

After dinner Ed pulled the old, blackened bucket out of the back of his truck, poured some water in it, added a little dish-washing soap, and snuggled it into embers on one side of the fire. We wiped off our utensils and put them into the bucket to soak. After a while they came clean, me washing, Ed rinsing.

Our bellies were full. The moon was up. A breeze danced through our camp. "C'mon, Loeffler. Let's go for a walk."

I grabbed my old maple stick, Ed his bamboo rod. We walked out to the dirt road east of the main arroyo and headed south, knowing that the nearest pavement in that direction was many miles away.

"Ed, you didn't answer my question." We walked along avoiding rocks and ruts.

"What question?"

"Do you blame science for the presence of those uranium trucks we saw this afternoon?"

Ed was silent for a few moments. He was generally careful to think before he spoke. "I think scientists have to share the responsibility for their discoveries. Human curiosity is powerful and can't be denied. The growth of science is a natural extension of that curiosity. And those of us who become scientists are responding to a need to satisfy that curiosity scientifically, not metaphysically. For some people, faith isn't enough. Hard evidence is the path to truth."

"I agree," I said. "But science doesn't stop with pure research. It usually leads to some sort of application. Some kind of invention. Take the atomic bomb, for example. I've watched atomic bombs be detonated from seven miles away and have been mightily impressed by the quality of light and color, by their immense capacity for nonselective destruction of life."

"Science leads to technology," said Ed, "and industry. And industrialism. Science itself isn't bad. It's what it can lead to that could be bad. Take industrialism, for example. Normal men who should be out hunting for a living find themselves working in factories or building skyscrapers or doing some kind of work for hire to make somebody else . . . not themselves . . . rich. Human population tends to gather in cities, and soon enough, the country is forgotten. Along with the sense of self-sufficiency that is every man's and every woman's birthright. No, science itself is not bad. And scientists are not necessarily any worse than anyone else. But they should assume some responsibility for the application of their discoveries."

“Like nuclear power plants.”

“Yeah. Like nuclear power plants. As Garrett Hardin says, we have to consider the ramifications of what we do. That isn’t easy. Who could have predicted that we would become a race of energy junkies? Or that growth for the sake of growth would have become the central theme of western culture, so called? In a situation like that you have science, technology, and industry all feeding each other until they collectively predominate in a state of technocracy to the extent that other values are hidden or lost to most of us. And it takes virtually everybody adjusting to this system to make it work. Very few of us are willing to admit that the system can’t go on forever. Things begin to go wrong and scientists are called in to think up remedies. More and more, the system comes to rely on remedial tinkering and becomes ever more centralized until utter collapse is inevitable. The sooner the better, by gawd! Then maybe we can stamp out this blight, this cancer of modern industrialism.”

“I’ve had this terrible thought lately,” I said.

“What’s that?”

“Suppose all of the nuclear waste that’s being stored near the world’s coastlines was suddenly deposited by an earthquake or other act of Nature in the nearest ocean. We’d be in hot water!”

“Oh, Christ.”

“What life-forms could withstand it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know whether there’s enough radioactive waste to destroy the seas or not. I wonder if anybody knows. And what could be done about it, anyway?”

“Well, in America there’s WIPP, where they plan to ship radioactive waste to New Mexico and bury it near Carlsbad, where they’re deluded into thinking that it’ll be safe for two hundred and fifty thousand years, which is about twenty-five times the length of recorded human history.”

Ed ruminated for a bit. “That’s what I mean. Science is misapplied or, at best, applied without regard to ramifications until it’s too late. The scientific process itself can’t be thought of as culpable. But scientists are if they don’t assume responsibility for their discoveries. Yet you can’t blame cancer researchers who want to find a cure for cancer knowing full well that human population growth will be less curtailed if they do. It’s a real dilemma.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t think you can blame scientists any more than

anybody else. I think everyone is to blame. I guess it's a matter of degree. Consider the scientist who is working on human birth control. Can he be regarded in the same light as the scientist who's perfecting a superweapon? If one accepts the premise that human overpopulation is the fundamental problem, then either or both of those scientists could be regarded as heroes. The end result of both areas of research is fewer humans."

"So much for ethics," said Ed. "There's a qualitative difference there. You could argue that a good method of birth control results in collective ecstasy while a superweapon results in collective misery. They may both result in fewer humans, but the difference lies in quality of intent."

We walked down the road in silence for a while, occasionally hearing the plaintive call of a great horned owl.

"These are tough questions, Jack. Who can say where the blame really lies? To my way of thinking, it lies with anyone who can clearly see what we're doing to this poor, defenseless planet in the name of profit and greed and then doesn't do anything about it. That's the real crime. You and I talk about this all the time. But what the hell do we do about it? I sit at a typewriter all day and hack away. I never have figured out what the hell you do. But except for pulling up a few survey stakes or venting anger on an occasional piece of heavy equipment, what have you or I really done? Not a goddamned thing. Even worse, we contribute to the general malaise. We both drive pickup trucks that burn gasoline. We both own refrigerators and stereo sets and hot water heaters and God knows what other appliances. What the hell is an appliance, anyway? It's an application of energy designed to make human life more luxurious and the manufacturer richer. It's also a human artifact that somehow lessens the chances of survival for the rest of the biotic community and denigrates the human user by weakening his own ability to be self-sufficient.

"Science should be used to aid us in our quest for understanding the meaning of existence, if indeed there is any meaning to existence. Instead we largely misuse this ability to be scientific. We use it to enhance our proclivity to consume more and more and more. Mankind is insatiable."

Swirls of dust began to be lifted in a gradually increasing wind. The moon had edged westward. We tacitly agreed to turn about and head back to camp. Ed walked off into the bushes to relieve himself. I heard him say, "I shall piss this way but once. Henceforth, I shall aim downwind."