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All the Strange Hours

CHAPTER 25

The Other Player

I AM coming to the end—the end of which I spoke in the beginning—the shattered mirror which can never be repaired but which lies in bits in the hallways of the mind itself. Feet crunch upon the glass as in an abandoned house; sometimes a ray of light strikes through a closed shutter and something still glitters, devastatingly beautiful, upon the floor. Or, similarly, a moonlit dream turns the fragments to soft shadows out of which come voices. I have not slept well since, in the hatchery days, I set the clock to wake me every hour. Perhaps I still fear the fire that might have consumed me there, or the dice game in the house of childhood. Who knows about these things? Who knows, sometimes in age, what one really is or if someone else—or alternately others—gazes from the eyes that we imagine are our own? Even psychologists admit to the reality of multiple personality.

But why philosophize? This is the story of a dream, but of a dream that came as I fumbled late amongst resurrected news clippings and objects that had been better left, like one's glasses and padlocks, to the hurrying time traders. In the words of the physicist Max Born, "the brain is a consummate piece of combinatorial mathematics." An hour comes when reality, the real-

DAYS OF A DOUBTER

ity we know, gives way to combinations no longer causal or successive in character.

I have not dreamed such a dream before but something tells me I will dream again, though in a different fashion. It began, I think, in the slight fever of a cold. It went on, gaining in reality, until I could sense the wheels of a train jouncing beneath me and the lurch of the freight car in whose door I was standing. A harsh wind cut through the doorway but there was still a faint light. Strung out along the grade were men who seemed known to me from past decades. They were clothed mostly in the black of the earlier century. They ran and reached up gesticulating hands as though in warning or goodbye. The train was picking up speed for the storm-filled country ahead. I leaned against the door and watched with no regret the running figures fade. Fields and bridges were flashing by at an incredible pace. The whistle ahead alternately wailed and blasted over the desolate countryside. It reverberated mournfully in my head as I turned to compose myself for sleep on the hard floor of the car.

There were two of us in that boxcar and, looking on with astonishment, alternately inhabiting the mind of first one and then the other, I saw that one was a grey-haired man, the other a youth of eighteen. There was something familiar about both of them.

"There's always another town," ventured the eighteen-year-old as the cold cut deep into the car. "Find some packing paper and wrap it inside your shirt. Christ, man, try to sleep." He tightened his belt, turned, and heaved vainly at the drafty door which stuck and refused to close.

"Will there be other towns?" asked the older man a little simply.

"There will be a town," repeated another voice in the car. Something about it was suddenly vast and inescapably ominous. The Player, the Other Player, I thought wildly. The Player who had tried to burn me in that place of the life machines so long ago. The Player who had waited in the adjoining corridor

and who never spoke. He was speaking now. "There will be a town," he said. The car filled with his presence. The train roared across a trestle that echoed like something heard in my youth. The Player no longer spoke in the car, but I knew he was there. "Jump," I whispered to the frightened eighteen-year-old whose hands shook with fear. "The train is doing sixty but you just might be the one to make it—the only one. Jump and make a fire for dawn."

We stood at the door in the black night and the beating rain, waiting for slackened speed and a soft embankment. Once more the youth hitched his belt. "Now," I shouted. He jumped but I never saw him hit the grade. The rain poured down in sheets.

The grey-haired man awoke in his bed staring at the ceiling in the dawn. The Player was still present but he had retreated to a corner as on that night in the hatchery.

"The young man jumped," I said after a long moment. "At least he had guts."

"You will not see him again," said the Other Player.

"And Feather?" I questioned, fingering names like beads.

"She does not remember."

"And the black-haired one in grade school whose name I cannot—?"

"No. It is too late—bad luck there, she will not remember."

"Did she make out?"

"Do you think it wise to ask?"

My head rolled back upon the pillow.

"Can you not be content?" said the Player. "You are an old man, a scholar now. You have come a long way through time. You have written books. You can name men since history began. You have stood in the places of the dead, handled their skulls. Content yourself. Anywhere along the way it could have been different."

"Or better," I said.

"But the women," I protested. "There was so little time," I

said. "I make faces, faces in pain when no one is looking. There were those who went away, or things which were not done right."

"You remember the game in the ruined house at evening? When you were a child? The score you could not read for sure?"

"Yes, yes I do."

"You played against all your possible futures. You played in the dim room at sunset. Remember?"

"I remember."

"You lost the unborn, remember?"

"I remember."

"You lost fame."

"I remember."

"And fortune."

"I remember."

"You left stones in various graves. The magic did not work. You are called a scientist?"

"I fought for them when all else was gone or laughed at. My kind have done it since the ice age. I would do it again."

"You were precocious at eighteen. You knew then how it would turn out."

"Yes," I murmured. For a moment I saw a line of squat, helmeted bodies and a goal ten yards behind me toward which the players surged. As the play began I could see the whole line shifting behind me.

"You were very fast," the voice conceded, "but your eyes were going even then. You had to turn to scholarship, remember? You liked this crush of bodies better. The direct approach. No metaphysics. At heart you are a primitive. As I remember, the game was lost."

"It was a game," I said.

I tried to face him down but the effort was like the breathing at the end of the field when the eyes of the fresh replacements are close and you know already how things will go.

"Would you like to play again for another ending?"

THE OTHER PLAYER

"Yes," I said. "No," I countered, considering. "I do not trust you. It might be worse. The pain—"

The Player waited patiently.

"You wish to play?" he asked again.

I nodded weakly. "It is the only way to win. The odds—"

The room grew suddenly quiet.

"Let us begin," I pleaded.

"There is only one game," said the remorseless gamester. "You have not learned its meaning. It is mentioned in your Bible. It is called the count of the days toward wisdom."

"And this is where it ends?" We were whispering now.

"Yes, this is where it ends."

I raised myself upon one elbow. "I will not play such a game twice," I said defiantly.

The Player paused, almost as if he shrugged invisibly.

"Others of your kind have found that best," he said finally. "They have taught themselves deliberately to leave the wheel of existence."

The clicking of the dice began again but it was far away.

"Who is playing?" I questioned.

"Hush," said the Player faintly, "I am going now. It is another game."

"Wait," I insisted. "I want to play."

"It is the only wisdom," brooded the Player. "That is the secret that was kept from you."

I was growing weaker now. "The play," I repeated. The clicking of the dice began again but the sound was faint. "I want to play."

"There is only the one game," affirmed the Player from somewhere behind me. "You play but once. That is why the days are counted. Lie back, you have already played."

"And it can be no different?" I asked. The Player did not answer. There was a great pain bursting in my heart. I needed the strength of the youth in the boxcar, but he was no longer there. He had—where was he now?

DAYS OF A DOUBTER

"He is gone," said the voice inexorably. "He never hit the grade, he is in you, wiped out in you."

I buried my face in the pillow. "Go away," I pleaded. "I do not want to remember."

"I am going," said the Player. "You have lost. There are new games beginning."

"But I won," I cried after him. "Remember, remember, that I played." It dawned suddenly morning in the harsh sunlight of Mexico, three decades back.

"That, too, is part of the wisdom," the voice came back to me. "You played. That is part of the counting. And this is where the kind of time that bewitched you began. Remember? *Behind nothing, before nothing.* This is the country of vertical time. I will leave you to add the zeros. The gods always carried them here."

My hands relaxed a little. I turned my head. I would sleep in the sun and consider. Carefully, I extracted a travel folder from my pocket and drew it over my face. It was lined with roads and towns crowded with other lives. I no longer believed the Player. Had I not been conditioned since childhood to escape? I would close my eyes and be patient as in that cabin long ago on the mountain in Colorado.

The clicking of the dice came a little nearer and then faded into a renewed dream. I was tired and I slept on the steps of a ruined temple. I cared no longer in what age I might awake. The Player was gone at last.

I turned and let the sun come faintly over my closed eyes. What had it all meant? I still did not know. Was this all that could be said of the counting? I tried to concentrate upon a face, but strangely that too was fading. I slept as the temple slept in the timeless Caribbean sun. This was what it meant then, the counting: the dots and bars on the great stelae. The wisdom could take care of itself. It was beyond me. It was beyond every man. But for all that the counting mattered.

Suddenly, inexplicably, I stood alone on a western hilltop in the falling snow of a blizzard that would never cease so long as the world remained. As though I were someone else I saw the approaching posse on horseback, their rifles black against the snow. Damn them, the snow had done it. I could go no farther. I dropped from the wagon. The lifted pistol in my hand did not waver. I was someone else now playing a role long finished because an innocent child could not forget.

I fired and the answering rifles brought me bloodily to my knees. I coughed. What mathematical equation was this? I had asked to play eternally against the Player. He had dissembled, cheated. It was forever a throw that turned out the same, eternally the same. A final mockery. Worship it the zero. But I would play, the warden and the hatred were long gone, but I would play. No man would beat me into line. I lifted the gun once more, the snow turning red beneath me. It was the last of the dream. *Behind nothing, before nothing, worship it the zero.* This, then, was the counting. It was the Player who controlled the dice.

I thought so in that dream. I do not believe it. "Between a man asleep and a man dead," Cervantes once wrote, "there is but little difference." Upon this point I would differ with the ironic assailant of windmills. I have said, and reiterated throughout this account of my journey, that either I have not slept at all, or I have lived a life of dreams so violent that at times I have struck out in defense, or striven with impotent muscles to beat back the powers of the dark. Curiously I have never dreamed of flight.

I have climbed up a solitary subway stair to a winking red glow upon a blank wall that denied me entrance, while a pushing crowd poured into a tunnel that I found utterly abhorrent and resolutely refused to enter. A sizable portion of my life has been given to such adventures which certainly do not equate with the conception of sleep as a little interim death. I have

even started up unhesitatingly with the passage of a burglar's flashlight over my eyes, as though something couched and waiting had expected him there.

Always, since that headlong fall into unconsciousness long ago, I sleep high on two pillows, with my arms, even in the coldest weather, outside the covers. Do I still await the return of the laughing puppet? I do not know. I only know that I dream and the dream ends in that bloody violence in the snow, the time traders' exchange of sixty years ago. Why can they not effect another? I know that this is the screen I must penetrate, a screen to be whirled away into deeper snow as once I tried to do by spinning the microfilm viewer in the archives.

When my mother died, among her remaining sparse belongings was a satchel left to me. In it I had discovered a huge forgotten bone from my early diggings. The bone lies now upon my desk, massive and so mineralized it can be made to ring when struck. Why had she saved it? God alone knows, but I am aware there were once two of these ice-age bison forelimbs and that one lies far away in the burial of a dog named Wolf who wandered much with me and upon whom my head once rested by a fire.

I think we dreamed the same dreams, that dog and I. It was for this reason that I had seen, in the eyes of the man on the loading platform in Kansas, the great cold, the unutterable spaces, and the age from which he had come. We knew, rather than spoke, knew because the precise definitions of the present day did not exist between us, any more than they had existed between myself and the dog named Wolf now lying in his grave. We had not been dogs or people in any modern sense. We were merely creatures who hunted and shared together, products of a winter such as I had once glimpsed from afar across blinding icefields long ago.

I did not care for taxonomic definitions, that was the truth of it. I did not care to be a man, only a being. I lifted the huge bone meditatively. The dream had faded; there was no way to

THE OTHER PLAYER

ask the Player to recast the dice. To do so always ended with Tom Murry, because Tom Murry had died as a hunted man yet still defined as human. I had inadvertently joined him, identified with him. But in that greater winter where I sought retreat, Tom Murry could lead me no further. I would continue to fall and die to no purpose. I remembered then the patient clicking that had followed me down the ancient vaults of that crumbling library through the door that out of long habit I had held open.

On impulse I put the bone beneath my pillow. I knew what I was doing. Wolf would help me, help me past that endless confrontation in the snow. The Player could not stop him, for we would be no longer man or dog, but creatures, creatures with no knowledge of contingency or games. All the carefully drawn human lines would be erased between us, the snows deeper, the posse floundering, the dice cup muted in the Player's hand. We would vanish together as an anonymous grey blur. The time traders would scurry to help us, even Coyote the trickster, who is unscrupulous and wins at gambling.

Make no mistake, I will dream again, but further, further back. The rifles will be silenced, the dice at last unshaken. I feel my hour coming. I am anxious to press on. They wait for me, the dog Wolf and the Indian, muffled in snow upon the altiplano.