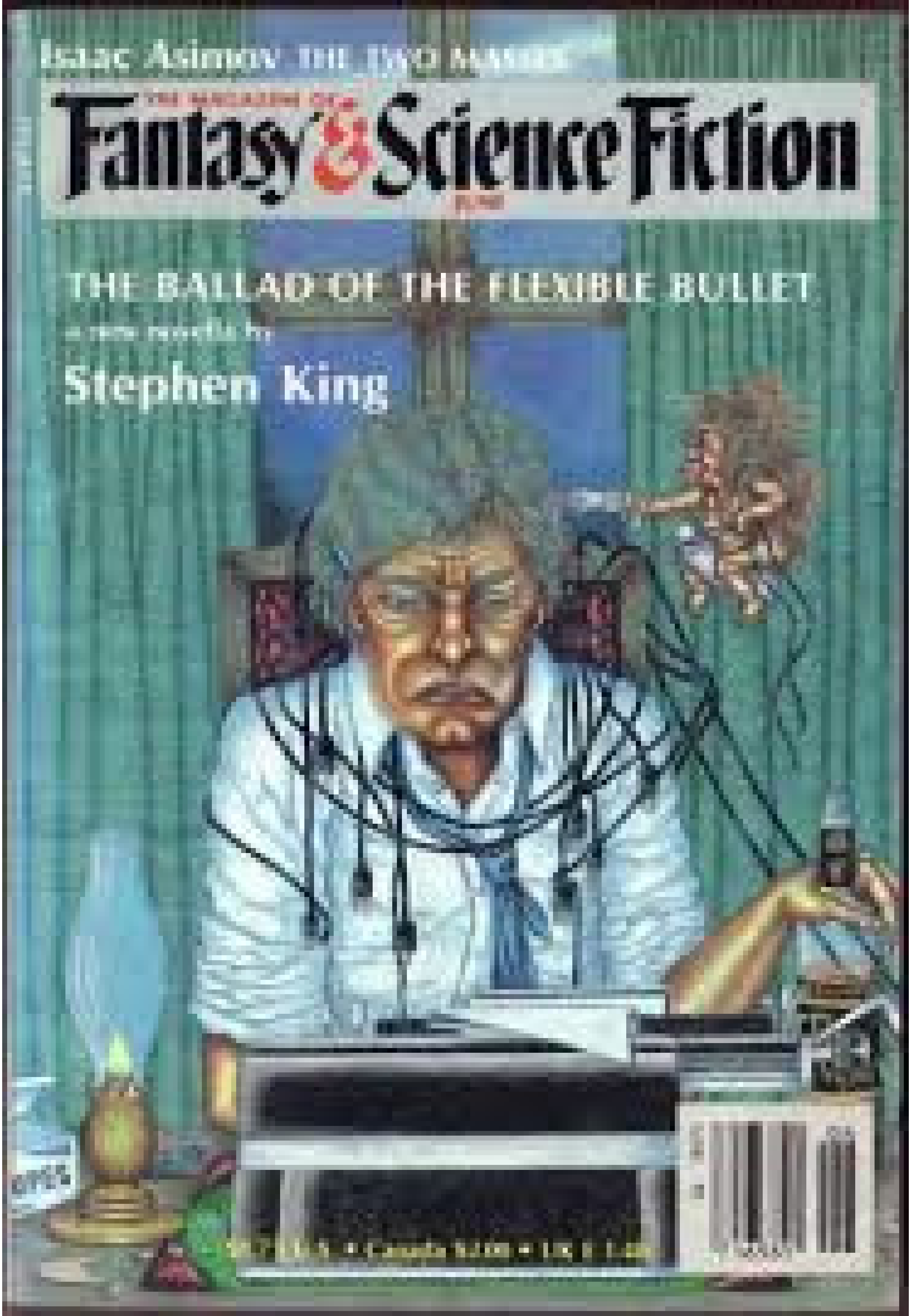
Isaac Asimov
Fantasy & Science Fiction
THE BALLAD OF THE FLEXIBLE BULLET
a new novella by
Stephen King

THE BALLAD OF THE FLEXIBLE BULLET

Stephen King

The barbecue was over. It had been a good one; drinks, charcoaled T-bones, rare, a green salad and Meg's special dressing. They had started at five. Now it was eight-thirty and almost dusk—the time when a big party is just starting to get rowdy. But they weren't a big party. There were just the five of them: the agent and his wife, the celebrated young writer and his wife, and the magazine editor, who was in his early sixties and looked older. The editor stuck to Fresca. The agent had told the young writer before the editor arrived that there had once been a drinking problem there. It was gone now, and so was the editor's wife … which was why they were five instead of six.

Instead of getting rowdy, an introspective mood fell over them as it started to get dark in the young writer's backyard, which fronted the lake. The young writer's first novel had been well reviewed and had sold a lot of copies. He was a lucky young man, and to his credit he knew it.

The conversation had turned with playful gruesomeness from the young writer's early success to other writers who had made their marks early and had then committed suicide. Ross Lockridge was touched upon, and Tom Hagen. The agent's wife mentioned Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, and the young writer said that he didn't think Plath qualified as a successful writer. She had not committed suicide because of success, he said; she had gained success because she had committed suicide. The agent smiled.

"Please, couldn't we talk about something else?" the young writer's wife asked, a little nervously.

Ignoring her, the agent said, "And madness. There have been those who have gone mad because of success." The agent had the mild but nonetheless rolling tones of an actor offstage.

The writer's wife was about to protest again—she knew that her husband not only liked to talk about these things so he could joke about them, and he wanted to joke about them because he thought

about them too much—when the magazine editor spoke up. What he said was so odd she forgot to protest.

“Madness is a flexible bullet.”

The agent’s wife looked startled. The young writer leaned forward quizzically. He said, “That sounds familiar—”

“Sure,” the editor said. “That phrase, the image, ‘flexible bullet,’ is Marianne Moore’s. She used it to describe some car or other. I’ve always thought it described the condition of madness very well. Madness is a kind of mental suicide. Don’t the doctors say now that the only way to truly measure death is by the death of the mind? Madness is a kind of flexible bullet to the brain.”

The young writer’s wife hopped up. “Anybody want another drink?” She had no takers.

“Well, I do, if we’re going to talk about this,” she said, and went off to make herself one.

The editor said: “I had a story submitted to me once, when I was working over at Logan’s. Of course it’s gone the way of Collier’s and The Saturday Evening Post now, but we outlasted both of them.” He said this with a trace of pride. “We published thirty-six short stories a year, or more, and every year four or five of them would be in somebody’s collection of the year’s best. And people read them. Anyway, the name of this story was ‘The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet,’ and it was written by a man named Reg Thorpe. A young man about this young man’s age, and about as successful. “

“He wrote Underworld Figures, didn’t he?” the agent’s wife asked.

“Yes. Amazing track record for a first novel. Great reviews, lovely sales in hardcover and paperback, Literary Guild, everything. Even the movie was pretty good, although not as good as the book. Nowhere near.”

“I loved that book,” the author’s wife said, lured back into the conversation against her better judgment. She had the surprised, pleased look of someone who has just recalled something which has been out of mind for too long. “Has he written anything since then? I read Underworld Figures back in college and that was … well, too long ago to think about.”

“You haven’t aged a day since then,” the agent’s wife said warmly, although privately she thought the young writer’s wife was wearing a too-small halter and a too-tight pair of shorts.

“No, he hasn’t written anything since then,” the editor said. “Except for this one short story I was telling you about. He killed himself. Went crazy and killed himself.”

“Oh,” the young writer’s wife said limply. Back to that.

“Was the short story published?” the young writer asked.

“No, but not because the author went crazy and killed himself. It never got into print because the editor went crazy and almost killed himself.”

The agent suddenly got up to freshen his own drink, which hardly need freshening. He knew that the editor had had a nervous breakdown in the summer of 1969, not long before Logan’s had drowned in a sea of red ink.

“I was the editor,” the editor informed the rest of them. “In a sense we went crazy together, Reg Thorpe and I, even though I was in New York, he was out in Omaha, and we never even met. His book had been out about six months and he had moved out there ‘to get his head together,’ as the phrase was then. And I happen to know this side of the story because I see his wife occasionally when she’s in New York. She paints, and quite well. She’s a lucky girl. He almost took her with him.”

The agent came back and sat down. “I’m starting to remember some of this now,” he said. “It wasn’t just his wife, was it? He shot a couple of other people, one of them a kid.”

“That’s right,” the editor said. “It was the kid that finally set him off.”

“The kid set him off?” the agent’s wife asked. “What do you mean?”

But the editor’s face said he would not be drawn; he would talk, but not be questioned.

“I know my side of the story because I lived it,” the magazine editor said. “I’m lucky, too. Damned lucky. It’s an interesting thing about those who try to kill themselves by pointing a gun at their heads and pulling the trigger. You’d think it would be the foolproof method, better than pills or slashing the wrists, but it isn’t. When you shoot yourself in the head, you just can’t tell what’s going to happen. The slug may ricochet off the skull and kill someone else. It may follow the skull’s curve all the way around and come out on the other side. It may lodge in the brain and blind you and leave you alive. One man may shoot himself in the forehead with a .38 and wake up in the hospital. Another may shoot himself in the forehead with a .22 and wake up in hell … if there is such a place. I tend to believe it’s here on earth, possibly in New Jersey.”

The writer’s wife laughed rather shrilly.

“The only foolproof suicide method is to step off a very high building, and that’s a way out that only the extraordinarily dedicated ever take. So damned messy, isn’t it?

“But my point is simply this: When you shoot yourself with a flexible bullet, you really don’t know what the outcome is going to be. In my case, I went off a bridge and woke up on a trash-littered embankment with a trucker whapping me on the back and pumping my arms up and down like he had only twenty-four hours to get in shape and he had mistaken me for a rowing machine. For Reg, the

bullet was lethal. He … But I'm telling you a story I have no idea if you want to hear."

He looked around at them questioningly in the gathering gloom. The agent and the agent's wife glanced at each other uncertainly, and the writer's wife was about to say she thought they'd had enough gloomy talk when her husband said, "I'd like to hear it. If you don't mind telling it for personal reasons, I mean."

"I never have told it," the editor said, "but not for personal reasons. Perhaps I never had the correct listeners."

"Then tell away," the writer said.

"Paul—" His wife put her hand on his shoulder. "Don't you think—"

"Not now, Meg."

The editor said:

"The story came in over the transom, and at that time Logan's no longer read unsolicited scripts. When they came in, a girl would just put them into return envelopes with a note that said 'Due to increasing costs and the increasing inability of the editorial staff to cope with a steadily increasing number of submissions, Logan's no longer reads unsolicited manuscripts. We wish you the best of luck in placing your work elsewhere.' Isn't that a lovely bunch of gobbledegook? It's not easy to use the word 'increasing' three times in one sentence, but they did it."

"And if there was no return postage, the story went into the wastebasket," the writer said. "Right?"

"Oh, absolutely. No pity in the naked city."

An odd expression of unease flitted across the writer's face. It was the expression of a man who is in a tiger pit where dozens of better men have been clawed to pieces. So far this man hasn't seen a

single tiger. But he has a feeling that they are there, and that their claws are still sharp.

“Anyway,” the editor said, taking out his cigarette case, “this story came in, and the girl in the mailroom took it out, paper-clipped the form rejection to the first page, and was getting ready to put it in the return envelope when she glanced at the author’s name. Well, she had read Underworld Figures. That fall, everybody had read it, or was reading it, or was on the library waiting list, or checking the drugstore racks for the paperback. “

The writer’s wife, who had seen the momentary unease on her husband’s face, took his hand. He smiled at her. The editor snapped a gold Ronson to his cigarette, and in the growing dark they could all see how haggard his face was—the loose, crocodile-skinned pouches under the eyes, the runneled cheeks, the old man’s jut of chin emerging out of that late-middle-aged face like the prow of a ship. That ship, the writer thought, is called old age. No one particularly wants to cruise on it, but the staterooms are full. The gangholds too, for that matter.

The lighter winked out, and the editor puffed his cigarette meditatively.

“The girl in the mailroom who read that story and passed it on instead of sending it back is now a full editor at G. P. Putnam’s Sons. Her name doesn’t matter; what matters is that on the great graph of life, this girl’s vector crossed Reg Thorpe’s in the mailroom of Logan’s magazine. Hers was going up and his was going down. She sent the story to her boss and her boss sent it to me. I read it and loved it. It was really too long, but I could see where he could pare five hundred words off it with no sweat. And that would be plenty.”

“What was it about?” the writer asked.

“You shouldn’t even have to ask,” the editor said. “It fits so beautifully into the total context.”

“About going crazy?”

“Yes, indeed. What’s the first thing they teach you in your first college creative-writing course? Write about what you know. Reg Thorpe knew about going crazy, because he was engaged in going there. The story probably appealed to me because I was also going there. Now you could say—if you were an editor—that the one thing the American reading public doesn’t need foisted on them is another story about Going Mad Stylishly in America, subtopic A, Nobody Talks to Each Other Anymore. A popular theme in twentieth-century literature. All the greats have taken a hack at it and all the hacks have taken an ax to it. But this story was funny. I mean, it was really hilarious.

“I hadn’t read anything like it before and I haven’t since. The closest would be some of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s stories … and Gatsby. The fellow in Thorpe’s story was going crazy, but he was doing it in a very funny way. You kept grinning, and there were a couple of places in this story—the place where the hero dumps the lime Jell-O on the fat girl’s head is the best—where you laugh right out loud. But they’re jittery laughs, you know. You laugh and then you want to look over your shoulder to see what heard you. The opposing lines of tension in that story were really extraordinary. The more you laughed, the more nervous you got. And the more nervous you got, the more you laughed … right up to the point where the hero goes home from the party given in his honor and kills his wife and baby daughter.”
“What’s the plot?” the agent asked.

“No,” the editor said, “that doesn’t matter. It was just a story about a young man gradually losing his struggle to cope with success. It’s better left vague. A detailed plot synopsis would only be boring. They always are.

“Anyway, I wrote him a letter. It said this: ‘Dear Reg Thorpe, I’ve just read “The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet” and I think it’s great. I’d like to publish it in Logan’s early next year, if that fits. Does $800 sound okay? Payment on acceptance. More or less.’ New paragraph.”

The editor indented the evening air with his cigarette.

” ‘The story runs a little long, and I’d like you to shorten it by about five hundred words, if you could. I would settle for a two-hundred-word cut, if it comes to that. We can always drop a cartoon.’ Paragraph. ‘Call, if you want.’ My signature. And off the letter went, to Omaha.”

“And you remember it, word for word like that?” the writer’s wife asked.

“I kept all the correspondence in a special file,” the editor said. “His letters, carbons of mine back. There was quite a stack of it by the end, including three or four pieces of correspondence from Jane Thorpe, his wife. I’ve read the file over quite often. No good, of course. Trying to understand the flexible bullet is like trying to understand how a Mobius strip can have only one side. That’s just the way things are in this best-of-all-possible worlds. Yes, I know it all word for word, or almost. Some people have the Declaration of Independence by heart.”

“Bet he called you the next day,” the agent said, grinning. “Collect. “

“No, he didn’t call. Shortly after Underworld Figures, Thorpe stopped using the telephone altogether. His wife told me that. When they moved to Omaha from New York, they didn’t even have a phone put in the new house. He had decided, you see, that the telephone system didn’t really run on electricity but on radium. He thought it was one of the two or three best-kept secrets in the history of the modern world. He claimed—to his wife—that all the radium was responsible for the growing cancer rate, not cigarettes or automobile emissions or industrial pollution. Each telephone had a small radium crystal in the handset, and every time you used the phone, you shot your head full of radiation.”

“Yuh, he was crazy,” the writer said, and they all laughed.

“He wrote instead,” the editor said, flicking his cigarette in the direction of the lake. “His letter said this: ‘Dear Henry Wilson (or just Henry, if I may), Your letter was both exciting and gratifying. My wife was, if anything, more pleased than I. The money is fine … although in all honesty I must say that the idea of being published in Logan’s at all seems like more than adequate compensation (but I’ll take it, I’ll take it). I’ve looked over your cuts, and they seem fine. I think they’ll improve the story as well as clear space for those cartoons. All best wishes, Reg Thorpe.”

“Under his signature was a funny little drawing … more like a doodle. An eye in a pyramid, like the one on the back of the dollar bill. But instead of Novus Ordo Seclorum on the banner beneath, there were these words: Fornit Some Fornus.”

“Either Latin or Groucho Marx,” the agent’s wife said.

“Just part of Reg Thorpe’s growing eccentricity,” the editor said. “His wife told me that Reg had come to believe in ‘little people,’ sort of like elves or fairies. The Fornits. They were luck-elves, and he thought one of them lived in his typewriter. “

“Oh my Lord,” the writer’s wife said.

“According to Thorpe, each Fornit has a small device, like a flitgun, full of … good-luck dust, I guess you’d call it. And the good-luck dust —”

“—is called fornus,” the writer finished. He was grinning broadly.

“Yes. And his wife thought it quite funny, too. At first. In fact, she thought at first—Thorpe had conceived the Fornits two years before, while he was drafting Underworld Figures—that it was just Reg, having her on. And maybe at first he was. It seems to have progressed from a whimsy to a superstition to an outright belief. It was … a flexible fantasy. But hard in the end. Very hard.”

They were all silent. The grins had faded.

“The Fornits had their funny side,” the editor said. “Thorpe’s typewriter started going to the shop a lot near the end of their stay in New York, and it was even a more frequent thing when they moved to Omaha. He had a loaner while it was being fixed for the first time out there. The dealership manager called a few days after Reg got his own machine back to tell him he was going to send a bill for cleaning the loaner as well as Thorpe’s own machine.”

“What was the trouble?” the agent’s wife asked.

“I think I know,” the writer’s wife said.

“It was full of food,” the editor said. “Tiny bits of cake and cookies. There was peanut butter smeared on the platens of the keys themselves. Reg was feeding the Fornit in his typewriter. He also ‘fed’ the loaner, on the off chance that the Fornit had made the switch.”

“Boy,” the writer said.

“I knew none of these things then, you understand. For the nonce, I wrote back to him and told him how pleased I was. My secretary typed the letter and brought it in for my signature, and then she had to go out for something. I signed it and she wasn’t back. And then—for no real reason at all—I put the same doodle below my name. Pyramid. Eye. And ‘Fomit Some Fornus.’ Crazy. The secretary saw it and asked me if I wanted it sent out that way. I shrugged and told her to go ahead.

“Two days later Jane Thorpe called me. She told me that my letter had excited Reg a great deal. Reg thought he had found a kindred soul … someone else who knew about the Fornits. You see what a crazy situation it was getting to be? As far as I knew at that point, a Fornit could have been anything from a lefthanded monkey wrench to a Polish steak knife. Ditto fornus. I explained to Jane that I had merely copied Reg’s own design. She wanted to know why. I slipped the question, although the answer would have been because I was very drunk when I signed the letter.”

He paused, and an uncomfortable silence fell on the back lawn area. People looked at the sky, the lake, the trees, although they were no more interesting now than they had been a minute or two before.

“I had been drinking all my adult life, and it’s impossible for me to say when it began to get out of control. In the professional sense I was on top of the bottle until nearly the very end. I would begin drinking at lunch and come back to the office el blotto. I functioned perfectly well there, however. It was the drinks after work—first on the train, then at home—that pushed me over the functional point.

“My wife and I had been having problems that were unrelated to the drinking, but the drinking made the other problems worse. For a long time she had been preparing to leave, and a week before the Reg Thorpe story came in, she did it.

“I was trying to deal with that when the Thorpe story came in. I was drinking too much. And to top it all off, I was having—well, I guess now it’s fashionable to call it a mid-life crisis. All I knew at the time was that I was as depressed about my professional life as I was about my personal one. I was coming to grips—or trying to—with a growing feeling that editing mass-market stories that would end up being read by nervous dental patients, housewives at lunchtime, and an occasional bored college student was not exactly a noble occupation. I was coming to grips—again, trying to, all of us at Logan’s were at that time—with the idea that in another six months, or ten, or fourteen, there might not be any Logan’s.

“Into this dull autumnal landscape of middle-aged angst comes a very good story by a very good writer, a funny, energetic look at the mechanics of going crazy. It was like a bright ray of sun. I know it sounds strange to say that about a story that ends with the protagonist killing his wife and infant child, but you ask any editor what real joy is, and he’ll tell you it’s the great story or novel you didn’t expect, landing on your desk like a big Christmas present. Look, you all know that Shirley Jackson story, ‘The Lottery.’ It ends on one of the most downbeat notes you can imagine. I mean, they take a nice lady out and stone her to death. Her son and daughter

participate in her murder, for Christ's sake. But it was a great piece of storytelling … and I bet the editor at the New Yorker who read the story first went home that night whistling.

"What I'm trying to say is the Thorpe story was the best thing in my life right then. The one good thing. And from what his wife told me on the phone that day, my acceptance of that story was the one good thing that had happened to him lately. The author-editor relationship is always mutual parasitism, but in the case of Reg and me, that parasitism was heightened to an unnatural degree."

"Let's go back to Jane Thorpe," the writer's wife said.

"Yes, I did sort of leave her on a side-track, didn't I? She was angry about the Fornit business. At first. I told her I had simply doodled that eye-and-pyramid symbol under my signature, with no knowledge of what it might be, and apologized for whatever I'd done.

"She got over her anger and spilled everything to me. She'd been getting more and more anxious, and she had no one at all to talk to. Her folks were dead, and all her friends were back in New York. Reg wouldn't allow anyone at all in the house. They were tax people, he said, or FBI, or CIA. Not long after they moved to Omaha, a little girl came to the door selling Girl Scout cookies. Reg yelled at her, told her to get the hell out, he knew why she was there, and so on. Jane tried to reason with him. She pointed out that the girl had only been ten years old. Reg told her that the tax people had no souls, no consciences. And besides, he said, the little girl might have been an android. Androids wouldn't be subject to the child-labor laws. He wouldn't put it past the tax people to send an android Girl Scout full of radium crystals to find out if he was keeping any secrets … and to shoot him full of cancer rays in the meantime."

"Good Lord," the agent's wife said.

"She'd been waiting for a friendly voice and mine was the first. I got the Girl Scout story, I found out about the care and feeding of Fornits, about fornus, about how Reg refused to use a telephone.

She was talking to me from a pay booth in a drugstore five blocks over. She told me that she was afraid it wasn't really tax men or FBI or CIA Reg was worried about. She thought he was really afraid that They—some hulking, anonymous group that hated Reg, was jealous of Reg, would stop at nothing to get Reg—had found out about his Fornit and wanted to kill it. If the Fornit was dead, there would be no more novels, no more short stories, nothing. You see? The essence of insanity. They were out to get him. In the end, not even the IRS, which had given him the very devil of a time over the income Underworld Figures generated, would serve as the boogeyman. In the end it was just They. The perfect paranoid fantasy. They wanted to kill his Fornit."

"My God, what did you say to her?" the agent asked.

"I tried to reassure her," the editor said. "There I was, freshly returned from a five-martini lunch, talking to this terrified woman who was standing in a drugstore phone booth in Omaha, trying to tell her it was all right, not to worry that her husband believed that the phones were full of radium crystals, that a bunch of anonymous people were sending android Girl Scouts to get the goods on him, not to worry that her husband had disconnected his talent from his mentality to such a degree that he could believe there was an elf living in his typewriter.

"I don't believe I was very convincing.

"She asked me—no, begged me—to work with Reg on his story, to see that it got published. She did everything but come out and say that 'The Flexible Bullet' was Reg's last contact to what we laughingly call reality.

"I asked her what I should do if Reg mentioned Fornits again. 'Humor him,' she said. Her exact words—humor him. And then she hung up.

"There was a letter in the mail from Reg the next day—five pages, typed, single-spaced. The first paragraph was about the story. The second draft was getting on well, he said. He thought he would be

able to shave seven hundred words from the original ten thousand five hundred, bringing the final down to a tight nine thousand eight.

“The rest of the letter was about Fornits and fornus. His own observations, and questions … dozens of questions.”

“Observations?” The writer leaned forward. “He was actually seeing them, then?”

“No,” the editor said. “Not seeing them in an actual sense, but in another way … I suppose he was. You know, astronomers knew Pluto was there long before they had a telescope powerful enough to see it. They knew all about it by studying the planet Neptune’s orbit. Reg was observing the Fornits in that way. They liked to eat at night, he said, had I noticed that? He fed them at all hours of the day, but he noticed that most of it disappeared after eight P.M.”

“Hallucination?” the writer asked.

“No,” the editor said. “His wife simply cleared as much of the food out of the typewriter as she could when Reg went out for his evening walk. And he went out every evening at nine o’clock.”

“I’d say she had quite a nerve getting after you,” the agent grunted. He shifted his large bulk in the lawn chair. “She was feeding the man’s fantasy herself.”

“You don’t understand why she called and why she was so upset,” the editor said quietly. He looked at the writer’s wife. “But I’ll bet you do, Meg.”

“Maybe,” she said, and gave her husband an uncomfortable sideways look. “She wasn’t mad because you were feeding his fantasy. She was afraid you might upset it.”

“Bravo.” The editor lit a fresh cigarette. “And she removed the food for the same reason. If the food continued to accumulate in the typewriter, Reg would make the logical assumption, proceeding

directly from his own decidedly illogical premise. Namely, that his Fornit had either died or left. Hence, no more fornus. Hence, no more writing. Hence …”

The editor let the word drift away on cigarette smoke and then resumed:

“He thought that Fornits were probably nocturnal. They didn’t like loud noises—he had noticed that he hadn’t been able to write on mornings after noisy parties—they hated the TV, they hated free electricity, they hated radium. Reg had sold their TV to Goodwill for twenty dollars, he said, and his wristwatch with the radium dial was long gone. Then the questions. How did I know about Fornits? Was it possible that I had one in residence? If so, what did I think about this, this, and that? I don’t need to be more specific, I think. If you’ve ever gotten a dog of a particular breed and can recollect the questions you asked about its care and feeding, you’ll know most of the questions Reg asked me. One little doodle below my signature was all it took to open Pandora’s box.”

“What did you write back?” the agent asked.

The editor said slowly, “That’s where the trouble really began. For both of us. Jane had said, ‘Humor him,’ so that’s what I did. Unfortunately, I rather overdid it. I answered his letter at home, and I was very drunk. The apartment seemed much too empty. It had a stale smell—cigarette smoke, not enough airing. Things were going to seed with Sandra gone. The dropcloth on the couch all wrinkled. Dirty dishes in the sink, that sort of thing. The middle-aged man unprepared for domesticity.

“I sat there with a sheet of my personal stationery rolled into the typewriter and I thought: I need a Fornit. In fact, I need a dozen of them to dust this damn lonely house with fornus from end to end. In that instant I was drunk enough to envy Reg Thorpe his delusion.

“I said I had a Fornit, of course. I told Reg that mine was remarkably similar to his in its characteristics. Nocturnal. Hated loud noises, but

seemed to enjoy Bach and Brahms … I often did my best work after an evening of listening to them, I said. I had found my Fornit had a decided taste for Kirschner's bologna … had Reg ever tried it? I simply left little scraps of it near the Scripto I always carried—my editorial blue pencil, if you like—and it was almost always gone in the morning. Unless, as Reg said, it had been noisy the night before. I told him I was glad to know about radium, even though I didn't have a glow-in-the-dark wristwatch. I told him my Fornit had been with me since college. I got so carried away with my own invention that I wrote nearly six pages. At the end I added a paragraph about the story, a very perfunctory thing, and signed it." "And below your signature—?" the agent's wife asked.

"Sure. Fornit Some Fornus." He paused. "You can't see it in the dark, but I'm blushing. I was so goddammed drunk, so goddammed smug … I might have had second thoughts in the cold light of dawn, but by then it was too late."

"You'd mailed it the night before?" the writer murmured.

"So I did. And then, for a week and a half, I held my breath and waited. One day the manuscript came in, addressed to me, no covering letter. The cuts were as we had discussed them, and I thought that the story was letter-perfect, but the manuscript was … well, I put it in my briefcase, took it home, and retyped it myself. It was covered with weird yellow stains. I thought …"

"Urine?" the agent's wife asked.

"Yes, that's what I thought. But it wasn't. And when I got home, there was a letter in my mailbox from Reg. Ten pages this time. In the course of the letter the yellow stains were accounted for. He hadn't been able to find Kirschner's bologna, so had tried Jordan's.

"He said they loved it. Especially with mustard.

"I had been quite sober that day. But his letter combined with those pitiful mustard stains ground right into the pages of his manuscript

sent me directly to the liquor cabinet. Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars. Go directly to drunk. “

“What else did the letter say?” the agent’s wife asked. She had grown more and more fascinated with the tale, and was now leaning over her not inconsiderable belly in a posture that reminded the writer’s wife of Snoopy standing on his doghouse and pretending to be a vulture.

“Only two lines about the story this time. All credit thrown to the Fornit … and to me. The bologna had really been a fantastic idea. Rackne loved it, and as a consequence—”

“Rackne?” the author asked.

“That was the Fornit’s name,” the editor said. “Rackne. As a consequence of the bologna, Rackne had really gotten behind in the rewrite. The rest of the letter was a paranoid chant. You have never seen such stuff in your life.”

“Reg and Rackne … a marriage made in heaven,” the writer’s wife said, and giggled nervously.

“Oh, not at all,” the editor said. “Theirs was a working relationship. And Rackne was male.”

“Well, tell us about the letter.”

“That’s one I don’t have by heart. It’s just as well for you that I don’t. Even abnormality grows tiresome after a while. The mailman was CIA. The paperboy was FBI; Reg had seen a silenced revolver in his sack of papers. The people next door were spies of some sort; they had surveillance equipment in their van. He no longer dared to go down to the corner store for supplies because the proprietor was an android. He had suspected it before, he said, but now he was sure. He had seen the wires crisscrossing under the man’s scalp, where he was beginning to go bald. And the radium count in his house was way up; at night he could see a dull, greenish glow in the rooms.

“His letter finished this way: ‘I hope you’ll write back and apprise me of your own situation (and that of your Fornit) as regards enemies, Henry. I believe that reaching you has been an occurrence that transcends coincidence. I would call it a life-ring from (God? Providence? Fate? supply your own term) at the last possible instant.

” ‘It is not possible for a man to stand alone for long against a thousand enemies. And to discover, at last, that one is not alone … is it too much to say that the commonality of our experience stands between myself and total destruction? Perhaps not. I must know: are the enemies after your Fornit as they are after Rackne? If so, how are you coping? If not, do you have any idea why not? I repeat, I must know.’

“The letter was signed with the Fornit Some Fornus doodle beneath, and then a P.S. Just one sentence. But lethal. The P.S. said: ‘Sometimes I wonder about my wife.’

“I read the letter through three times. In the process, I killed an entire bottle of Black Velvet. I began to consider options on how to answer his letter. It was a cry for help from a drowning man, that was pretty obvious. The story had held him together for a while, but now the story was done. Now he was depending on me to hold him together. Which was perfectly reasonable, since I’d brought the whole thing on myself.

“I walked up and down the house, through all the empty rooms. And I started to unplug things. I was very drunk, remember, and heavy drinking opens unexpected avenues of suggestibility. Which is why editors and lawyers are willing to spring for three drinks before talking contract at lunch.”

The agent brayed laughter, but the mood remained tight and tense and uncomfortable.

“And please keep in mind that Reg Thorpe was one hell of a writer. He was absolutely convinced of the things he was saying. FBI. CIA.

IRS. They. The enemies. Some writers possess a very rare gift for cooling their prose the more passionately they feel their subject. Steinbeck had it, so did Hemingway, and Reg Thorpe had that same talent. When you entered his world, everything began to seem very logical. You began to think it very likely, once you accepted the basic Fornit premise, that the paperboy did have a silenced .38 in his bag of papers. That the college kids next door with the van might indeed be KGB agents with death-capsules in wax molars, on a do-or-die mission to kill or capture Rackne.

“Of course, I didn’t accept the basic premise. But it seemed so hard to think. And I unplugged things. First the color TV, because everybody knows that they really do give off radiation. At Logan’s we had published an article by a perfectly reputable scientist suggesting that the radiation given off by the household color television was interrupting human brainwaves just enough to alter them minutely but permanently. This scientist suggested that it might be the reason for declining college-board scores, literacy tests, and grammar-school development of arithmetical skills. After all, who sits closer to the TV than a little kid?

“So I unplugged the TV, and it really did seem to clarify my thoughts. In fact, it made it so much better that I unplugged the radio, the toaster, the washing machine, the dryer. Then I remembered the microwave oven, and I unplugged that. I felt a real sense of relief when that fucking thing’s teeth were pulled. It was one of the early ones, about the size of a house, and it probably really was dangerous. Shielding on them’s better these days.

“It occurred to me just how many things we have in any ordinary middle-class house that plug into the wall. An image occurred to me of this nasty electrical octopus, its tentacles consisting of electrical cables, all snaking into the walls, all connected with wires outside, and all the wires leading to power stations run by the government.

“There was a curious doubling in my mind as I did those things,” the editor went on, after pausing for a sip of his Fresca. “Essentially, I was responding to a superstitious impulse. There are plenty of

people who won't walk under ladders or open an umbrella in the house. There are basketball players who cross themselves before taking foul shots and baseball players who change their socks when they're in a slump. I think it's the rational mind playing a bad stereo accompaniment with the irrational subconscious. Forced to define 'irrational subconscious,' I would say that it is a small padded room inside all of us, where the only furnishing is a small card table, and the only thing on the card table is a revolver loaded with flexible bullets.

"When you change course on the sidewalk to avoid the ladder or step out of your apartment into the rain with your furled umbrella, part of your integrated self peels off and steps into that room and picks the gun up off the table. You may be aware of two conflicting thoughts: Walking under a ladder is harmless, and Not walking under a ladder is also harmless. But as soon as the ladder is behind you—or as soon as the umbrella is open—you're back together again."

The writer said, "That's very interesting. Take it a step further for me, if you don't mind. When does that irrational part actually stop fooling with the gun and put it up to its temple?"

The editor said, "When the person in question starts writing letters to the op-ed page of the paper demanding that all the ladders be taken down because walking under them is dangerous. "

There was a laugh.

"Having taken it that far, I suppose we ought to finish. The irrational self has actually fired the flexible bullet into the brain when the person begins tearing around town, knocking ladders over and maybe injuring the people that were working on them. It is not certifiable behavior to walk around ladders rather than under them. It is not certifiable behavior to write letters to the paper saying that New York City went broke because of all the people callously walking under workmen's ladders. But it is certifiable to start knocking over ladders."

“Because it’s overt,” the writer muttered.

The agent said, “You know, you’ve got something there, Henry. I’ve got this thing about not lighting three cigarettes on a match. I don’t know how I got it, but I did. Then I read somewhere that it came from the trench warfare in World War I. It seems that the German sharpshooters would wait for the Tommies to start lighting each other’s cigarettes. On the first light, you got the range. On the second one, you got the windage. And on the third one, you blew the guy’s head off. But knowing all that didn’t make any difference. I still can’t light three on a match. One part of me says it doesn’t matter if I light a dozen cigarettes on one match. But the other part—this very ominous voice, like an interior Boris Karloff—says ‘Ohhhh, if you dooo …’ “

“But all madness isn’t superstitious, is it?” the writer’s wife asked timidly.

“Isn’t it?” the editor replied. “Jeanne d’Arc heard voices from heaven. Some people think they are possessed by demons. Others see gremlins … or devils … or Fornits. The terms we use for madness suggest superstition in some form or other. Mania … abnormality … irrationality … lunacy … insanity. For the mad person, reality has skewed. The whole person begins to reintegrate in that small room where the pistol is.

“But the rational part of me was still very much there. Bloody, bruised, indignant, and rather frightened, but still on the job. Saying: ‘Oh, that’s all right. Tomorrow when you sober up, you can plug everything back in, thank God. Play your games if you have to. But no more than this. No further than this.’

“That rational voice was right to be frightened. There’s something in us that is very much attracted to madness. Everyone who looks off the edge of a tall building has felt at least a faint, morbid urge to jump. And anyone who has ever put a loaded pistol up to his head … “

“Ugh, don’t,” the writer’s wife said. “Please.”

“All right,” the editor said. “My point is just this: even the most well-adjusted person is holding on to his or her sanity by a greased rope. I really believe that. The rationality circuits are shoddily built into the human animal.

“With the plugs pulled, I went into my study, wrote Reg Thorpe a letter, put it in an envelope, stamped it, took it out and mailed it. I don’t actually remember doing any of these things. I was too drunk. But I deduce that I did them because when I got up the next morning, the carbon was still by my typewriter, along with the stamps and the box of envelopes. The letter was about what you’d expect from a drunk. What it boiled down to was this: the enemies were drawn by electricity as well as by the Fornits themselves. Get rid of the electricity and you got rid of the enemies. At the bottom I had written, ‘The electricity is fucking up your thinking about these things, Reg. Interference with brainwaves. Does your wife have a blender?’ “

“In effect, you had started writing letters to the paper,” the writer said.

“Yes. I wrote that letter on a Friday night. On Saturday morning I got up around eleven, hung over and only blurrily aware of what sort of mischief I’d been up to the night before. Great pangs of shame as I plugged everything back in. Greater pangs of shame—and fear—when I saw what I’d written to Reg. I looked all over the house for the original to that letter, hoping like hell I hadn’t mailed it. But I had. And the way I got through that day was by making a resolution to take my lumps like a man and go on the wagon. Sure I was.

“The following Wednesday there was a letter from Reg. One page, handwritten. Fornit Some Fornus doodles all over it. In the center, just this: ‘You were right. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Reg. You were right. Everything is fine now. Reg. Thanks a lot. Reg. Fornit is fine. Reg. Thanks. Reg.’ “

“Oh, my,” the writer’s wife said.

“Bet his wife was mad,” the agent’s wife said.

“But she wasn’t. Because it worked.”

“Worked?” the agent said.

“He got my letter in the Monday-morning post. Monday afternoon he went down to the local power-company office and told them to cut his power off. Jane Thorpe, of course, was hysterical. Her range ran on electricity, she did indeed have a blender, a sewing machine, a washer-dryer combination … well, you understand. On Monday evening I’m sure she was ready to have my head on a plate.

“But it was Reg’s behavior that made her decide I was a miracle worker instead of a lunatic. He sat her down in the living room and talked to her quite rationally. He said that he knew he’d been acting in a peculiar fashion. He knew that she’d been worried. He told her that he felt much better with the power off, and that he would be glad to help her through any inconvenience that it caused. And then he suggested that they go next door and say hello.”

“Not to the KGB agents with the radium in their van?” the writer asked.

“Yes, to them. Jane was totally floored. She agreed to go over with him but she told me that she was girding herself up for a really nasty scene. Accusations, threats, hysteria. She had begun to consider leaving Reg if he wouldn’t get help for his problem. She told me that Wednesday morning on the phone that she had made herself a promise: the power was the next-to-the-last straw. One more thing, and she was going to leave for New York. She was becoming afraid, you see. The thing had worsened by such degrees as to be nearly imperceptible, and she loved him, but even for her it had gotten as far as it could go. She had decided that if Reg said one strange word to the students next door, she was going to break up housekeeping. I found out much later that she had already asked some very circumspect questions about the procedure in Nebraska to effect an involuntary committal.”

“The poor woman,” the writer’s wife murmured.

“But the evening was a smashing success,” the editor said. “Reg was at his most charming … and according to Jane, that was very charming indeed. She hadn’t seen him so much on in three years. The sullenness, the secretiveness, they were gone. The nervous tics. The involuntary jump and look over his shoulder whenever a door opened. He had a beer and talked about all the topics that were current back in those dim dead days: the war, the possibilities of a volunteer army, the riots in the cities, the pot laws.

“The fact that he had written Underworld Figures came up, and they were … ‘author-struck’ was the way Jane put it. Three of the four had read it, and you can bet the odd one wasn’t going to linger any on his way to the library.”

The writer laughed and nodded. He knew about that bit.

“So,” the editor said, “we leave Reg Thorpe and his wife for just a little while, without electrical power but happier than they’ve been in a good long time—”

“Good thing he didn’t have an IBM typewriter,” the agent said.

“—and return to Ye Editor. Two weeks have gone by. Summer is ending. Ye Editor has, of course, fallen off the wagon any number of times, but has managed on the whole to remain pretty respectable. The days have gone their appointed rounds. At Cape Kennedy, they are getting ready to put a man on the moon. The new issue of Logan’s, with John Lindsay on the cover, is out on the stands, and selling miserably, as usual. I had put in a purchase order for a short story called ‘The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet,’ by Reg Thorpe, first serial rights, proposed publication January 1970, proposed purchase price $800, which was standard then for a Logan’s lead story.

“I got a buzz from my superior, Jim Dohegan. Could I come up and see him? I trotted into his office at ten in the morning, looking and

feeling my very best. It didn't occur to me until later that Janey Morrison, his secretary, looked like a wake in progress.

"I sat down and asked Jim what I could do for him, or vice versa. I won't say the Reg Thorpe name hadn't entered my mind; having the story was a tremendous coup for Logan's, and I suspected a few congratulations were in order. So you can imagine how dumbfounded I was when he slid two purchase orders across the desk at me. The Thorpe story, and a John Updike novella we had scheduled as the February fiction lead. RETURN stamped across both.

"I looked at the revoked purchase orders. I looked at Jimmy. I couldn't make any of it out. I really couldn't get my brains to work over what it meant. There was a block in there. I looked around and I saw his hot plate. Janey brought it in for him every morning when she came to work and plugged it in so he could have fresh coffee when he wanted it. That had been the drill at Logan's for three years or more. And that morning all I could think of was, if that thing was unplugged, I could think. I know if that thing was unplugged, I could put this together.

"I said, 'What is this, Jim?'

" 'I'm sorry as hell to have to be the one to tell you this, Henry,' he said. 'Logan's isn't going to be publishing any more fiction as of January 1970.' "

The editor paused to get a cigarette, but his pack was empty. "Does anyone have a cigarette?"

The writer's wife gave him a Salem.

"Thank you, Meg."

He lit it, shook out the match, and dragged deep. The coal glowed mellowly in the dark.

“Well,” he said, “I’m sure Jim thought I was crazy. I said, ‘Do you mind?’ and leaned over and pulled the plug on his hot plate.

“His mouth dropped open and he said, ‘What the hell, Henry?’

” ‘It’s hard for me to think with things like that going,’ I said. ‘Interference.’ And it really seemed to be true, because with the plug pulled, I was able to see the situation a great deal more clearly. ‘Does this mean I’m pinked?’ I asked him.

” ‘ don’t know,’ he said. ‘That’s up to Sam and the board. I just don’t know, Henry.’

“There were a lot of things I could have said. I guess what Jimmy was expecting was a passionate plea for my job. You know that saying, ‘He had his ass out to the wind’? … I maintain that you don’t understand the meaning of that phrase until you’re the head of a suddenly nonexistent department.

“But I didn’t plead my cause or the cause of fiction at Logan’s. I pleaded for Reg Thorpe’s story. First I said that we could move it up over the deadline—put it in the December issue.

“Jimmy said, ‘Come on, Henry, the December ish is locked up. You know that. And we’re talking ten thousand words here.’

” ‘Nine-thousand-eight,’ I said.

” ‘And a full-page illo,’ he said. ‘Forget it.’

” ‘Well, we’ll scrap the art,’ I said. ‘Listen, Jimmy, it’s a great story, maybe the best fiction we’ve had in the last five years.’

“Jimmy said, ‘I read it, Henry. I know it’s a great story. But we just can’t do it. Not in December. It’s Christmas, for God’s sake, and you want to put a story about a guy who kills his wife and kid under the Christmas trees of America? You must be—’ He stopped right there,

but I saw him glance over at his hot plate. He might as well have said it out loud, you know?”

The writer nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving the dark shadow that was the editor’s face.

“I started to get a headache. A very small headache at first. It was getting hard to think again. I remembered that Janey Morrison had an electric pencil sharpener on her desk. There were all those fluorescents in Jim’s office. The heaters. The vending machines in the concession down the hall. When you stopped to think of it, the whole fucking building ran on electricity; it was a wonder that anyone could get anything done. That was when the idea began to creep in, I think. The idea that Logan’s was going broke because no one could think straight. And the reason no one could think straight was because we were all cooped up in this highrise building that ran on electricity. Our brainwaves were completely messed up. I remember thinking that if you could have gotten a doctor in there with one of those EEG machines, they’d get some awfully weird graphs. Full of those big, spiky alpha waves that characterize malignant tumors in the forebrain.

“Just thinking about those things made my headache worse. But I gave it one more try. I asked him if he would at least ask Sam Vadar, the editor-in-chief, to let the story stand in the January issue. As Logan’s fiction valedictory, if necessary. The final Logan’s short story.

“Jimmy was fiddling with a pencil and nodding. He said, ‘I’ll bring it up, but you know it’s not going to fly. We’ve got a story by a one-shot novelist and we’ve got a story by John Updike that’s just as good … maybe better … and—’

” ‘The Updike story is not better!’ I said.

” ‘Well, Jesus, Henry, you don’t have to shout—’

” ‘I am not shouting!’ I shouted.

“He looked at me for a long time. My headache was quite bad by then. I could hear the fluorescents buzzing away. They sounded like a bunch of flies caught in a bottle. It was a really hateful sound. And I thought I could hear Janey running her electric pencil sharpener. They’re doing it on purpose, I thought. They want to mess me up. They know I can’t think of the right things to say while those things are running, so … so …

“Jim was saying something about bringing it up at the next editorial meeting, suggesting that instead of an arbitrary cutoff date they publish all the stories which I had verbally contracted for … although …

“I got up, went across the room, and shut off the lights.

” ‘What did you do that for?’ Jimmy asked.

” ‘You know why I did it,’ I said. ‘You ought to get out of here, Jimmy, before there’s nothing left of you.’

“He got up and came over to me. ‘I think you ought to take the rest of the day off, Henry,’ he said. ‘Go home. Rest. I know you’ve been under a strain lately. I want you to know I’ll do the best I can on this. I feel as strongly as you do … well, almost as strongly. But you ought to just go home and put your feet up and watch some TV.’

” ‘TV,’ I said, and laughed. It was the funniest thing I’d ever heard. ‘Jimmy,’ I said. ‘You tell Sam Vadar something else for me.’

” ‘What’s that, Henry?’

” ‘Tell him he needs a Fornit. This whole outfit. One Fornit? A dozen of them.’

” ‘A Fornit,’ he said, nodding. ‘Okay, Henry. I’ll be sure to tell him that.’

“My headache was very bad. I could hardly even see. Somewhere in the back of my mind I was already wondering how I was going to tell Reg and wondering how Reg was going to take it.

” ‘I’ll put in the purchase order myself, if I can find out who to send it to,’ I said. ‘Reg might have some ideas. A dozen Fornits. Get them to dust this place with fornus from end to end. Shut off the fucking power, all of it.’ I was walking around his office and Jimmy was staring at me with his mouth open. ‘Shut off all the power, Jimmy, you tell them that. Tell Sam that. No one can think with all that electrical interference, am I right?’

” ‘You’re right, Henry, one hundred percent. You just go on home and get some rest, okay? Take a nap or something.’

” ‘And Fornits. They don’t like all that interference. Radium, electricity, it’s all the same thing. Feed them bologna. Cake. Peanut butter. Can we get requisitions for that stuff?’ My headache was this black ball of pain behind my eyes. I was seeing two of Jimmy, two of everything. All of a sudden I needed a drink. If there was no fornus, and the rational side of my mind assured me there was not, then a drink was the only thing in the world that would get me right.

” ‘Sure, we can get the requisitions,’ he said.

” ‘You don’t believe any of this, do you, Jimmy?’ I asked.

” ‘Sure I do. It’s okay. You just want to go home and rest a little while.’

” ‘You don’t believe it now,’ I said, ‘but maybe you will when this rag goes into bankruptcy. How in the name of God can you believe you’re making rational decisions when you’re sitting less than fifteen yards from a bunch of Coke machines and candy machines and sandwich machines?’ Then I really had a terrible thought. ‘And a microwave oven!’ I screamed at him. ‘They got a microwave oven to heat the sandwiches up in!’

“He started to say something, but I didn’t pay any attention. I ran out. Thinking of that microwave oven explained everything. I had to get away from it. That was what made the headache so bad. I remember seeing Janey and Kate Younger from the ad department and Mert Strong from publicity in the outer office, all of them staring at me. They must have heard me shouting.

“My office was on the floor just below. I took the stairs. I went into my office, turned off all the lights, and got my briefcase. I took the elevator down to the lobby, but I put my briefcase between my feet and poked my fingers in my ears. I also remember the other three or four people in the elevator looking at me rather strangely.” The editor uttered a dry chuckle. “They were scared. So to speak. Cooped up in a little moving box with an obvious madman, you would have been scared, too.”

“Oh, surely, that’s a little strong,” the agent’s wife said.

“Not at all. Madness has to start somewhere. If this story’s about anything—if events in one’s own life can ever be said to be about anything—then this is a story about the genesis of insanity. Madness has to start somewhere, and it has to go somewhere. Like a road. Or a bullet from the barrel of a gun. I was still miles behind Reg Thorpe, but I was over the line. You bet.

“I had to go somewhere, so I went to Four Fathers, a bar on Forty-ninth. I remember picking that bar specifically because there was no juke and no color TV and not many lights. I remember ordering the first drink. After that I don’t remember anything until I woke up the next day in my bed at home. There was puke on the floor and a very large cigarette burn in the sheet over me. In my stupor I had apparently escaped dying in one of two extremely nasty ways—choking or burning. Not that I probably would have felt either.”

“Jesus,” the agent said, almost respectfully.

“It was a blackout,” the editor said. “The first real bona fide blackout of my life—but they’re always a sign of the end, and you never have

very many. One way or the other, you never have very many. But any alcoholic will tell you that a blackout isn't the same as passing out. It would save a lot of trouble if it was. No, when an alky blacks out, he keeps doing things. An alky in a blackout is a busy little devil. Sort of like a malign Fornit. He'll call up his ex-wife and abuse her over the phone, or drive his car the wrong way on the turnpike and wipe out a carload of kids. He'll quit his job, rob a market, give away his wedding ring. Busy little devils.

"What I had done, apparently, was to come home and write a letter. Only this one wasn't to Reg. It was to me. And I didn't write it—at least, according to the letter I didn't."

"Who did?" the writer's wife asked.

"Bellis."

"Who's Bellis?"

"His Fornit," the writer said almost absently. His eyes were shadowy and faraway.

"Yes, that's right," the editor said, not looking a bit surprised. He made the letter in the sweet night air for them again, indenting at the proper points with his finger.

" 'Hello from Bellis. I am sorry for your problems, my friend, but would like to point out at the start that you are not the only one with problems. This is no easy job for me. I can dust your damned machine with fornus from now unto forever, but moving the KEYS is supposed to be your job. That's what God made big people FOR. So I sympathize, but that's all of the sympathy you get.

" 'I understand your worry about Reg Thorpe. I worry not about Thorpe but my brother, Rackne. Thorpe worries about what will happen to him if Rackne leaves, but only because he is selfish. The curse of serving writers is that they are all selfish. He worries not about what will happen to Rackne if THORPE leaves. Or goes el

bonzo seco. Those things have apparently never crossed his oh-so-sensitive mind. But, luckily for us, all our unfortunate problems have the same short-term solution, and so I strain my arms and my tiny body to give it to you, my drunken friend. YOU may wonder about long-term solutions; I assure you there are none. All wounds are mortal. Take what's given. You sometimes get a little slack in the rope but the rope always has an end. So what. Bless the slack and don't waste breath cursing the drop. A grateful heart knows that in the end we all swing.

" 'You must pay him for the story yourself. But not with a personal check. Thorpe's mental problems are severe and perhaps dangerous but this in no way indicates stupiddity.' "

The editor stopped here and spelled: S-t-u-p-i-d-d-i-t-y. Then he went on. " 'If you give him a personal check he'll crack wise in about nine seconds.

" 'Withdraw eight hundred and some few-odd dollars from your personal account and have your bank open a new account for you in the name Arvin Publishing, Inc. Make sure they understand you want checks that look businesslike—nothing with cute dogs or canyon vistas on them. Find a friend, someone you can trust, and list him as co-drawer. When the checks arrive, make one for eight hundred dollars and have the co-drawer sign the check. Send the check to Reg Thorpe. That will cover your ass for the time being.

" 'Over and out.' It was signed 'Bellis.' Not in holograph. In type."

"Whew," the writer said again.

"When I got up the first thing I noticed was the typewriter. It looked like somebody had made it up as a ghost-typewriter in a cheap movie. The day before it was an old black office Underwood. When I got up—with a head that felt about the size of North Dakota—it was a sort of gray. The last few sentences of the letter were clumped up and faded. I took one look and figured my faithful old Underwood was probably finished. I took a taste and went out into the kitchen.

There was an open bag of confectioner's sugar on the counter with a scoop in it. There was confectioner's sugar everywhere between the kitchen and the little den where I did my work in those days."

"Feeding your Fornit," the writer said. "Bellis had a sweet tooth. You thought so, anyway."

"Yes. But even as sick and hung over as I was, I knew perfectly well who the Fornit was."

He ticked off the points on his fingers.

"First, Bellis was my mother's maiden name.

"Second, that phrase el bonzo seco. It was a private phrase my brother and I used to use to mean crazy. Back when we were kids.

"Third, and in a way most damning, was that spelling of the word 'stupidity.' It's one of those words I habitually misspell. I had an almost screamingly literate writer once who used to spell 'refrigerator' with a d—'refridgerator'—no matter how many times the copy editors blooped it. And for this guy, who had a doctoral degree from Princeton, 'ugly' was always going to be 'ughly.' "

The writer's wife uttered a sudden laugh—it was both embarrassed and cheerful. "I do that."

"All I'm saying is that a man's misspellings—or a woman's—are his literary fingerprints. Ask any copy editor who has done the same writer a few times.

"No, Bellis was me and I was Bellis. Yet the advice was damned good advice. In fact, I thought it was great advice. But here's something else—the subconscious leaves its fingerprints, but there's a stranger down there, too. A hell of a weird guy who knows a hell of a lot. I'd never seen that phrase 'co-drawer' in my life, to the best of my knowledge … but there it was, and it was a good one, and I found out some time later that banks actually use it.

“I picked up the phone to call a friend of mine, and this bolt of pain—incredible!—went through my head. I thought of Reg Thorpe and his radium and put the phone down in a hurry. I went to see the friend in person after I’d taken a shower and gotten a shave and had checked myself about nine times in the mirror to make sure my appearance approximated how a rational human being is supposed to look. Even so, he asked me a lot of questions and looked me over pretty closely. So I guess there must have been a few signs that a shower, a shave, and a good dose of Listerine couldn’t hide. He wasn’t in the biz, and that was a help. News has a way of traveling, you know. In the biz. So to speak. Also, if he’d been in the biz, he would have known Arvin Publishing, Inc., was responsible for Logan’s and would have wondered just what sort of scam I was trying to pull. But he wasn’t, he didn’t, and I was able to tell him it was a self-publishing venture I was interested in since Logan’s had apparently decided to eighty-six the fiction department.”

“Did he ask you why you were calling it Arvin Publishing?” the writer asked.

“Yes.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him,” the editor said, smiling a wintry smile, “that Arvin was my mother’s maiden name.”

There was a little pause, and then the editor resumed; he spoke almost uninterrupted to the end.

“So I began waiting for the printed checks, of which I wanted exactly one. I exercised to pass the time. You know—pick up the glass, flex the elbow, empty the glass, flex the elbow again. Until all that exercise wears you out and you just sort of fall forward with your head on the table. Other things happened, but those were the ones that really occupied my mind—the waiting and the flexing. As I remember. I have to reiterate that, because I was drunk a lot of the

time, and for every single thing I remember, there are probably fifty or sixty I don't.

"I quit my job—that caused a sigh of relief all around, I'm sure. From them because they didn't have to perform the existential task of firing me for craziness from a department that was no longer in existence, me because I didn't think I could ever face that building again—the elevator, the fluorescents, the phones, the thought of all that waiting electricity.

"I wrote Reg Thorpe and his wife a couple of letters each during that three-week period. I remember doing hers, but not his—like the letter from Bellis, I wrote those letters in blackout periods. But I hewed to my old work habits when I was blotto, just as I hewed to my old misspellings. I never failed to use a carbon … and when I came to the next morning, the carbons were lying around. It was like reading letters from a stranger.

"Not that the letters were crazy. Not at all. The one where I finished up with the P.S. about the blender was a lot worse. These letters seemed … almost reasonable."

He stopped and shook his head, slowly and wearily.

"Poor Jane Thorpe. Not that things appeared to be all that bad at their end. It must have seemed to her that her husband's editor was doing a very skillful—and humane—job of humoring him out of his deepening depression. The question of whether or not it's a good idea to humor a person who has been entertaining all sorts of paranoid fantasies—fantasies which almost led in one case to an actual assault on a little girl—probably occurred to her; if so, she chose to ignore the negative aspects, because she was humoring him, too. Nor have I ever blamed her for it—he wasn't just a meal ticket, some nag that was to be worked and humored, humored and worked until he was ready for the knacker's shop; she loved the guy. In her own special way, Jane Thorpe was a great lady. And after living with Reg from the Early Times to the High Times and finally to the Crazy Times, I think she would have agreed with Bellis about

blessing the slack and not wasting your breath cursing the drop. Of course, the more slack you get, the harder you snap when you finally fetch up at the end … but even that quick snap can be a blessing, I reckon—who wants to strangle?

“I had return letters from both of them in that short period—remarkably sunny letters … although there was a strange, almost final quality to that sunlight. It seemed as if … well, never mind the cheap philosophy. If I can think of what I mean, I’ll say it. Let it go for now.

“He was playing hearts with the kids next door every night, and by the time the leaves started to fall, they thought Reg Thorpe was just about God come down to earth. When they weren’t playing cards or tossing a Frisbee they were talking literature, with Reg gently rallying them through their paces. He’d gotten a puppy from the local animal shelter and walked it every morning and night, meeting other people on the block the way you do when you walk your mutt. People who’d decided the Thorpes were really very peculiar people now began to change their minds. When Jane suggested that, without electrical appliances, she could really use a little house help, Reg agreed at once. She was flabbergasted by his cheery acceptance of the idea. It wasn’t a question of money—after Underworld Figures they were rolling in dough—it was a question, Jane figured, of they. They were everywhere, that was Reg’s scripture, and what better agent for they than a cleaning woman that went everywhere in your house, looked under beds and in closets and probably in desk drawers as well, if they weren’t locked and then nailed shut for good measure.

“But he told her to go right ahead, told her he felt like an insensitive clod not to’ve thought of it earlier, even though—she made a point of telling me this—he was doing most of the heavy chores, such as the hand-washing, himself. He only made one small request: that the woman not be allowed to come into his study.

“Best of all, most encouraging of all from Jane’s standpoint, was the fact that Reg had gone back to work, this time on a new novel. She had read the first three chapters and thought they were marvelous.

All of this, she said, had begun when I had accepted ‘The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet’ for Logan’s—the period before that had been dead low ebb. And she blessed me for it.

“I am sure she really meant that last, but her blessing seemed to have no great warmth, and the sunniness of her letter was marred somehow—here we are, back to that. The sunshine in her letter was like sunshine on a day when you see those mackerel-scale clouds that mean it’s going to rain like hell soon.

“All this good news—hearts and dog and cleaning woman and new novel—and yet she was too intelligent to really believe he was getting well again … or so I believed, even in my own fog. Reg had been exhibiting symptoms of psychosis. Psychosis is like lung cancer in one way—neither one of them clears up on its own, although both cancer patients and lunatics may have their good days.

“May I borrow another cigarette, dear?”

The writer’s wife gave him one.

“After all,” he resumed, bringing out the Ronson, “the signs of his idee fixe were all around her. No phone; no electricity. He’d put Reynolds Wrap over all of the switchplates. He was putting food in his typewriter as regularly as he put it into the new puppy’s dish. The students next door thought he was a great guy, but the students next door didn’t see Reg putting on rubber gloves to pick up the newspaper off the front stoop in the morning because of his radiation fears. They didn’t hear him moaning in his sleep, or have to soothe him when he woke up screaming with dreadful nightmares he couldn’t remember.

“You, my dear”—he turned toward the writer’s wife—“have been wondering why she stuck with him. Although you haven’t said as much, it’s been on your mind. Am I right?”

She nodded.

“Yes. And I’m not going to offer a long motivational thesis—the convenient thing about stories that are true is that you only need to say this is what happened and let people worry for themselves about the why. Generally, nobody ever knows why things happen anyway … particularly the ones who say they do.

“But in terms of Jane Thorpe’s own selective perception, things had gotten one hell of a lot better. She interviewed a middle-aged black woman about the cleaning job, and brought herself to speak as frankly as she could about her husband’s idiosyncrasies. The woman, Gertrude Rulin by name, laughed and said she’d done for people who were a whole lot stranger. Jane spent the first week of the Rulin woman’s employ pretty much the way she’d spent that first visit with the young people next door—waiting for some crazy outburst. But Reg charmed her as completely as he’d charmed the kids, talking to her about her church work, her husband, and her youngest son, Jimmy, who, according to Gertrude, made Dennis the Menace look like the biggest bore in the first grade. She’d had eleven children in all, but there was a nine-year gap between Jimmy and his next oldest sib. He made things hard on her.

“Reg seemed to be getting well … at least, if you looked at things a certain way he did. But he was just as crazy as ever, of course, and so was I. Madness may well be a sort of flexible bullet, but any ballistics expert worth his salt will tell you no two bullets are exactly the same. Reg’s one letter to me talked a little bit about his new novel, and then passed directly to Fornits. Fornits in general, Rackne in particular. He speculated on whether they actually wanted to kill Fornits, or—he thought this more likely—capture them alive and study them. He closed by saying, ‘Both my appetite and my outlook on life have improved immeasurably since we began our correspondence, Henry. Appreciate it all. Affectionately yours, Reg.’ And a P.S. below inquiring casually if an illustrator had been assigned to do his story. That caused a guilty pang or two and a quick trip to the liquor cabinet on my part.

“Reg was into Fornits; I was into wires.

“My answering letter mentioned Fornits only in passing—by then I really was humoring the man, at least on that subject; an elf with my mother’s maiden name and my own bad spelling habits didn’t interest me a whole hell of a lot.

“What had come to interest me more and more was the subject of electricity, and microwaves, and RF waves, and RF interference from small appliances, and low-level radiation, and Christ knows what else. I went to the library and took out books on the subject; I bought books on the subject. There was a lot of scary stuff in them … and of course that was just the sort of stuff I was looking for.

“I had my phone taken out and my electricity turned off. It helped for a while, but one night when I was staggering in the door drunk with a bottle of Black Velvet in my hand and another one in my topcoat pocket, I saw this little red eye peeping down at me from the ceiling. God, for a minute I thought I was going to have a heart attack. It looked like a bug up there at first … a great big dark bug with one glowing eye.

“I had a Coleman gas lantern and I lit it. Saw what it was at once. Only instead of relieving me, it made me feel worse. As soon as I got a good look at it, it seemed I could feel large, clear bursts of pain going through my head—like radio waves. For a moment it was as if my eyes had rotated in their sockets and I could look into my own brain and see cells in there smoking, going black, dying. It was a smoke detector—a gadget which was even newer than microwave ovens back in 1969.

“I bolted out of the apartment and went downstairs—I was on the fifth floor but by then I was always taking the stairs—and hammered on the super’s door. I told him I wanted that thing out of there, wanted it out of there right away, wanted it out of there tonight, wanted it out of there within the hour. He looked at me as though I had gone completely—you should pardon the expression—bonzo seco, and I can understand that now. That smoke detector was supposed to make me feel good, it was supposed to make me safe. Now, of

course, they're the law, but back then it was a Great Leap Forward, paid for by the building tenants' association.

"He removed it—it didn't take long—but the look in his eyes was not lost upon me, and I could, in some limited way, understand his feelings. I needed a shave, I stank of whiskey, my hair was sticking up all over my head, my topcoat was dirty. He would know I no longer went to work; that I'd had my television taken away; that my phone and electrical service had been voluntarily interrupted. He thought I was crazy.

"I may have been crazy but—like Reg—I was not stupid. I turned on the charm. Editors have got to have a certain amount, you know. And I greased the skids with a ten-dollar bill. Finally I was able to smooth things over, but I knew from the way people were looking at me in the next couple of weeks—my last two weeks in the building, as things turned out—that the story had traveled. The fact that no members of the tenants' association approached me to make wounded noises about my ingratitude was particularly telling. I suppose they thought I might take after them with a steak knife.

"All of that was very secondary in my thoughts that evening, however. I sat in the glow of the Coleman lantern, the only light in the three rooms except for all the electricity in Manhattan that came through the windows. I sat with a bottle in one hand, a cigarette in the other, looking at the plate in the ceiling where the smoke detector with its single red eye—an eye which was so unobtrusive in the daytime that I had never even noticed it—had been. I thought of the undeniable fact that, although I'd had all the electricity turned off in my place, there had been that one live item … and where there was one, there might be more.

"Even if there wasn't, the whole building was rotten with wires—it was filled with wires the way a man dying of cancer is filled with evil cells and rotting organs. Closing my eyes I could see all those wires in the darkness of their conduits, glowing with a sort of green nether light. And beyond them, the entire city. One wire, almost harmless in itself, running to a switchplate … the wire behind the switchplate a

little thicker, leading down through a conduit to the basement where it joined a still thicker wire … that one leading down under the street to a whole bundle of wires, only those wires so thick that they were really cables.

“When I got Jane Thorpe’s letter mentioning the tinfoil, part of my mind recognized that she saw it as a sign of Reg’s craziness, and that part knew I would have to respond as if my whole mind thought she was right. The other part of my mind—by far the largest part now—thought: ‘What a marvelous idea!’ and I covered my own switchplates in identical fashion the very next day. I was the man, remember, that was supposed to be helping Reg Thorpe. In a desperate sort of way it’s actually quite funny.

“I determined that night to leave Manhattan. There was an old family place in the Adirondacks I could go to, and that sounded fine to me. The one thing keeping me in the city was Reg Thorpe’s story. If ‘The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet’ was Reg’s life-ring in a sea of madness, it was mine, too—I wanted to place it in a good magazine. With that done, I could get the hell out.

“So that’s where the not-so-famous Wilson-Thorpe correspondence stood just before the shit hit the fan. We were like a couple of dying drug addicts comparing the relative merits of heroin and ‘ludes. Reg had Fornits in his typewriter, I had Fornits in the walls, and both of us had Fornits in our heads.

“And there was they. Don’t forget they. I hadn’t been flogging the story around for long before deciding they included every magazine fiction editor in New York—not that there were many by the fall of 1969. If you’d grouped them together, you could have killed the whole bunch of them with one shotgun shell, and before long I started to feel that was a damned good idea.

“It took about five years before I could see it from their perspective. I’d upset the super, and he was just a guy who saw me when the heat was screwed up and when it was time for his Christmas tip. These other guys … well, the irony was just that a lot of them really

were my friends. Jared Baker was the assistant fiction editor at Esquire in those days, and Jared and I were in the same rifle company during World War II, for instance. These guys weren't just uneasy after sampling the new improved Henry Wilson. They were appalled. If I'd just sent the story around with a pleasant covering letter explaining the situation—my version of it, anyway—I probably would have sold the Thorpe story almost right away. But oh no, that wasn't good enough. Not for this story. I was going to see that this story got the personal treatment. So I went from door to door with it, a stinking, grizzled ex-editor with shaking hands and red eyes and a big old bruise on his left cheekbone from where he ran into the bathroom door on the way to the can in the dark two nights before. I might as well have been wearing a sign reading BELLEVUE-BOUND.

"Nor did I want to talk to these guys in their offices. In fact, I could not. The time had long since passed when I could get into an elevator and ride it up forty floors. So I met them like pushers meet junkies—in parks, on steps, or in the case of Jared Baker, in a Burger Heaven on Forty-ninth Street. Jared at least would have been delighted to buy me a decent meal, but the time had passed, you understand, when any self-respecting maitre d' would have let me in a restaurant where they serve business people."

The agent winced.

"I got perfunctory promises to read the story, followed by concerned questions about how I was, how much I was drinking. I remember—hazily—trying to tell a couple of them about how electricity and radiation leaks were fucking up everyone's thinking, and when Andy Rivers, who edited fiction for American Crossings, suggested I ought to get some help, I told him he was the one who ought to get some help.

" 'You see those people out there on the street?' I said. We were standing in Washington Square Park. 'Half of them, maybe even three-quarters of them, have got brain tumors. I wouldn't sell you

Thorpe's story on a bet, Andy. Hell, you couldn't understand it in this city. Your brain's in the electric chair and you don't even know it.'

"I had a copy of the story in my hand, rolled up like a newspaper. I whacked him on the nose with it, the way you'd whack a dog for piddling in the corner. Then I walked off. I remember him yelling for me to come back, something about having a cup of coffee and talking it over some more, and then I passed a discount record store with loudspeakers blasting heavy metal onto the sidewalk and banks of snowy-cold fluorescent lights inside, and I lost his voice in a kind of deep buzzing sound inside my head. I remember thinking two things—I had to get out of the city soon, very soon, or I would be nursing a brain tumor of my own, and I had to get a drink right away.

"That night when I got back to my apartment I found a note under the door. It said 'We want you out of here, you crazy-bird.' I threw it away without so much as a second thought. We veteran crazy-birds have more important things to worry about than anonymous notes from fellow tenants.

"I was thinking over what I'd said to Andy Rivers about Reg's story. The more I thought about it—and the more drinks I had—the more sense it made. 'Flexible Bullet' was funny, and on the surface it was easy to follow … but below that surface level it was surprisingly complex. Did I really think another editor in the city could grasp the story on all levels? Maybe once, but did I still think so now that my eyes had been opened? Did I really think there was room for appreciation and understanding in a place that was wired up like a terrorist's bomb? God, loose volts were leaking out everywhere.

"I read the paper while there was still enough daylight to do so, trying to forget the whole wretched business for a while, and there on page one of the Times there was a story about how radioactive material from nuclear-power plants kept disappearing—the article went on to theorize that enough of that stuff in the right hands could quite easily be used to make a very dirty nuclear weapon.

“I sat there at the kitchen table as the sun went down, and in my mind’s eye I could see them panning for plutonium dust like 1849 miners panning for gold. Only they didn’t want to blow up the city with it, oh no. They just wanted to sprinkle it around and fuck up everyone’s minds. They were the bad Fornits, and all that radioactive dust was bad-luck fornus. The worst bad-luck fornus of all time.

“I decided I didn’t want to sell Reg’s story after all—at least, not in New York. I’d get out of the city just as soon as the checks I’d ordered arrived. When I was upstate, I could start sending it around to the out-of-town literary magazines. Sewanee Review would be a good place to start, I reckoned, or maybe Iowa Review. I could explain to Reg later. Reg would understand. That seemed to solve the whole problem, so I took a drink to celebrate. And then the drink took a drink. And then the drink took the man. So to speak. I blacked out. I only had one more blackout left in me, as it happened.

“The next day my Arvin Company checks came. I typed one of them up and went to see my friend, the ‘co-drawer.’ There was another one of those tiresome cross-examinations, but this time I kept my temper. I wanted that signature. Finally, I got it. I went to a business supply store and had them make up an Arvin Company letter-stamp while I waited. I stamped a return address on a business envelope, typed Reg’s address (the confectioner’s sugar was out of my machine but the keys still had a tendency to stick), and added a brief personal note, saying that no check to an author had ever given me more personal pleasure … and that was true. Still is. It was almost an hour before I could bring myself to mail it—I just couldn’t get over how official it looked. You never would have known that a smelly drunk who hadn’t changed his underwear in about ten days had put that one together. “

He paused, crushed out his cigarette, looked at his watch. Then, oddly like a conductor announcing a train’s arrival in some city of importance, he said, “We have reached the inexplicable.

“This is the point in my story which most interested the two psychiatrists and various mental caseworkers with whom I was

associated over the next thirty months of my life. It was the only part of it they really wanted me to recant, as a sign that I was getting well again. As one of them put it, ‘This is the only part of your story which cannot be explicated as faulty induction … once, that is, your sense of logic has been mended.’ Finally I did recant, because I knew—even if they didn’t—that I was getting well, and I was damned anxious to get out of the sanitarium. I thought if I didn’t get out fairly soon, I’d go crazy all over again. So I recanted—Galileo did, too, when they held his feet to the fire—but I have never recanted in my own mind. I don’t say that what I’m about to tell you really happened; I only say I still believe it happened. That’s a small qualification, but to me it’s crucial.

“So, my friends, the inexplicable:

“I spent the next two days preparing to move upstate. The idea of driving the car didn’t disturb me at all, by the way. I had read as a kid that the inside of a car is one of the safest places to be during an electrical storm, because the rubber tires serve as near-perfect insulators. I was actually looking forward to getting in my old Chevrolet, cranking up all the windows, and driving out of the city, which I had begun to see as a sink of lightning. Nevertheless, part of my preparations included removing the bulb in the dome light, taping over the socket, and turning the headlight knob all the way to the left to kill the dashlights.

“When I came in on the last night I meant to spend in the apartment, the place was empty except for the kitchen table, the bed, and my typewriter in the den. The typewriter was sitting on the floor. I had no intention of taking it with me—it had too many bad associations, and besides, the keys were going to stick forever. Let the next tenant have it, I thought—it, and Bellis, too.

“It was just sunset, and the place was a funny color. I was pretty drunk, and I had another bottle in my topcoat pocket against the watches of the night. I started across the den, meaning to go into the bedroom, I suppose. There I would sit on the bed and think about

wires and electricity and free radiation and drink until I was drunk enough to go to sleep.

“What I called the den was really the living room. I made it my workplace because it had the nicest light in the whole apartment—a big westward-facing window that looked all the way to the horizon. That’s something close to the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes in a fifth-floor Manhattan apartment, but the line of sight was there. I didn’t question it; I just enjoyed it. That room was filled with a clear, lovely light even on rainy days.

“But the quality of the light that evening was eerie. The sunset had filled the room with a red glow. Furnace light. Empty, the room seemed too big. My heels made flat echoes on the hardwood floor.

“The typewriter sat in the middle of the floor, and I was just going around it when I saw there was a ragged scrap of paper stuck under the roller—that gave me a start, because I knew there had been no paper in the machine when I went out for the last time to get the fresh bottle.

“I looked around, wondering if there was someone—some intruder—in the place with me. Except it wasn’t really intruders, or burglars, or junkies, I was thinking of … it was ghosts.

“I saw a ragged blank place on the wall to the left of the bedroom door. I at least understood where the paper in the typewriter had come from. Someone had simply torn off a ragged piece of the old wallpaper.

“I was still looking at this when I heard a single small clear noise—clack!—from behind me. I jumped and whirled around with my heart knocking in my throat. I was terrified, but I knew what that sound was just the same—there was no question at all. You work with words all your life and you know the sound of a typewriter platen hitting paper, even in a deserted room at dusk, where there is no one to strike the key.”

They looked at him in the dark, their faces blurred white circles, saying nothing, slightly huddled together now. The writer's wife was holding one of the writer's hands tightly in both of her own.

"I felt … outside myself. Unreal. Perhaps this is always the way one feels when one arrives at the point of the inexplicable. I walked slowly over to the typewriter. My heart was pounding madly up there in my throat, but I felt mentally calm … icy, even.

"Clack! Another platen popped up. I saw it this time—the key was in the third row from the top, on the left.

"I got down on my knees very slowly, and then all the muscles in my legs seemed to go slack and I half-swooned the rest of the way down until I was sitting there in front of the typewriter with my dirty London Fog topcoat spread around me like the skirt of a girl who has made her very deepest curtsy. The typewriter clacked twice more, fast, paused, then clacked again. Each clack made the same kind of flat echo my footfalls had made on the floor.

"The wallpaper had been rolled into the machine so that the side with the dried glue on it was facing out. The letters were ripply and bumpy, but I could read them: rackn, it said. Then it clacked again and the word was rackne.

"Then—" He cleared his throat and grinned a little. "Even all these years later this is hard to tell … to just say right out. Okay. The simple fact, with no icing on it, is this. I saw a hand come out of the typewriter. An incredibly tiny hand. It came out from between the keys B and N in the bottom row, curled itself into a fist, and hammered down on the space bar. The machine jumped a space—very fast, like a hiccough—and the hand drew back down inside."

The agent's wife giggled shrilly.

"Can it, Marsha," the agent said softly, and she did.

“The clacks began to come a little faster,” the editor went on, “and after a while I fancied I could hear the creature that was shoving the key arms up gasping, the way anyone will gasp when he is working hard, coming closer and closer to his physical limit. After a while the machine was hardly printing at all, and most of the keys were filled with that old gluey stuff, but I could read the impressions. It got out rackne is d and then the y key stuck to the glue. I looked at it for a moment and then I reached out one finger and freed it. I don’t know if it—Bellis—could have freed it himself. I think not. But I didn’t want to see it … him … try. Just the fist was enough to have me tottering on the brink. If I saw the elf entire, so to speak, I think I really would have gone crazy. And there was no question of getting up to run. All the strength had gone out of my legs.

“Clack-clack-clack, those tiny grunts and sobs of effort, and after every word that pallid ink-and dirt-streaked fist would come out between the B and the N and hammer down on the space bar. I don’t know exactly how long it went on. Seven minutes, maybe. Maybe ten. Or maybe forever.

“Finally the clacks stopped, and I realized I couldn’t hear him breathing anymore. Maybe he fainted … maybe he just gave up and went away … or maybe he died. Had a heart attack or something. All I really know for sure is that the message was not finished. It read, completely in lowercase: rackne is dying its the little boy jimmy thorpe doesn’t know tell thorpe rackne is dying the little boy jimmy is killing rackne bel … and that was all.

“I found the strength to get to my feet then, and I left the room. I walked in great big tippy-toe steps, as if I thought it had gone to sleep and if I made any of those flat echoey noises on the bare wood it would wake up and the typing would start again … and I thought if it did, the first clack would start me screaming. And then I would just go on until my heart or my head burst.

“My Chevy was in the parking lot down the street, all gassed and loaded and ready to go. I got in behind the wheel and remembered

the bottle in my topcoat pocket. My hands were shaking so badly that I dropped it, but it landed on the seat and didn't break.

"I remembered the blackouts, and, my friends, right then a blackout was exactly what I wanted, and exactly what I got. I remember taking the first drink from the neck of the bottle, and the second. I remember turning the key over to accessory and getting Frank Sinatra on the radio singing 'That Old Black Magic,' which seemed fitting enough. Under the circumstances. So to speak. I remember singing along, and having a few more drinks. I was in the back row of the lot, and I could see the traffic light on the corner going through its paces. I kept thinking of those flat clacking sounds in the empty room, and the fading red light in the den. I kept thinking of those puffing sounds, as if some body-building elf had hung fishing sinkers on the ends of a Q-Tip and was doing bench presses inside my old typewriter. I kept seeing the pebbly surface on the back side of that torn scrap of wallpaper. My mind kept wanting to examine what must have gone on before I came back to the apartment … kept wanting to see it—him—Bellis—jumping up, grabbing the loose edge of the wallpaper by the door to the bedroom because it was the only thing left in the room approximating paper—hanging on—finally tearing it loose and carrying it back to the typewriter on its—on his—head like the leaf of a nipa palm. I kept trying to imagine how he—it—could ever have run it into the typewriter. And none of that was blacking out so I kept drinking and Frank Sinatra stopped and there was an ad for Crazy Eddie's and then Sarah Vaughan came on singing 'I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter' and that was something else I could relate to since I'd done just that recently or at least I'd thought I had up until tonight when something happened to give me cause to rethink my position on that matter so to speak and I sang along with good old Sarah Soul and right about then I must have achieved escape velocity because in the middle of the second chorus with no lag at all I was puking my guts out while somebody first thumped my back with his palms and then lifted my elbows behind me and put them down and then thumped my back with his palms again. That was the trucker. Every time he thumped I'd feel a great clot of liquid rise up in my throat and get ready to go back

down except then.he'd lift my elbows and every time he lifted my elbows I'd puke again, and most of it wasn't even Black Velvet but river water. When I was able to lift my head enough to look around it was six o'clock in the evening three days later and I was lying on the bank of the Jackson River in western Pennsylvania, about sixty miles north of Pittsburgh. My Chevy was sticking out of the river, rear end up. I could still read the McCarthy sticker on the bumper.

"Is there another Fresca, love? My throat's dry as hell."

The writer's wife fetched him one silently, and when she handed it to him she impulsively bent and kissed his wrinkled, alligator-hide cheek. He smiled, and his eyes sparkled in the dim light. She was, however, a good and kindly woman, and the sparkle did not in any way fool her. It was never merriness which made eyes sparkle that way.

"Thank you, Meg."

He drank deeply, coughed, waved away the offer of a cigarette.

"I've had enough of those for the evening. I'm going to quit them entirely. In my next incarnation. So to speak.

"The rest of my own tale really needs no telling. It would have against it the only sin that any tale can ever really be guilty of—it's predictable. They fished something like forty bottles of Black Velvet out of my car, a good many of them empty. I was babbling about elves, and electricity, and Fornits, and plutonium miners, and fornus, and I seemed utterly insane to them, and that of course is exactly what I was.

"Now here's what happend in Omaha while I was driving around—according to the gas credit slips in the Chevy's glove compartment—five northeastern states. All of this, you understand, was information I obtained from Jane Thorpe over a long and painful period of correspondence, which culminated in a face-to-face meeting in New Haven, where she now lives, shortly after I was dismissed from the

sanitarium as a reward for finally recanting. At the end of that meeting we wept in each other's arms, and that was when I began to believe that there could be a real life for me—perhaps even happiness—again.

"That day, around three o'clock in the afternoon, there was a knock at the door of the Thorpe home. It was a telegraph boy. The telegram was from me—the last item of our unfortunate correspondence. It read: REG HAVE-RELIABLE INFORMATION THAT RACKNE IS DYING IT'S THE LITTLE BOY ACCORDING TO BELLIS BELLIS SAYS THE BOY'S NAME IS JIMMY FORNIT SOME FORNUS HENRY.

"In case that marvelous Howard Baker question of What did he know and when did he know it? has gone through your mind, I can tell you that I knew Jane had hired a cleaning woman; I didn't know—except through Bellis—that she had a li'l-devil son named Jimmy. I suppose you'll have to take my word for that, although in all fairness I have to add that the shrinks who worked on my case over the next two and a half years never did.

"When the telegram came, Jane was at the grocery store. She found it, after Reg was dead, in one of his back pockets. The time of transmission and delivery were both noted on it, along with the added line No telephone/Deliver original. Jane said that although the telegram was only a day old, it had been so much handled that it looked as if he'd had it for a month.

"In a way, that telegram, those twenty-six words, was the real flexible bullet, and I fired it directly into Reg Thorpe's brain all the way from Paterson, New Jersey, and I was so fucking drunk I don't even remember doing it.

"During the last two weeks of his life, Reg had fallen into a pattern that seemed normality itself. He got up at six, made breakfast for himself and his wife, then wrote for an hour. Around eight o'clock he would lock his study and take the dog for a long, leisurely walk around the neighborhood. He was very forthcoming on these walks,

stopping to chat with anyone who wanted to chat with him, tying the pooch outside a nearby cafe to have a midmorning cup of coffee, then rambling on again. He rarely got back to the house before noon. On many days it was twelve-thirty or one o'clock. Part of this was an effort to escape the garrulous Gertrude Rulin, Jane believed, because his pattern hadn't really begun to solidify until a couple of days after she started working for them.

"He would eat a light lunch, lie down for an hour or so, then get up and write for two or three hours. In the evenings he would sometimes go next door to visit with the young people, either with Jane or alone; sometimes he and Jane took in a movie, or just sat in the living room and read. They turned in early, Reg usually a while before Jane. She wrote there was very little sex, and what there was of it was unsuccessful for both of them. 'But sex isn't as important for most women,' she said, 'and Reg was working full-out again, and that was a reasonable substitute for him. I would say that, under the circumstances, those last two weeks were the happiest in the last five years.' I damn near cried when I read that.

"I didn't know anything about Jimmy, but Reg did. Reg knew everything except for the most important fact—that Jimmy had started coming to work with his mother.

"How furious he must have been when he got my telegram and began to realize! Here they were, after all. And apparently his own wife was one of them, because she was in the house when Gertrude and Jimmy were there, and she had never said a thing to Reg about Jimmy. What was it he had written to me in that earlier letter? 'Sometimes I wonder about my wife.'

"When she arrived home on that day the telegram came, she found Reg gone. There was a note on the kitchen table which said, 'Love—I've gone down to the bookstore. Back by suppertime.' This seemed perfectly fine to Jane … but if Jane had known about my telegram, the very normality of that note would have scared the hell out of her, I think. She would have understood that Reg believed she had changed sides.

“Reg didn’t go near any bookstore. He went to Littlejohn’s Gun Emporium downtown. He bought a .45 automatic and two thousand rounds of ammunition. He would have bought an AK-70 if Littlejohn’s had been allowed to sell them. He meant to protect his Fornit, you see. From Jimmy, from Gertrude, from Jane. From them.

“Everything went according to established routine the next morning. She remembered thinking he was wearing an awfully heavy sweater for such a warm fall day, but that was all. The sweater, of course, was because of the gun. He went out to walk the dog with the .45 stuffed into the waistband of his chinos.

“Except the restaurant where he usually got his morning coffee was as far as he went, and he went directly there, with no lingering or conversation along the way. He took the pup around to the loading area, tied its leash to a railing, and then went back toward his house by way of backyards.

“He knew the schedule of the young people next door very well; knew they would all be out. He knew where they kept their spare key. He let himself in, went upstairs, and watched his own house.

“At eight-forty he saw Gertrude Rulin arrive. And Gertrude wasn’t alone. There was indeed a small boy with her. Jimmy Rulin’s boisterous first-grade behavior convinced the teacher and the school guidance counselor almost at once that everyone (except maybe Jimmy’s mother, who could have used a rest from Jimmy) would be better off if he waited another year. Jimmy was stuck with repeating kindergarten, and he had afternoon sessions for the first half of the year. The two day-care centers in her area were full, and she couldn’t change to afternoons for the Thorpes because she had another cleaning job on the other side of town from two to four.

“The upshot of everything was Jane’s reluctant agreement that Gertrude could bring Jimmy with her until she was able to make other arrangements. Or until Reg found out, as he was sure to do.

“She thought Reg might not mind—he had been so sweetly reasonable about everything lately. On the other hand, he might have a fit. If that happened, other arrangements would have to be made. Gertrude said she understood. And for heaven’s sake, Jane added, the boy was not to touch any of Reg’s things. Gertrude said for sure not; the mister’s study door was locked and would stay locked.

“Thorpe must have crossed between the two yards like a sniper crossing no-man’s-land. He saw Gertrude and Jane washing bed linen in the kitchen. He didn’t see the boy. He moved along the side of the house. No one in the dining room. No one in the bedroom. And then, in the study, where Reg had morbidly expected to see him, there Jimmy was. The kid’s face was hot with excitement, and Reg surely must have believed that here was a bona fide agent of they at last.

“The boy was holding some sort of death-ray in his hand, it was pointed at the desk … and from inside his typewriter, Reg could hear Rackne screaming.

“You may think I’m attributing subjective data to a man who’s now dead—or, to be more blunt, making stuff up. But I’m not. In the kitchen, both Jane and Gertrude heard the distinctive warbling sound of Jimmy’s plastic space blaster … he’d been shooting it around the house ever since he started coming with his mother, and Jane hoped daily that its batteries would go dead. There was no mistaking the sound. No mistaking the place it was coming from, either—Reg’s study.

“The kid really was Dennis the Menace material, you know—if there was a room in the house where he wasn’t supposed to go, that was the one place he had to go, or die of curiosity. It didn’t take him long to discover that Jane kept a key to Reg’s study on the dining-room mantel, either. Had he been in there before? I think so. Jane said she remembered giving the boy an orange three or four days before, and later, when she was clearing out the house, she found orange

peels under the little studio sofa in that room. Reg didn't eat oranges —claimed he was allergic to them.

"Jane dropped the sheet she was washing back into the sink and rushed into the bedroom. She heard the loud wah-wah-wah of the space blaster, and she heard Jimmy, yelling: 'I'll getcha! You can't run! I can seeya through the GLASS!' And … she said … she said that she heard something screaming. A high, despairing sound, she said, so full of pain it was almost insupportable.

" 'When I heard that,' she said, 'I knew that I would have to leave Reg no matter what happened, because all the old wives' tales were true … madness was catching. Because it was Rackne I was hearing; somehow that rotten little kid was shooting Rackne, killing it with a two-dollar space-gun from Kresge's.

" 'The study door was standing open, the key in it. Later on that day I saw one of the dining-room chairs standing by the mantel, with Jimmy's sneaker prints all over the seat. He was bent over Reg's typewriter table. He—Reg—had an old office model with glass inserts in the sides. Jimmy had the muzzle of his blaster pressed against one of those and was shooting it into the typewriter. Wah-wah-wah-wah, and purple pulses of light shooting out of the typewriter, and suddenly I could understand everything Reg had ever said about electricity, because although that thing ran on nothing more than harmless old C or D cells, it really did feel as if there were waves of poison coming out of that gun and rolling through my head and frying my brains.

" ' "I seeya in there!" Jimmy was screaming, and his face was filled with a small boy's glee—it was both beautiful and somehow gruesome. "You can't run away from Captain Future! You're dead, alien!" And that screaming … getting weaker … smaller …

" ' "Jimmy, you stop it!" I yelled.

" 'He jumped. I'd startled him. He turned around … looked at me … stuck out his tongue … and then pushed the blaster against the

glass panel and started shooting again. Wah-wah-wah, and that rotten purple light.

” ‘Gertrude was coming down the hall, yelling for him to stop, to get out of there, that he was going to get the whipping of his life … and then the front door burst open and Reg came up the hall, bellowing. I got one good look at him and understood that he was insane. The gun was in his hand.

” ‘ “Don’t you shoot my baby!” Gertrude screamed when she saw him, and reached out to grapple with him. Reg simply clubbed her aside.

” ‘Jimmy didn’t even seem to realize any of this was going on—he just went on shooting the space blaster into the typewriter. I could see that purple light pulsing in the blackness between the keys, and it looked like one of those electrical arcs they tell you not to look at without a pair of special goggles because otherwise it might boil your retinas and make you blind.

” ‘Reg came in, shoving past me, knocking me over.

” ‘ “RACKNE!” he screamed. “YOU’RE KILLING RACKNE!”

” ‘And even as Reg was rushing across the room, apparently planning to kill that child,’ Jane told me, ‘I had time to wonder just how many times he had been in that room, shooting that gun into the typewriter when his mother and I were maybe upstairs changing beds or in the backyard hanging clothes where we couldn’t hear the wah-wah-wah … where we couldn’t hear that thing … the Fornit … inside, screaming.

” ‘Jimmy didn’t stop even when Reg came bursting in—just kept shooting into the typewriter as if he knew it was his last chance, and since then I have wondered if perhaps Reg wasn’t right about they, too—only maybe they just sort of float around, and every now and then they dive into a person’s head like someone doing a double-gainer into a swimming pool and they get that somebody to do the

dirty work and then check out again, and the guy they were in says, “Huh? Me? Did what?”

” ‘And in the second before Reg got there, the screaming from inside the typewriter turned into a brief, drilling shriek—and I saw blood splatter all over the inside of that glass insert, as if whatever was in there had finally just exploded, the way they say a live animal will explode if you put it in a microwave oven. I know how crazy it sounds, but I saw that blood—it hit the glass in a blot and then started to run.

” ‘ “Got it,” Jimmy said, highly satisfied. “Got—”

” ‘Then Reg threw him all the way across the room. He hit the wall. The gun was jarred out of his hand, hit the floor, and broke. It was nothing but plastic and Eveready batteries, of course.

” ‘Reg looked into the typewriter, and he screamed. Not a scream of pain or fury, although there was fury in it—mostly it was a scream of grief. He turned toward the boy then. Jimmy had fallen to the floor and whatever he had been—if he ever was anything more than just a mischievous little boy—now he was just a six-year-old in terror. Reg pointed the gun at him, and that’s all I remember.’ “

The editor finished his soda and put the can carefully aside.

“Gertrude Rulin and Jimmy Rulin remember enough to make up for the lack,” he said. “Jane called out, ‘Reg, NO!’ and when he looked around at her, she got to her feet and grappled with him. He shot her, shattering her left elbow, but she didn’t let go. As she continued to grapple with him, Gertrude called to her son, and Jimmy ran to her.

“Reg pushed Jane away and shot her again. This bullet tore along the left side of her skull. Even an eighth of an inch to the right and he would have killed her. There is little doubt of that, and none at all that, if not for Jane Thorpe’s intervention, he would have surely killed Jimmy Rulin and quite possibly the boy’s mother as well.

“He did shoot the boy—as Jimmy ran into his mother’s arms just outside the door. The bullet entered Jimmy’s left buttock on a downward course. It exited from his upper-left thigh, missing the bone, and passed through Gertrude Rulin’s shin. There was a lot of blood, but no major damage done to either.

“Gertrude slammed the study door and carried her screaming, bleeding son down the hallway and out the front door.”

The editor paused again, thoughtfully.

“Jane was either unconscious by that time or she has deliberately chosen to forget what happened next. Reg sat down in his office chair and put the muzzle of the .45 against the center of his forehead. He pulled the trigger. The bullet did not pass through his brain and leave him a living vegetable, nor did it travel in a semicircle around his skull and exit harmlessly on the far side. The fantasy was flexible, but the final bullet was as hard as it could be. He fell forward across the typewriter, dead.

“When the police broke in, they found him that way; Jane was sitting in a far corner, semiconscious.

“The typewriter was covered with blood, presumably filled with blood as well; head wounds are very, very messy.

“All of the blood was Type O.

“Reg Thorpe’s type.

“And that, ladies and gentlemen, is my story; I can tell no more.” Indeed, the editor’s voice had been reduced to little more than a husky whisper.

There was none of the usual post-party chatter, or even the awkwardly bright conversation people sometimes use to cover a cocktail-party indiscretion of some moment, or to at least disguise

the fact that things had at some point become much more serious than a dinner-party situation usually warranted.

But as the writer saw the editor to his car, he was unable to forbear one final question. “The story,” he said. “What happened to the story?”

“You mean Reg’s—”

” ‘The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet,’ that’s right. The story that caused it all. That was the real flexible bullet—for you, if not for him. What in the hell happened to this story that was so goddam great?”

The editor opened the door of his car; it was a small blue Chevette with a sticker on the back bumper which read FRIENDS DON’T LET FRIENDS DRIVE DRUNK. “No, it was never published. If Reg had a carbon copy, he destroyed it following my receipt and acceptance of the tale—considering his paranoid feelings about they, that would have been very much in character.

“I had his original plus three photocopies with me when I went into the Jackson River. All four in a cardboard carton. If I’d put that carton in the trunk, I would have the story now, because the rear end of my car never went under—even if it had, the pages could have been dried out. But I wanted it close to me, so I put it in the front, on the driver’s side. The windows were open when I went into the water. The pages … I assume they just floated away and were carried out to sea. I’d rather believe that than believe they rotted along with the rest of the trash at the bottom of that river, or were eaten by catfish, or something even less aesthetically pleasing. To believe they were carried out to sea is more romantic, and slightly more unlikely, but in matters of what I choose to believe, I find I can still be flexible.

“So to speak.”

The editor got into his small car and drove away. The writer stood and watched until the taillights had winked out, and then turned around. Meg was there, standing at the head of their walk in the

darkness, smiling a little tentatively at him. Her arms were crossed tightly across her bosom, although the night was warm.

“We’re the last two,” she said. “Want to go in?”

“Sure.”

Halfway up the walk she stopped and said: “There are no Fornits in your typewriter, are there, Paul?”

And the writer, who had sometimes—often—wondered exactly where the words did come from, said bravely: “Absolutely not.”

They went inside arm in arm and closed the door against the night.