there’s nothing to prevent a wall from being a monument as well. In any case, this wall is an axiom stating that certain knowledge about how people should live is unobtainable. I reject this axiom and climb over the wall. We don’t need prophets to tell us how to live; we can find out for ourselves by consulting *what’s actually there*.”

There was nothing to say to that, so I just shrugged.