

## Michael Mirolla / TWO STORIES

### POINT I

Let's start on a point along the path of infinite digression. And label it Point I. At this particular time, Stork is rowing a nondescript boat down an oil-slicked river. The boat is equipped with three oars and a kerosene lamp. And a box of waterproof matches. Above him, the sky reeks yellow. To his sides, tubes like giant recta overflow into the river. Along the bank, a young woman is standing on top of a rusted car. She waits with her thumb stuck out and her dress hoisted to the waist. Stork looks at her in awe; her shiny legs curve beckoningly with the point of a ragged building visible between them; her breasts hang out as she unbuttons her blouse. He hasn't had sex (with a woman) in three years. His genitals begin to ache; he releases his penis and quickly steers the boat towards the shore, looking ahead at the quick, easy fuck, at the ...

A:

But then he stops. And pulls back on his oars so that the boat jerks around to face in the other direction. Women make him nervous. The last one had laughed at the inadequacy of his equipment. He had had to run to his mamma who told him not to worry about what other women might say. They were naughty and the only things good enough for them were eels. With the belching city as the background and the monstrous machines carving it up for dinner, the woman has slowly removed all her clothes. She smiles and pouts her lips; she sways her body back and forth in unison with the rocking of the boat; she holds up her breasts and shakes them at him. Paralyzed, his left leg jerking beyond control, Stork pulls in the oars and the boat continues to float down the river. The woman leaps from the car and chases after him, screaming obscenities. Her feet are cut and bleeding from the broken glass (of which she will die). Her hair whips in the wind. It is falling out in clumps. She runs for a long time,

cursing, throwing car mirrors and hub caps into the water, pleading, spitting out her teeth. But she finally gives up when her shredded feet can carry her no further and she sits down to watch the hunched-up man as he's taken away by a black current. There'll be other men in other boats, you wait and see. One will turn her way. So it's no use getting dressed again and she curls up, waiting for her feet to heal.

Stork is masturbating frantically, thinking of the wife he seldom knew. He is unable to hold the oars, too busy ejaculating overboard. Was that her on the shore? Certain characteristics, such as how she shook her breasts, remind him of her. But it's impossible. He left his wife behind in one of the innumerable canals that led to the river. His mother had warned him she'd only be a burden on the last leg of the journey.

When he finally regains control of the oars, it is dark. He no longer knows where he is. Lights flicker along the shore, but the city is in total darkness, except for a dull glow in the distance like the spread of radioactive miasma. His stomach rumbles and his shoulder blades are stiffening like warped wood. He steers the boat towards one of the banks, past a gushing stream of potassium and sodium cyanide solutions. As the boat scrapes to a stop, a voice cries out: "Beat it, buster. We only got enough for two."

Stork steps out cautiously, his feet making slight sucking noises as they're swallowed by the mud. He searches blindly on the ground, picks up a large stick and hefts it to find the point where it balances best. Two men—one massive, lumbering; the other small, weasel-like—jump out of the brambles and make for him. He caves in the face of the massive one, deflecting him to one side and then hitting him again for good measure as he goes down. The other screeches and moves away. Stork sits down near the fire the two had built, complete with a spit made out of a broom handle. On it, a slightly-leaking kettle sways precariously. He lifts the top and the odour of decaying meat sends him reeling. He'll eat it, however, as it's a choice between this unknown and the certainty of raw rat flesh, the remains of creatures stuck in the sewer gratings. While waiting for it to cook, he thinks back to but doesn't quite reflect on the violence he has committed. It's surely the first man he has ever killed. He feels nothing. His mother had told him scant days before as he leaned with his hand on her emaciated lap that there were many mean and dangerous men along the way waiting to beat him, strip him, force him to do things

he didn't want to do. Not to mention the women who had knives hidden between their legs and wanted to suck him dry.

Half in and half out of the circle of light, his face in the mud, the dead man stirs. He lifts his head like a snake and looks around. He can't see. Perhaps it's only the blood from his mouth and nose; perhaps he's blind, never to see again. He can hear, however, out of one torn ear, the crackling of the fire.

"Alphonse, is that you? Alphonse, I can't see." He emits static as he speaks.

Stork jumps to his feet and holds the stick in a menacing position. In his hurry, he has picked up the bloodied end first. He cleans his hands against a clot of grass.

"Alphonse, get me some water." He spits out his last remaining teeth. And licks the blood that's thickening about his lips.

Stork's mother has warned him never to show any mercy. If a man's down, kick him between the legs and finish him. But Stork is by nature a merciful man. He lifts the dead man and drags him towards the fire.

"Did you kill him, Alphonse? Eh? The bastard! Wanting our food!"

Stork gently cleans the dead man's face which is utterly disfigured, more like pulp than flesh. Then, he wraps it in bandages made from the sleeves of his shirt. Through the hole that was once the dead man's mouth, he spoon-feeds him. One for the dead man; one for Stork. One for the dead man; one for Stork. On a little hill of cars, not far away, Alphonse dances in an absolute rage. He stops suddenly to watch, squinting and wondering about what kinds of torture Stork is inflicting on his poor friend. Sticking needles in his legs; hot coals down his throat; glass pipettes into his urethra? He'd like to help—how he'd like to help—but rationalizes there is little he can do. So he pops a handful of sticky pills into his mouth, curls up inside an overturned car and falls asleep. Almost instantly.

"Where are all these motherfuckers coming from, Alphonse? It wasn't like this before. It was peaceful then. Now, all along the river, these motherfuckin' bastards come strokin' their little pricks. And their sons-of-a-whore friends pour liquid shit on us from back there somewhere (he points in the wrong direction—towards the open sea). Cocksuckers! I'd like to line them all up and cut off their balls. Bastard! He didn't hafta hit me, did he? What did I ever do to him?"

He continues in this general manner as Stork feeds him. Then he falls asleep, snoring and gurgling, in rhythm with the pulse of his blood. Stork is thirsty. He takes a rusted tomato juice tin, goes down to the river and scoops out a bucket of water. When he sees it in the light of the fire, he no longer feels the urge to drink—not even if he boils it. What looks like an aborted minnow—or a human fetus—floats leisurely in it, covered with mucus, thick oil and another substance that seems to be eating away at the oil. He tosses the tin in the direction of the cars.

Stork realizes the importance of staying awake. After all, Alphonse must be out there somewhere, perhaps just waiting for the chance to get even. But this doesn't help and he falls asleep almost at once. The fire is a lullaby flicking about his brain, licking him gently. His head drops between his shoulders.

He wakes in the morning in exactly the same position, the fire out, the cold like a stiff penetrating piece of metal. He remembers a violent dream in which he lost himself in a thick greasy jungle of thin black trees that curled back onto themselves, whose limbs caused boils to erupt where they touched the earth. What had startled him awake was falling into a slick mouth-like pit that reeked of dead animals. There was a time (prior to the canals) when his dreams were truly dreams, when his dreams at least provided an escape from the landscape. Now all he has is a song. And that, too, is fast eluding him, becoming misplaced snatches and bursts of fallible memory.

It isn't yet dawn. A vapid yellow sky yawns above the emerging city. In the distance, electric pulses fire at mysterious intervals. He turns to the river. For the first time, he hears the water lapping against the bank, filling in the scattered suction of mud, clinging like phosphorescent beads to the hollow, reed-like grass. He thinks it's poetic. He had wanted to be a poet once (prior to the canals) but his mother told him they were naughty and often frequented brothels. So he's here instead. He wonders where the poet is.

The dead, bandaged man is still sleeping, his mouth swollen open like some grotesque fish head. Stork contemplates finishing the man off, putting him out of his obvious misery, but decides instead to leave him sleep. He rises and steals quietly away, lifting one leg after the other in an exaggerated pantomime manner so that they don't stay in contact with the mud more than necessary. The boat's still there. He steps into the scum and pulls himself in;

then pushes the boat away from the shore. As he sits there, an impression of his buttocks forming on the beads of acid rain, he ponders the future. It seems to him, suddenly and out of nowhere, that his life has been wasted till now. He slouches down as low as possible in the seat so that the wind chills only the top of his head. Why, if it weren't for circumstances beyond his control, circumstances of birth, of character, of coincidence and luck, he could be, at this very moment, within the walls of that city, within the airy vaults, safely locked away, counting his money and his women, perhaps even owning several of those outflow pipes, for he has heard that they are the new status symbols. In fact, that would be the first thing he'd do: bypass all else and simply buy several of these pipes. Never mind about the factories and manufacturing plants. Or the big-mawed machines that ate all in their paths. He could always get directly to the waste chemicals themselves without losing time.

Back on the shore, the man called Alphonse arises, rubbing his eyes. He looks through the car window and sees the boat floating away as if by itself. He immediately rushes to the aid of his friend, hoping the coals have cooled down and the needles emptied of their poison. He shakes him, jabbing him with an open-toed boot.

"Wake up! Wake up!"

The bandaged man stirs. A clot of half-dried blood spurts from his mouth.

"What's the matter? Alphonse? What's wrong?"

He feels the bandages. They're now various shades of red and brown, crusting to his skin.

"That bastard!" Alphonse exclaims. "Did he hurt you?"

"What the fuck do you think? I'm wearing these bandages for blind man's bluff or something?"

"But did he hurt you after?"

"After? After what? What's the matter with you?" He looks in the direction he believes Alphonse to be. "Lost your memory or something? You were right here last night, weren't you? Weren't you?"



A: 1.

Alphonse looks away. He is disgusted by the sight of the bandages on his friend's face, the thought of what lies beneath. He knows the air is acid, can eat holes through stainless steel, let alone rotting flesh.

"Well?"

"Last night? I was right here. Where do you think I was?"

"Obviously." He starts to unwrap the bandages. "Who else put these motherlovin' rags on? Did you give it to him good?"

"Huh? Yeah. Oh yeah. I caved his eggshell head in."

"Good, good." His mouth and chin are visible, dripping with flesh. "That's for my teeth."

"And I let him have it in the balls."

"That's for my nose."

"And I dragged his rotten corpse over and dumped the stinking carcass into the water. Where the fish gnawed him to bits."

"That's for my eyes."

He has removed most of the bandage and is trying to open those very same eyes. A piece of cloth flutters from the back of his head where it is encrusted and stuck. Alphonse looks around proudly. By now, he can see Stork's body being chewed away by eels or by an army of minute fish razing it to the bone with their sharp glinting needle-like teeth.

"Help me change the bandage, will you? And get some water to wash my eyes."

Alphonse snaps out of his reverie. He turns and looks for the first time at his friend's exposed face. Holding back a scream, he pukes black bile and edges slowly away.

Stork is singing a song his mother taught him:

Buss me, buss me, Bauble mine!  
Be my Love and I'll be Thine.  
All the Court has come a-Maying.  
All the Court at Love is playing;  
Men are sighing, Maids are singing,  
Through the woods their laughter ringing,  
Gathering Flowers, Giving Kisses—  
We poor fools have no such Blisses.  
Be my Love and I'll be Thine.  
Buss me, buss me, Bauble Mine.

He thinks it's lovely because it makes no sense, because there's nothing he can relate to. So he sings it again, continuously, in cycles, feeling his voice scraping over the water. All the lovely things his mother has taught him. He wonders if she understood them. He thinks not. Or else she wouldn't be wasting away from some unimaginable disease. No, that was too, too cruel of her. Because of it, he's on his own, tormented by naked women and assaulted by ungrateful half-humans. And he's hungry and the river fumes are stinking. And a new breed of seagull, tough, beady-eyed, patch-feathered, suicidal, splatters him with its droppings. The gull never regains altitude but swooping low and folding its wings, thuds against the riverbank. Reflecting on this, Stork doesn't notice the slow widening of the river. Nor does he see the rock that sleeps a foot below the waterline, ready to lift its head at the slightest irrhythmic ripple.

A: 1. a)

The boat crumples like a soiled newspaper against it. A splinter jams into Stork's left thigh; he lets out a scream and tumbles into the water. Before he's able to reach the rock, he swallows a few mouthfuls. Castor oil. A river of castor oil. From the rock itself he can see nothing but water. Are those clouds, the banks of the river, or grey waves frozen at their peaks? He feels sick. His feet seem to be rotting away, eroding into the rock. All he can do is sit and wait for another boat to pass by. He waits all day. Parts of him are dying away, shredding off and being left behind. That night, when his shivering has become instinctual and his legs feel like wet cords of wood, he looks out and catches a glimpse of a million fire-flies floating in the water ahead of him. That's where he'd be now if he hadn't been so stupid. He curls down in the foot of water and calls out for his mother, slowly, softly, full of sincerity, a toneless plea.

A: 1. b)

As the boat is about to crash, one of the oars catches between it and the rock. It bends, snaps in two. Stork feels its pressure as it brushes against his side and then gives way so that he almost topples over. Falling into the bottom of the boat, he fumbles about for the spare oar and manoeuvres the boat till he's circumvented the rock's jaws and is safely beyond it. Then he looks back at the mass of darker grey, at a vision of a red splintering boat and a blue drowning man, all made real by the two pieces of oar trailing behind him. His crotch is damp. He thinks the civilized thought that he stinks mightily. On further examination, he finds it's the odour of putrefaction, the same smell as that of the decaying meat flapping in the current. But the boat is through the last barrier and carries on safely towards open water where grey meets grey.

A: 2.

"Last night? He chased me away. I couldn't help it. He chased me away."

Alphonse starts digging into the ground with a small stick.

A stammer, a confusion of blood: "Who... who... the... the... fuck... fuck... bandaged me up?"

Alphonse points downriver.

"Him."

The dead man with the filthy bandages bellows like a deranged bull. He whirls and kicks the air. One of these kicks sends the fire leaping in all directions, sparks hissing on the water. He sobs in frustration, slashes at some torment in the air.

"I'll get that bastard. I'll get him. Where is he?"

Alphonse's hole is six inches deep by now.

"He's gone."

"Gone? Whadya mean gone? Where?" He whirls, spinning like a broken top, then falls dizzily to his knees, holding his head.

"On the river. Where the shit else could he go?"

"So what the fuck are we waiting for, eh? Let's go get him. He can't have gotten that far. Let's go."

Alphonse's stick has snapped in two. He continues with his hands, occasionally pulling out pieces of bluish metal that seem to glow.



"But you can't see."

The dead man leaps up again and the static in his voice reaches a high-pitched resolution: "That's all the more reason for us to get that cuntlicking bastard. Come on. Come on!"

As if forgetting his blindness, he runs towards their boat and stumbles headlong into the mud. Alphonse rushes over to lift him up, but is pushed away. On all fours, the dead man searches for the boat. Then, splashing through the water, he climbs over the side like a crab, falling in head first. He fumbles for the rope and prepares to cast off.

"Wait for me, you idiot," Alphonse cries out.

"I ain't waiting for no one. Come on if you're coming."

Alphonse picks up a twisted crow-bar and jumps into the boat. He hands the crow-bar to the dead man who fondles it, feels the metal closely from the blunt end to the forked tongue before kissing it. Alphonse rows. He now wishes he hadn't mentioned anything about last night. Or had lied. Just a little white lie. They should be searching for food or a shelter or a woman maybe, not chasing after some dangerous madman. But he continues to row.

After about half an hour, they catch sight of Stork's boat. At this distance, it seems to be in a state of semi-existence, appearing only when a wave lifts it up towards the sky. It floats along leisurely. Alphonse whispers to his friend that the boat is ahead of them. Now, they can hear phrases from a strange incantation. The man with the bandages is using the crow-bar to follow a beat. Alphonse orders him to keep quiet.

They're almost upon him before Stork hears the slight slicing of oars in water and looks up. For a moment, he's transfixed by the sight of the bandaged man waving the crow-bar. He can feel layers of his mind being stripped away, eaten by a creature that's all teeth. For a moment, he has the terrifying feeling he'll defecate all over himself but regains control of his sphincter and begins to row furiously away. Calmness is all. He can hear the voice of the bandaged man as if he were whispering sweet nothings in his ear, as if there were suddenly no distance between them.

"Come on, you little motherfuckin' lump of shit. Come and get what's coming to you."

He slams the crow-bar against the edge of the boat; Alphonse rows grimly.

Show no mercy, Stork's mother is saying. Show no mercy.

"You piece of rotting cunt! You prickless, wormy slab of dog meat! You just wait there now. Just wait for little old me. I'm coming for you."

Kick them when they're down because they're naughty if they get up again.

A: 2. a)

With a lurch of his whole being, Stork is ripped from the boat and hears it splintering as he lands on a submerged rock. He's hurt and can't get up. The world is a warm sticky place. A thick splinter has caught in his throat. There's laughter behind him. He cries out, but his vocal cords don't respond. His hand reaches for the splinter but never makes it. The crow-bar is almost comically soft as it crushes his brain against the rock. There's no need for the second blow, but it comes anyway. Alphonse insists he must have a turn as well. Between the two of them, they pound Stork so that the ragged bones stick out through his muscles and skin. And stop only when they're exhausted. Then, tossing the body away, Alphonse and the dead bandaged man turn to get back into their boat. And Alphonse can be seen gesturing wildly as it floats beyond his reach and heads out towards the open. Neither can swim. At first, they sit there. Then the bandaged man can be seen chasing Alphonse around the spreading pool of blood, stumbling, rising again, slipping on the greasy water and connecting once in a while with the crow-bar. But then Alphonse decides he's had enough. He waits for his friend to come around and gives him a vicious blow across the face. The bandaged man falls; Alphonse squats, pulls his friend by the hair and makes as if to finish him off with the crow-bar. But then he changes his mind, lifts his friend's face out of the water and places it gently on his lap.

A: 2. b)

Something just scrapes the edge of Stork's boat and turns it sideways. He loses an oar. With the other one, he pushes off and circles around the obstruction. Behind him, Alphonse angles in his direction. He knows about the rock and can already see Stork crashing into it. But Stork slides by. Alphonse knows now they'll never catch him but, on his friend's insistence, they keep after him for most of the day. The bandaged man falls asleep; Alphonse's shoulders ache.

"That's it. I ain't going no further."

He pulls up the oars and turns the boat around. It's dark. All he can see are the fires along the riverbank, warm and inviting like a series of false advertisements. The man in the bandages wakes with a scream.

"Alphonse," he says, his voice barely audible.

"What?"

"Are you there?"

"Sure I'm here, you idiot. Otherwise, how would I be talkin' to you?"

"Alphonse?"

"What now?"

"I'm scared. Do you think I'll see again?"

"No!"

\* \* \*

Stork finally lights his kerosene lamp. He has been floating in the dark for hours, fearing they were still following him. He's proud of himself. After all, they couldn't catch him. For some reason, the lamp reminds him of the girl he had passed the day before. He closed his eyes. From this distance, he can easily visualize another scenario, can easily make love to her. Her body smells of clover and parsley—or so he hopes as he has never smelled these things. She takes his hand and leads him to an old mattress. A rat scampers out as they collapse on it. She kisses and kneads him till he's ready to explode. A bubble pops on the surface of the water. He trembles as he descends to her, but it's not nervousness. Only an excitement that knows no bounds. The bubble spreads thickly over the water. The automatic motions take over. It's easy, he thinks. Just pretend she's your mother, forcing her legs apart, probing for the fatal wedge. The rat crouches behind a tuft of grass and waits for the humans to finish, beady eyes wary, nose sniffing for danger. The girl opens her eyes and thanks him. They sit down cuddled against each other and tell their stories: how she wandered out from the city, how he had almost rowed by, how fate threw them together. A slice of earth corrupts and falls into the water. Stork wants to circle her nipple with his lips. He wants to fall asleep in her arms. She, on the other hand, is busy marvelling at the way a penis shrivels from a formidable serpent to a frail worm. She remembers a dark foul room filled with bats where her mother and father drank, fought, screamed, kicked, stabbed, screwed and . . . but it's not true. She was born in a mansion, in a test-tube, in the jerking off of gigantic mechanical sex objects that sixty-nined each other and then carried the little bits of metal sperm around until they could spit them out at the first available signs of life.

A drop of perspiration burns his eyes. He finds himself surrounded by a vast network of lights, bobbing up and down. They are scattered at varying distances, like stars. He rows towards one; it rows towards him. He sees now it's a red row-boat like his. There's a man in it. He holds up the lamp towards the man's face and the other reciprocates. Despite the wishful thinking, they are not one and the same.

## THE SINGULAR MAN

The singular man lives in a cave outside the city's electric gates. The cave is an artificial creation, quarter-spherical in shape, with a flat façade, a diameter of pi-squared and an elliptical opening through which only one person at a time can squeeze. In it, equidistant between front and back along the central arc, is a small plastic three-legged stool on which he sits during his hours of contemplation. An imaginary wire brings electricity to a light-bulb that hangs directly over the stool. It can be turned on and off by the pulling of an imaginary string. He turns on this light when he sleeps. Otherwise, contemplation is done in the dark. The cave itself lies at the bottom of a warped mountain which serves to separate "his" city from the next where perhaps another singular man lives. He doubts this but has, till now, not ascertained the facts, as he detests travel and won't move unless absolutely forced to.

His waking time, approximately twenty hours a day, is taken up entirely with the question: "Why must I die?" He asks it not in the apocalyptic, hysterical manner of preachers and those about to go, but in the way others ask the time of day. He has filled copy books, walls, clothes, calendars and even mouse traps with this question and its variants. Nothing else ever intrudes on his thinking unless it's connected to the central mystery. He knows all the clichés: there is a cure for everything except death; death cures all; you only live once; to be able to live well, you must learn how to die well and vice versa. His dreams are just as skeletal, a profusion of coffins and pocketless suits (he has one already prepared) and dreaded figures in white uniforms. Often, he is blind in his dreams; still more often, deaf. Most of the dreams end in a rage of suffocation.



At first, during the early years, a steady procession of philosophers, scientists, poets, writers of prose, etc. came from the city and wound their way down to the cave where, one at a time, they entered the oval opening to answer his question. The philosophers said it was because of the inevitable decay of being as it gradually acquired meaning; scientists attributed it to genetic programming; poets answered blissfully: "Because you were born"; writers, of course, lost the thread of the argument and wove their own patterns of description, narration, characterization and time-sequences, complete with new techniques of I-you-he manipulation. The only certified wise man to visit him answered simply: "Because." As can be imagined, none of these answers was the least satisfying for the singular man. He grew quiet in their presence, refused to ask his question, developed a moroseness that would burst into laughter the moment they left. This attracted even more to his cave as the password for the age was enigmatic silence. Then he struck on the idea of switching on the light every time he sensed a visitor. They found him asleep on his stool and totally unresponsive. He practised till he could pull the imaginary string at precisely the moment they were crawling through the mouth of the cave. The sudden light repelled them as if they were some type of anti-moth.

Now, only his wife visits him—to bring him food. This wife, haggard, rundown and crone-like even though only middle-aged, is a relic of the days when, as an electronics and logic circuit expert in the city's power plant, he kissed the ground and thanked heaven for his existence, for his position in the natural balance of things. An acute reader can easily differentiate his present attitude from the former. The food, however, might as well come by itself or materialize in the cave's fetid air for all he notices. In fact, if asked, he probably wouldn't be able to say the last time he was aware of his wife. He notices only things that excite him, that stimulate the question, that irritate. With respect to the food itself, he eats nothing but meat, meat on the verge of going bad. And it has to be real meat, not the plastic-produced stuff so popular in the city. The realization that something somewhere has suffered, screamed, died to produce this meal adds immensely to his excitement. But that's just half of it: the half-digested meat is always vomited up afterwards, spewing up in lumpy, accusing pieces. This is the duality of the singular man.

The city's attitude towards this man has developed into one of acute indifference. (They once sent a Health Inspector to investigate the rumour that he was keeping bisexual chickens without a licence, but this proved false and the inspector excused himself profusely as he fell out of the entrance like a cracked egg.) The city tolerates him as long as he remains outside the gates. It has more important problems: roads continually to tear up, garbage to be strewn, sewers to block up and, of course, the power plant to prevent a darkness from creeping in through one of the chinks. Electricity is the city's pride and pre-occupation. Someone capable of flying over (not possible) would see it as a song in a bubble of light, a sizzling, sparking song but a monotoned song nevertheless. All those who work in the power plant are accorded the highest places in the city's hierarchy. The mayor himself (herself lately) is traditionally gleaned from the former superintendents of this plant. The singular man never got beyond the first engineering level in his few years there. The personnel department had made a psychological report on him which cast a shadow on his future (as well as predicting it). It said that, unlike most of the workers who were truly contented, satisfied and prepared to assume the posture and attitude of their superiors without question, his good will, bonhomie and ready smile were nothing but "sugar-coating over the rotten apple core" of his personality. He left to take up his position as the singular man shortly after a six hundred volt shot of electricity jarred loose some of the neuron synapse connections in his lower brain. He had been the singular man for all time. And singular men live in perfect damp caves sitting on three-legged stools with naked bulbs dangling overhead to remind them of former glory.

After the problem of death itself, the thing that worries him most is what he'll say on his death-bed. Will he be cryptic and enigmatic, leaving behind a set of mysteriously-encoded words to be deciphered through the ages? Or romantically brave? Perhaps, even smiling un peu as his lips form the last irrevocable vowels and consonants? Silence, a piercing stare at one of his sloping inscribed walls? No, for then he would burst, not die, fly apart like an overripe squash. A rhetoric of the soul, talking on and on, climax after climax? In the long run, the singular man concludes it's better not to dwell on it—hope it occurs spontaneously—and to concentrate on the act itself. Certainly,

he would die well: a little fever, a little delirium, a little cold, a little death rattle, a little . . . Who does he want at his bedside? Everyone. (The whole universe, animate and inanimate, gathered into an incandescent ball to pay its respects. Every face whispers: "Soon, you'll be part of a wonderful new creation never before imagined, let alone seen: a leg, an arm, a spirit, a flower petal, a piece of charcoal filled with ancestral worms." Big deal, he manages to answer, trying to focus his eyes. I want to remain me. It's no use my aiming for something better. It could just as easily turn out something worse. And I despise gambling. They cite examples: Tithonus, Sisyphus, Prometheus. All sought immortality in their own way; all received it in another.) And no one. Absolutely nothing. A vast blankness; a blank vastness. Out floating in a desert where he sees only the undulating sand and his own rot, his own limbs falling off, sizzling where they touch the dunes, screaming as they turn to glass.

At first, his wife lived with him in the cave, doing all the wifely chores. But she couldn't get used to sleeping with the light on. She would get up in the middle of the night from the far corner where she slept and would pull the string. He always awoke with a scream that caused her to start beating at him with her fists. She moved outside and slept under the stars. (They were there but not visible.) The climate in that part of the world is excellent, regulated as it is by the surrounding mountains. This seemed the perfect compromise, close enough to provide for him yet not so close so as to be disturbed by his eccentricities. And it worked well—till the ones from the city began to arrive at all hours to have a look at the cave-dwellers, poking at her while she slept and reading out pamphlets that described the two of them either as "neurotic misfits unable to cope with the growing pains and complexities of our technological-mythological-astrological society" or as "precursors of a new dawn, ready to restore the human animal to its proper place at the centre of the web of existence." From then on, she was at his side day and night, whispering in his ear, invoking her body, prying open his, closing hers, saying it was enough, he'd had his little joke on the city. Now it was backfiring on them. All one had to do was return to the city and recover one's old job. Become important again in a normal way. It was then that he spoke for the last time to his wife: "I'm the singular man. It's my duty to off-set the false life of the city with my own true sense of

death. I don't need you any more, so you may leave." She left but soon returned with a doctor who recommended a psychiatrist who convinced her that his disease was both incurable and highly contagious. Not yet entirely certain and not wishing to feel that she'd abandoned her husband prematurely, she consulted the medicine man who was protected by the city and held the only licence within a pi-squared mile radius. That proved the last straw for, after a few incantations, invocations and bush burnings, the medicine man burst out weeping and ran off, muttering something about finding a cave. The present arrangement was initiated by her at that time. She re-married (an engineer from the power plant) and he was very understanding when it came time for her to bring her former husband food. The realization he would eat only meat came after several dishes of vegetables and fruit were left untouched. The next time she attempted a mixture in the form of a stew. At first, she thought he'd rejected the whole thing but, on throwing it out, she noticed the pieces of meat were gone. Thus she fed him only meat. Money—and real meat was expensive—was no object. Her husband had virtually unlimited credit. So, the singular man alternated between spare ribs and pork. On Christmas Eve, he ate fried eel; on Good Friday, fillet of sole. He imagined they were some type of holiday but couldn't tell them apart.

The singular man is casting about for a way to cheat fate out of its unexpected yet fully predictable booty. Perhaps, coming down with a one-hundred-per-cent fatal disease would reduce the uncertainty to a minimum? But a minimum wasn't a small enough approximation to please him. Traditionally, of course, he knew of only one way to cheat at that game: suicide. Suicide has one big drawback. He rejects it as self-defeating. In fact, he no longer feels it's that important to anticipate or control the coming of death. What does eat at him (like the fat white larva of a dung beetle) is the question: "Why must I die when everything else remains, seeing what I no longer see, feeling what I no longer feel?" He concludes the worst part of death is knowing there are some still living, some still quick: add a few at the beginning, push a few into/out of the middle, chop off a few at the end. If we all die at once, he reasons, there will be nothing left to exist, to pity, to laugh, to cannibalize, to dance. What a sweet thought! Everything must die when he dies. He will become a murderer, killing all the unsuspecting blue-eyed creatures with their bodies wrapped around the living fuel pump. He will kill the fuel pumps as well,



those with the paunches first, then the mean lean ones. He will leave the deformed creatures till the end for they resemble him in some strange way. These he will destroy as humanely as possible, some type of pill or drug to put them to sleep. And himself? The action must turn on the actor. Wouldn't he be left to exist, to pity, to laugh? He must attempt the annihilation of all at the same time—and that included himself. He must practise the art of bloodthirstiness for it definitely was an acquired skill and not inherent. This is the reason for the mouse-traps. They philosophize in their own way. Such a pleasure would a mouse receive from them if it could read that famous question: "Why must I die?" The cheese would turn into his own body and he'd scamper away to relate to his family the narrow escape. Instead, the cheese does become his body. The singular man catches several mice each day but develops no thirst for blood. The little trickle on the side of their mouths induces him even before he's eaten to vomit—a thin, yellowish spewing.

The days pass in disharmonious equality. He begins to wander outside the confines of the cave. He marvels at the well-defined separation of light between the inside and out. Here it is dry. The cave is a world of primitive damp and artificial light. And lately, his light bulb has begun to flicker. He points to the sky: there is the hazy sun, everlasting Sol; and here is the earth, the infinitesimal Earth. And these, these are the rays connecting them, tugging, trying to pull them together in fiery embrace. The singular man lies between the great presses and, suffering excruciating pleasure (to the point of pain), is moulded into a new singular man, much wiser than the first and less latent. This singular man dresses in pocketless suits. He asks no questions but talks of beauty and meaning, art and life. He addresses himself at the foot of the mountain, talks of love and death, of man and wisdom, of suicide and murder.



In the beginning, his wife is wary of the change, frightened that it might be but a new form of the old illness. She, however, is gradually convinced that he has turned into something better, a synthesis. She leaves her new husband and rejoins the old. She listens intently as he talks. She thinks it a pity that the words are being wasted on rock and sky and wind, for she's certain now her husband's a genius. She hires a secretary to take down, in short hand, all that he says, no matter how trivial it may sound. This secretary sleeps when he sleeps and writes when he talks. The singular man feels the creation of a world inside himself. Out of a gamble he never knew he'd taken, there has evolved the something better that the universe bowed to at his death bed.

The philosophers, scientists, poets, writers and solitary wise man return, each from a banquet where the food was scarce. They proclaim him the singular man and accept his word without question. It is his profound suffering, his intense magnification of the idea of death that has formed him, they say in unison. He talks on, oblivious of their presence. They rush away to base philosophic systems, scientific laws, epics, trilogies and wise sayings on his spoutings. Modern man, they say as one, has lost his voice. Here it has been regained. Silence is an unnecessary evil, they warn, created by people with hideous secrets. The city once again files towards him, a few (misfits and malcontents one and all) denouncing him for having spoken, the majority carrying pamphlets that speak of him as "emblematic of its serenity and fortitude in the face of ineffable mystery." It names streets and buildings after him. Pictures of his white hair and calm face abound. A huge electric sign proclaiming "The Singular Man Lives Here" lights up the sky. He talks on; the secretary writes it down. Finally, as the grandest of grand gestures and bearing in mind the fact he was once its top electronics expert (so say the records), the mayor offers him the job as the power plant's superintendent. He does not acknowledge the honour at the time but several weeks later he stops talking, builds an acrid fire around the stool and gets rid of the secretary (who agrees to resign on condition he can follow the singular man about even without remuneration). He then moves back into the city. The cave is surrounded by guards and declared a municipal shrine.

The singular man is determined to create a meaning out of his life. He, therefore, sets out to make the city one huge, fantastic light. Nowhere a speck of darkness; nowhere an alley or park unlit. Even the sewers are as bright as operating rooms. People are asked to wear hats with multi-beam lights on them. The crime rate is thus cut in half. The other half can't be helped by lights as those are committed under their glare. Murder and rape in secluded corners are things of the past—there are no secluded corners. When someone is in trouble, he designates it by flashing a yellow light. Prostitutes still use the traditional red. Lovers signal each other through a variety of lights known only to each other. His engineers are working on a dome that will generate its own light. Some of the city dwellers don't know what darkness means. Others remember it as a primeval fear that loped leisurely through their childhoods. It is now as remote as gods and minotaurs, as incredible as living in caves.

The singular man himself lives in an office attached high to the side of the power plant. It is rectangular in shape, pi-squared metres per side. The stool has been replaced by a metal swivel chair, computer terminal and ergonomic desk. No philosophers, poets, writers or wise man visit him. Rather it is a steady stream of engineers, chemists, architects, technicians and salesmen. They pull down his statements in full flight. "Let the solitudes disappear," he says and immediately a campaign is launched to couple everyone or to build all the edifices so that they touch or to have the population join hands. He attends feasts where speakers pronounce him the ideal man and the paradigm for youth. In his closet is a pile of discarded mouse traps, the copy of a book written in short hand and a scrunched up secretary fed daily on his orts. These objects leech themselves to him in moments between drinks. He shrugs them off and joins the rest—a controlled revelation, a heart-to-heart discussion on the meaning of light, a free-wheeling denunciation of materialism and darkness. His wife smiles and keeps the intrigues away from him (imagine—there are those who long for the good old days!), but she's worried that he still eats only meat and wears clothes without pockets, that the true changes are masked by superficial similarities.

But those who blame her for what happens next are merely groping in the dark. On the first night, amid the luminous festivities to celebrate power and its electric acquisition, there is a flicker, a flicker like a subliminal message. Enough only to disturb for a moment the celebrations. On the second night, it is a flash of darkness lasting from five to ten seconds. During that time, the entire population freezes, stares up blindly at the vanished dome; fear's ozone rises lazily, followed by sweaty relief as the lights blaze again. "The power interruption just experienced," the loudspeakers bark, "is an aberration of the laws of probability. Not in a million billion years could it happen again. Rest assured." The people cheer as one and resume dancing. On the third night, the lights die permanently; the city itself disappears. The silent cowering, the inability to move, lasts for several hours. Then, there is that scream that neighbouring cities claim they heard as clearly as if all distance had vanished. And the killing starts. Revenges are settled, new ones started; the hungry-eyed child getting set to cross the street is gang raped by an entire troop of Boy Scouts; the mental hospital's and prison's electric cell-doors pop open as the auxiliary power inexplicably fails to kick on. After the first rampage, during which the greater portion of the population is destroyed, the survivors (those genetically equipped with better night sight) head instinctively towards their failed protector. On the way they pass the medicine man who has, alas, danced his last dance. Rats carry away his limbs; an eye stares up balefully from its cushion of earth. After waiting politely for a few moments (habits are hard to break), they burst into the office. The singular man is obviously there, sitting at his computer terminal. Mouse traps and a secretary, pulled out of the closet as if from a hat, litter the floor. "He has abandoned us," screams the erstwhile leader, a tall blond ex-games master holding a smoky torch which he shoves into the secretary's face. "Here I am, right before you," the singular man says, standing up to make himself more visible. But, while he's plainly there, it's plain they can't see him. "The wife! Where's the wife?" They turn and seek her out. "Hold your horses," she says, emerging from her toilet. "Just putting on a touch of make-up. Wrinkles, you know." Mercifully, she dies from

a bludgeon blow (stool leg?) before being reduced to a bloody pulp right before the eyes of her husband. Then the mayor, the philosophers, scientists, poets, writers and single wise man are rounded up and crucified. For students of anthropology and history, their bones can still be seen hanging from the X-shaped power grids. The few remaining people turn on each other, stumbling about in the massive dark, rushing through the city as if caught in an unstemmable hemorrhage. Who's to blame for allowing the singular man such power, such access to power? And a flurry of blows, a whistling of knives, a crystal snapping of necks.

The next night, one person emerges onto the brightly-lit streets. He repeatedly asks, as he heads towards some kind of termination: "Why must I live?" The acute reader can easily extract his former attitude from his present one. He thinks back to a time of lying in his damp cave at the age of forty with his light on, pulling the imaginary string, dreading to be born. They have destroyed it now, sealed up the entrance, smashed the bulb. Blind shadows gather behind him. The city isn't dead. Yet. For he leads an army of misfits, the mentally ill, the disturbed, the deranged, the diseased, the disordered, the demented over the mountain towards the next city where a similar army waits huddled in its bubble. He carries a nondecipherable book under his arms. He'll need it when they regain their sight.