

"The Chairs"

By K. D. Kragen

to Jannie

And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto
Balaam, "What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me
these three times?"

From: Numbers 22:21-35

Here, where men's eyes were empty and as bright
As the blank windows set in glaring brick,
When the wind strengthens from the sea—and night
Drops like fog and makes the breath come thick;

From: "Ghosts of a Lunatic
Asylum," by Stephen Vincent
Benét (New York: Farrar &
Rinehart, 1942) p. 411.



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AUTHOR'S NOTE: "The Chairs" was my first short story, written in the mid-1980s. A long time ago, now. It was written in an age called the "Cold War era," when the world teetered upon the 11th-hour brink of nuclear extinction, where the constant threat of a global atomic war between the "super powers," the Soviet Union and the U.S. and its allies, loomed over us all, as it had since the mid-1950s. Thirty duck-and-cover years. We of the "bomb-baby generation," many of us lived our whole lives under the MAD umbrella (Mutually Assured Destruction) in fear of imminent nuclear holocaust and annihilation. This is our story.

"The Chairs" was to appear in *Eldritch Tales*, purchased by Crispin Burnham on February 9, 1992 (see Contract below). Unfortunately, the publisher ceased operation before "The Chairs" ever came to press. (Details of magazine publishing history, 1978-1995, can be found at "Science Fiction, Fantasy, & Weird Fiction Magazine Index: 1890-2001, A Checklist of Magazine Titles and Issues," Indexed by Stephen T. Miller & William G. Contento, <http://www.locusmag.com/index/chklist/mg0238.htm>.) Due to the story's specific historical context, and world events transpiring in 1991-92, I never resubmitted "The Chairs" elsewhere for publication.

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Author(s): K. D. Kragen

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P.S. Not long after finishing the first draft of this story, my nuclear nightmares ceased. I haven't stopped writing since.

The Chairs

The window was open a crack to the night. From our bed I could see a wild fantasy sky of moon-shadowed clouds running crazily across deep starry patches in blackness, while the dark earth below slept in moon-lit, shadowy stillness—a Van Gogh skyscape over a Rembrandt streetscape.

I hunched up on my elbows trying not to awaken Britta, asleep in the calmness of her own dreams. Soon the night became more illumined and animate. I began to notice strange shapes on the front lawn. Raising myself up a little higher and squinting my eyes, the bare outlines of the shapes became distinct and slowly coalesced into the forms of chairs.

Chairs?

My eyes twitched with straining in the quiet cold. An odd clamminess drifted up the blankets and over my shoulders. I looked down at Britta again. The realness of her sleeping form steadied the growing uneasiness within me.

Slowly, I turned back toward the window. At first everything seemed just as before. Then suddenly, like a blast from a huge open furnace, a searing coldness and freezing fear cried out from beyond the open window. The street outside, in all its stillness, in all its etched clarity, howled at me like an arctic gale, a shrieking maelstrom beating toward me and ripping my senses to tatters. I rose up out of bed in its grip, pulled toward the window, the heavy drapery blowing out on either side. There were many chairs now, on the lawn, in the street, down the street off into the distant dimness. Like Plato's Form Of The Chair come down into the cave of the world, refracted and diffused in the acids of time and space—some mad sign for us shadow-watchers.

God, help me!

I stumbled away from the vision at the window, backing out of the room. The whole place trembled like an old streetcar going too fast over bad tracks, and I could hardly keep my feet. The walls moved. The whole world shifting. I staggered into the living room in a drunken panic. I backed up against the far wall directly opposite the front door, arms out, fingers digging into the wallpaper behind me. My eyes were locked straight ahead in terror. The front door stood open wide, the chairs—THE CHAIRS!—in the open doorway and a few feet into the living room. And then they screamed! And I knew it wasn't me screaming because I wanted to and couldn't. It was them. It was the chairs! They were screaming!...even the chairs rose up and screamed!

God! Britta Britta Britta Britta....

"Brittaaaaaa...!"

1.

The early dawn birds begin their twittering in the front locust tree. First inklings of morning light fill the room, leaving everything in dark outline like a two-dimensional ink drawing. I lie there on my back with my head propped up on one fist and slowly scan the room.

This is our home, I think to myself. Britta, you sleep so secure, even happy. Her lithe shape beside me is a mere outline.

The bird-talk from out front filters into the room; more light fills in the third dimension of things. Oh, joyous third dimension which animates all. Oh, frabjous morning light—strange, only now am I conscious of my wife's rhythmic breathing, as if extension and sound are metaphysically dependent.

Quietly I move my muddled thoughts and garbled visions through the bedroom, gathering up my clothes laid out the evening before. I dress in the living room, watching the clock's pendulum arch from side to side, tick to tick. Underneath the ticking and the early hours there seems to be something more, something stirring, as if summoned from great depths underlying the very structure of things, simmering in the magma of reality. Yet, this thought hardly flashes like lightning in the mind, then it's gone.

In the small kitchen I put on tea water, two slices of toast into the toaster, and tomatoes into a pan for frying. The clouds swirl aloft keeping the morning dark as I gaze abstractly out the north-facing window. The sky-realm moves across my vision, slowly, silently, an ancient scroll winding off of one reel onto another, moving, simmering, like tea water, like warm tomato juices, its reddish tint, a blood-reddish spume, intertwines among the grays and shades. And the vastness of it booms and rumbles soundlessly, roaring behind my eyes and inside my mind. The sky crashes, as the ocean, against cliffs I know to be but a few miles to the west, and I can see the tumultuous surf reflected in that winter panorama. I feel the roll and swell of the clouds, like the deep, like on a ship in heavy seas.

After a time, my thoughts shift to the day's schedule at the university: three classes, a faculty meeting, then a much-needed break.

Today's our winter-quarter day away, Britta! A day to ourselves, you off to your secret place, me off to mine. Dinner at the pub, the Darlingscott Lorry Stop at the Kearney Hotel, a quiet and lushly-lonely night in the City of my soul. Then, tomorrow night, reunion with the Lady of my soul. Britta, you never thought it strange we give each other these four nights away, one for each season. These four nights a year have been a kind of strength to us, and our life together. For we always come back. We know we will. How could we not, Britta? How could I not?

"Ssstsssstssst..." the tea pot beckons. I drop a teaspoon of loose Earl Grey into a cup of boiling water, dish up the bubbling tomatoes and buttered toast, and settle down to the breakfast counter. Leaving the lights off, I eat huddled over the subdued glow of the morning as it spreads itself across my quiet meditations. I sit bent over the steaming teacup as if it were a dying winter campfire in some northern forest. A morning mist hangs about the little kitchen in solitude and the world boils away into the steam of discontent and fears of annihilation.

The morning mist moves across the coast highway as I head south toward the bridge and the city. The Golden Gate glows a bright burgundy with the eastern sun, filling my view as I pull out of the Waldo Tunnel and drop into the miasmatic nectar of San Francisco.

Students wander to their seats as I enter the classroom, "first-year S.F. State" tattooed across caffeine blood-shot eyes. Another winter quarter gets under way as thirty Introduction To Philosophy students await their initiation into the history, varieties, disparities, anxieties, and processes of human thought, the sanities, insanities, quests for certainty, quests for truth, and those delightful deceivers of the human and analytic spirit, death and madness.

"Now look, people, we're just getting going here. Don't get discouraged or bummed with this stuff. We human beings, caught up in the business and busyness of our lives, personal and corporate, may seldom feel the need to question the cosmos, to make inquiries into existence, to think about thinking. But when the necessity, or desire, arises to do so, it would surely help to know where to begin—or even how! If we don't learn to be clever, you know, the universe can make awful bloody fools of us."

The hour ends. I stare at the empty room full of empty chairs. A few seem to be gaining interest, anxious to argue, question, doubt, think.

I go to lunch.

"I'll have a Bud, and, uh...a roast beef sandwich, thank you."

"Right, Mr. Stendorff," says Franky.

I look around. New paintings cover the whitewashed walls. Ah, devoted art department.

"Here's your Bud, Mr. Stendorff. How's business?"

"Oh, business as usual, Franky. Philosophy's coming in again, maybe."

"Is it?" Franky pauses thoughtfully. And then, changing topics, "Art department had us closed down for an hour this morning. 'Hang this one here. No, no, hang it over there. Those don't go together very well. This one does not seem fit anywhere!' Look pretty good this bunch though, don't they?"

"I like 'em, Franky. Dresses the place up real nice."

"Be right back with your roast beef, Mr. Stendorff."

"Thanks, Franky. Take your time."

Hello? My attention is drawn to one of the paintings. That's an unusual picture; kind of stands apart. ("This one does not seem to fit anywhere," Franky had said.) Interesting. Almost a still life, and yet...not quite. A kind of van Eyck realism or...hmm. A still life. A still life of chairs.

"Franky, that was from our art department?" I call out, pointing toward the painting.

"The chairs picture? Yeah, they didn't know what to hang that one with, so they stuck it all by itself."

"But all these pictures were local work, or just some?"

"Oh, all, Mr. Stendorff. They told me so. All of them. Yep, all of them."

I stare into the picture. Huh. Right. A still life of chairs.

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[1956]

"All right children, step into line, and quietly, orderly. This is serious business...you heard me, Joey Stendorff!"

"Yes, Mrs. Gauff."

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Clapping her hands slowly, stately, Mrs. Gauff marched up to the front of the line of children. The air-raid siren wavered back and forth along the halls. Throughout the elementary school little children descended downward into the basement, gazing warily at the giant furnace and steam boiler—great sleeping beasts. Stacks of last year's books huddled close together in a corner of the dusty cellar. There was a breathlessness of waiting, like holding your breath while still breathing just a little—little child breaths.

As some of the children entered the half-lit underbelly of the elementary school, they gazed up at the secret symbol above the doorway, a circle with three upside-down triangles above the words "Fallout Shelter."

There were no fire-drill whispers here, no elfin boy-girl giggles, only breathing. Breathing, and morose incomprehension.

"Why are we all hiding here, together?" ran through small Stendorff's unlearned mind. "Are those triangles going to protect us, like mommy when she says after-nightmare prayers?"

In another corner, darker yet, lay metal guernys piled high with *the prone carcasses of chairs*, folded against megatons of civilization, waiting for the spring assembly *or the end of the world*.

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George Brinski and Julie Giribaldi walk into the cafeteria.

"Franky, how are you," calls Julie. "Oh, hello, Joe," noticing my blank expression. "May we join you?"

"Please," I say, tearing my entranced gaze from the chairs picture.

"Missed last Friday's faculty meeting," George exclaims. "Bad move, Joe. Julie was terrific!"

"Huh?" I respond distractedly.

"Oh, he was officially absent, George," defends Julie. "You remember. He was representing us at the West Coast accreditation—"

Franky breaks in, "What'll it be, folks?"

"The special, please, Franky," George replies. "And coffee."

"Same for me, Franky, except, I'll have an Anchor Steam, thank you," Julie says, trying to get a napkin out of the overstuffed metal napkin holder.

"I was in Berkeley, George, remember," I explain, while childhood memories and dreams lie like ancient mist off the ragged coast of my mind, and the chairs picture, reposing there patiently at the edge of my vision.

After lunch, George, Julie and I walk together toward our respective classes. Outside the cafeteria we pass an anti-war rally just breaking up, a banner demanding "Get Out of El Salvador!" fluttering in the chill wind. Among the increasing wisps of white fog, hundreds of San Francisco pigeons scramble about, cleaning up the crumbs of sack lunches.

Glancing at some placards, George comments, "Did you know, my friends, that if a global nuclear war were to take place the entire structure of reality could undergo an unprecedented metaphysical alteration, causing," he pauses, "a kind of ontological black hole. Of course all black holes may be, in essence, ontological."

Julie and I exchange quizzical glances, while he adds, "To consciously experience such a change—"

"Wait a minute, George," I interject, "if consciousness does exist, I doubt it would following such an event as what you are suggesting. You must view consciousness as an extremely resilient entity. Ha! You old metaphysician, you. Always looking for a new angle. Just want to get into pictures, don't you."

"Great, George," adds Julie. "After World War Three, we'll all find ourselves in Oz, dropped there by a mushroom cloud instead of a Kansas twister."

"No, really," George continues undaunted. "I think there is substantial scientific basis for the notion of an alteration of fundamental reality. Just the heat generated by thousands of megatons of nuclear fusion could far surpass that of any known stellar phenomena by millions of degrees. Take the center of a class-O star. It can reach a temperature of as much as fifteen million degrees Kelvin. But a single megaton nuclear blast can exceed twenty-seven million degrees! What of over a million U.S. and Soviet megatons, and in so small a locality and time-space? Remember, the war does not have to be started by either us or the Soviets to nonetheless be ended by all of us."

"Interesting proposition, George," I suggest. "Going to be giving this paper soon?" I smile, though suspecting my insensitivity. "Uh, well, here's my class. See you guys later, eh."

After George has walked off, I turn to Julie, "This is not like George. The old post-positivist, he almost seemed serious."

"Don't look at me," Juli shrugs. "Half the time I don't know what George is going on about, anymore." We each turn and go our own ways.

I walk into the room, empty but for a large conference table surrounded by twelve chairs. Ten minutes to two.

Ah, to get lost in the problems of philosophy of religion and forget for awhile megatons and mutually assured destruction. "Oh, we're off to see the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz. Because, because, because, because...."

I look about the empty class room. A still life of chairs. I notice my hands. They're trembling. The room, all of a sudden, feels very cold. I button my coat, but with some difficulty. My hands fumble clumsily. At the windows, the fog presses in against dirt-streaked panes. I sit down at the table and lay my briefcase in front of me. I breathe deep, Zen deep, steady breath in, press downward, and breathe outward slowly, rhythmically. Over and over I breathe, empty breathing, the child breath in, the adult breath out, young breath in, old breath out, driving all else from thought—the fog, the ticking of the clock, the cold, the bomb, the chairs....

"Hi, Dr. Stendorff. Hello?"

"Karl! Hi, Karl."

"I'm going for some coffee, Dr. Stendorff. Can I get you some?"

"Thanks, I could handle that," I reply, trying to smile.

Walking into the room, Katie nods to us, "Karl, Dr. Stendorff."

"Hi, Katie," says Karl. "Coffee?" he asks, gesturing toward the hallway.

"No thanks. I'm coffeed out." Katie holds the door open for him as he heads off to the coffee machine.

"Is Terry doing his progress report today, Dr. Stendorff?" Katie asks.

"Hey, I sure am," interjects Terry. He fills the doorway with his great wrestler's bulk. "Unless Dr. Stendorff gives us the day off, that is." His square jaw and heavy brow belie—especially to the neo-eugenicist—a skill of articulation and critical ability not often found in senior undergraduates.

"You've got it, Terry," I reply. "The next thirty minutes are yours."

Karl slips into the room, hands me a cup of coffee and takes a seat.

Julius and Ted show up just before the bell. "Samuel couldn't make it today," Ted announces. "Down with something again."

"Well, five out of six will have to do. Take good notes, Ted. As you all know," I shake my head to the steaming coffee, "this week everyone will be presenting a short statement of the topic to be covered in their term research paper. Remember, this is your class. You requested it and helped design it. Terry will be leading off today, Katie tomorrow. Terry? It's all yours."

"Yes sir." Walking up to the board, Terry rustles a bulk of papers.

"He's written his whole paper already!" exclaims Ted.

"Let me write out my thesis statement." Taking up chalk, Terry begins a frantic scribbling. Everyone leans forward to try and decipher his scrawl.

"OK, OK, I'll read it aloud: 'The present study is an investigation into the psychological and philosophical effects of impending nuclear holocaust upon various modern and representative systems of eschatological expectation'. I'll be drawing from both the standard non-religious, utopian literature, as well as the apocalyptic writings of a number of religions and ideologies."

Great, just great. First Brinski, now one of my best students.

Terry stands back from the board. He views his work not so much with pride as with the critical eye of the artist contemplating his first few strokes on a new canvas.

"Hey, what it is!" Ted quips with a grin.

"Will your thesis," Katie asks, leaning back in her chair, "assume the inevitability or merely the possibility of a global nuclear holocaust?" Katie always leans back in her chair. She's generally a very relaxed person.

"Nuclear annihilation," responds Terry, "need only be a possibility, but not of necessity inevitable, to have a significant, if not astounding, affect upon many of the more representative eschatological systems to be discussed."

What a group....

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[1958]

"Joey! Joey! Wake up!"

"Mom...oh, Mom!"

"Joey, you were just dreaming. It was only a dream," my mother soothed.

"Mrs. Gauff...and the whole city, moving, moving. The—" Sitting up in bed I could see my mother's peaceful sympathy in the light of the bed lamp.

"I'm OK," I heard myself say, hoping she wouldn't ask. "I'm OK."

"It's all right, Joey. It's all right. Tell me about it. Let it out of your head, and then we'll just put it away into 'the drawer of dreams'."

"Oh, all right." I took a deep breath. "It was another air-raid drill, again. Mrs. Gauff getting everyone into line. Then somebody said it was for real! The atomic war! And I

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didn't wanna go down into the basement and hide—all crowded and quiet—into the air-raid shelter under the school, with that old furnace and everybody and the chairs—waiting for the end of the world.

"So I ran away. Kids tried to grab me. I jumped over the school-yard wall. Everybody was yelling. Then I was in the street. There were sirens, but it was all quiet.

"Then I was on my bicycle going home, through trees, all quiet and still—except for the sirens. Everything was so strange. At first I couldn't find Van Ness Avenue or Market Street or Twin Peaks. Then I was walking. And then I knew where I was! On Mt. Davidson, Teresita Boulevard. You know, just a few blocks from the corner, a few blocks from home. It was so quiet!

"Then there were people. Everywhere! All walking down the street toward me, heading downtown. They were like zombies, staring, walking, all in the same direction. So I grabbed this kid and asked where everybody was going. He just looked at me, but not really at me, and said, 'To the big air-raid shelter under the city. You gotta come, too.' Then he just went off.

"Then there was this airplane up in the sky far away. But it was coming closer over the city. And just for a minute I felt good 'cause I was running away from the big air-raid shelter! I was all alone but I could feel all those people crammed into the air-raid shelter under the city like a million rats crowded in down there. I could feel it, feel them rustlin' around!

"Then I was sitting on the cliff down from the house. You know, where all the rocks are and we find alligator lizards and snakes. So I looked over the city and it was empty and quiet, like a ship where even the rats had left.

"Then the bomb dropped shiny and silver out of the plane up in the sky. It seemed to fall so slow and kinda graceful, right downtown near the bay. Then right there in my dream I saw the biggest light ever! The whole world was on fire!

"And I was burning!" I suddenly screamed. "And...and I—"

"Shuuuuu, Joey."

"But even when I woke up, before you got here, Mom, I could still see that huge white light and I woke up just like this all wet and sweaty and numb and tingly just like this, Mom! Like I...like I...."

*like I....*

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"...consider it to be pretty inconceivable for the Messiah to come into a world completely devastated by nuclear war." Terry rolls the chalk around in his hand waiting for another question. "Any more questions?"

"So, is it a go, Dr. Stendorff?"

"Huh? —right. I'll read over your proposal and, uh, have it back to you next Monday, Terry. Sounds good. Very...very imaginative. We'll see. Anyone have any more questions for Terry? No. Fine."

Everyone sits quietly. I look down at my watch. Twenty to three, already. "OK. I...I guess I'm not myself, today. Why don't we knock off early. See you tomorrow for Katie's presentation? Good enough, Katie?"

"Sure. Good enough," Katie responds, still leaning back in her chair with a look far away and contemplative.

I clear up my things, shuffle papers, feeling blind-exhausted.

"It's like being right at the front, you know," Katie murmurs. Everyone but Katie has left.

"What?" I hardly notice she has spoken. I shake my head, repeating her words, "at the front."

"Yes," she continues. "Born, raised, every hour of every day on the front lines of some war, and not just some war, but all reality a war, and every person a soldier-at-the-front."

I sit facing Katie, somewhat taken aback at the matter-of-fact way she seems to have just stated some sort of epitaph for our age.

We shift in our chairs. Fog-rivulets drip down the windows.

"Did you live before the bomb, before it was really known about."

"Well, sure, a little," I say.

"What was it like?"

"Huh? Oh, we all have those memories. You have them, from when you were a little child, not yet come of age, unknowing of nuclear war, nuclear death.

"I remember something my father once told me," I continue. "When he was a reservist, during World War Two, he sat out on the end of Muni Pier with a rifle in hand waiting for Japanese subs to surface in the bay. That was right after Pearl Harbor, you know. He sat there looking out toward the Golden Gate. There was great anxiety, then, that the Japanese would next attack San Francisco. Anyway, all security was gone for him. Gone. Just like that. In an instant he had changed, changed from a home-port reservist to...to your soldier-at-the-front.

"But that was just for a time, with a beginning and an end. Since the 50's, since the dawn of the nuclear age, your fear-at-the-front has become virtually universal, without foreseeable climax—except death. To answer your question, I guess it's as if there never was a before. Or it has no meaning anymore."

"No meaning anymore—" She mouths my words, slipping into herself again. She looks at the windows. Then she turns to me, looks into my eyes. "How do you deal with it?"

"How do I deal with it? Interesting question. I dream a lot. I have dreams. Then I...just shove them into the drawer of dreams, and go on."

"Nightmares, you mean."

2.

San Francisco. San Francisco is The Little-big City, punctuated with some thirty-nine hills which rise and fall within forty-nine square miles. There may be eight million stories in the Naked City. Here in San Francisco there are but a scant eight hundred thousand.

Leaving the campus at the end of the day, I decide to take the public transit downtown to the Kearney Hotel. With my car safely moored for the night in the university lot, I head toward the streetcar tracks. At the bus stop, students from the nearby high school scramble about among varicolored business suits: youths wandering amidst their *maya* through thickening fog and growing indistinction.

I board the downtown-bound "M" car, which clatters off toward Twin Peaks Tunnel. The tunnel, three and a half miles from the West Portal end to the Castro Street end, running under Forest Hills and Twin Peaks and skirting Ashbury Heights, is one of the few aspects of San Francisco life that was not a deliberate adaptation to the hill-ridden terrain such as were the Cable Cars or the staired sidewalks of Pacific Heights and Nob Hill. Rather, the tunnel stands in direct confrontation with the city's rugged landscape.

The clatter of steel wheels on the tracks gives the signal for all passengers to hold on tight against the swaying car. As we move into the tunnel's gaping maw, a small boy behind me starts chattering.

"Mommy? Mommy? Mommy? Mom...."

"Hmmm?"

"Mommy, where do you find dreams?"

"Where do you find dreams, honey?"

"In the dark, Mommy!" he announces with gleeful childish exclamation.

"Yes, honey. In the dark."

The clatter of steel wheels echoes on down the tunnel as it curves off into the dark...an ontological black hole, an eschatological expectation, a still life of chairs? Oh, bother.

Snaking out of the tunnel the car sheds decibels of sound like old skin and comes to its stop at Castro Street. The Castro Street stop: a turnstile of public transport with ever-changing faces; one humanity with many souls; the greatest diversity in the midst of a magnificent, vast, and inexplicably ominous unity; a unity imagined by the eleventh century Indian philosopher Ramanuja in his Vedic natural theology, a unity sought by Carl Gustav Jung in the archetypes of humankind's "collective unconscious," a unity revealed in the Judeo-Christian revelation, a unity animated by young and old, rising and falling daily like strange bile within the bowels of every time-bound age, like sweet incense beneath the throne of heaven.

The child and his mother get off the streetcar. Others lay their coins or transfers down before the conductor and search for empty seats or standing room. The doors close and the car moves on with a jolt, along Market Street toward the city's monoliths, financial center, gay life, evening side of town.

On and on the steel-car streetcar rambles, past gutter and shopping-cart parking lot, trading people like a northern trapper trading pelts for coffee. At the Dolores stop, a runaway cart from the Safeway crosses the tracks in front of us. The doors of the streetcar close and we're on our way again.

An elderly gentleman sits down next to me. From his overcoat he pulls out a book, its worn, blackened binding smells of damp leather. He holds it on his lap. His movements are

purposeful, ritualistic, hand moving toward lapel, turning slightly at an angle, slipping in between greatcoat and inner jacket, the sudden cessation of movement as fingers make contact with the object of their quest, and then, the bound possession is shifted deftly from its interior sanctuary to its exterior resting place on the gentleman's lap. For five more stops, there the book lies.

Upon further notice the gentleman's gruff and worn exterior becomes more evident. Curious, I begin to notice the threadbare shininess of his slacks, the dank dustiness of his overcoat, the floppy, brown-aged shoes. His hair, while superficially neat, is ill-shorn and scraggly. He is shaven but with apparent inattention or distraction, as to which I cannot be sure.

The hardships of being old and alone, I sigh to myself, then look out the window again.

Our car crosses Van Ness Avenue, and the old Orphium Theater can be seen ahead and to the left. Market Street sparkles—new old-fashioned lamp posts, underground utilities, recently groomed planter boxes and cosmetic brickwork.

My fellow passenger snores into a slump. His shaky hands caress the old book in his sleep. I wonder what the book is, as we approach the Kearney Street stop. I grab my briefcase and try to squeeze by the old man without waking him up; but as I do, the book begins to slip off his lap, arousing him. He grabs it in mid-plunge, revealing its gold-stamped, rich leather binding. I stare in amazement as the car rattles and jerks to a stop. The book's faded gold-imprinted title, shadowed by the fog-sodden streetcar windows, ensnares my unbelieving eyes. It reads, "And Even The Chairs Cried Out, by Heirn—"

The movement of the crowd propels me aft toward the rear exit. I wanted to cry, and to cry out to the old man, "What is this book? Who are you?" Something else in me says, "Kearney stop, here. Don't miss your stop now!" Ignore the superstitious moment! I am a man of letters, rational and endowed with articulate common sense. "Inarticulate madness!" —in a continuum of altering states of...of not just consciousness—"MADNESS! I'll get you for this, Brinski! And your little dog, too—"

"Hey, cool it, man! Who you yelling at, anyway?"

"Huh?" I jerk my head around. "You talking to me?"

"Why don't you just get off, man. You're making everyone nervous, man."

"This is my stop." What am I saying. Why am I talking to this person?

I climb down off the streetcar, shivering, disoriented. Just before the doors shush closed, I notice a number of passengers staring down at me.

God, what's happening to me? Britta? The mist drizzles over my face. Must be coming down with something. That's it. Coming down with something.

I turn toward the cross-walk, traverse Market Street north to Kearney, shaking with the cold, or embarrassment—something else, too, something I can't quite get my mind around. I recall a diary entry of the artist Edvard Munch: "I was walking along the road with two friends. The sun set. I felt a tinge of melancholy. Suddenly the sky became a bloody red. I stopped and leaned against the railing, dead tired, and looked at the flaming clouds that hung like blood over the blue-black fjord and the city. My friends walked on. I stood there trembling with fright. And I felt a loud, unending scream piercing nature."

Oh, that's good, Stendorff. That's real good....

Just after World War II there was an influx of English folk who moved to California, Santa Barbara, San Francisco. One couple from the vicinity of Darlingscott in Warwickshire made such a move, and for as many years now have run a little cafe in the Kearney Hotel called

the Darlingscott Lorry Stop. They serve Whitbread, Bass and Watney's on tap, cottage pie, roast pig and pasties, and for breakfast, eggs, sausage, fried bread and tomatoes.

Starting up the street, I can feel the damp concrete through the soles of my shoes. I've got to get rid of this obsession, these dreams. These last few days it's begun to warp my sense of proportion. Damn! I've lived with the bomb for nearly forty years, I ought to be bloody good at it by now. Fool, Stendorff! You don't GET GOOD at it.

I cover the four blocks to the Kearney Hotel unthinkingly mind-deep in thought. The soothing sound of tires on wet pavement accompanies me up to the entrance of the Darlingscott cafe.

Gregory steps to the door and opens it for me. "No car tonight, sir?"

"No Gregory, thank you. Decided to take the streetcar. For a change, you know. Probably ought to have brought my umbrella though, don't you think?"

"Just a wet fog, I'm sure. Good evening, sir."

"Thanks, Gregory." I pause before the open doorway...trembling, remembering the dreams....

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The wanderer sat on a rocky crag before the stone-roofed gorge, a rock-strewn passage rent from ages past, torn and battered greedily by timeless winds, dreary, frost-runed, lying silent beneath a dusk-invaded sky illumined by a quarter moon. He sat there gazing upon that pure and desolate entrance.

Some weeks' growth of stubbly beard, winter-weary boots, a drawn and sullen countenance, all hung about the misanthropic climber like a persistent mountain mist. Intermittent flakes of snow mixed with a chill breeze wafting icy from the higher deep-snow peaks to the craggy vales below.

Arising, the traveler donned his pack and moved into the lonely shadow of the fissure. Occasional patches of moon-grey, cloudy sky peeped into ancient hollows. On and on amidst the range of towering cliffs the great cut wound, the rare open space being ever so quickly swallowed up by more and deeper gloominess. Farther on, the gorge transformed itself completely into the shaft of a cave boring into solid mountain depths. Down and down it went.

Suddenly, the ragged crack-of-a-tunnel began to smooth itself out, its dimensions becoming more regular. It gave the traveler sudden, shivering pause. Tiny whisperings reached up from somewhere down the tunnel's black throat.

And then, he was no more in the tunnel! Without notice, everything had taken on a new and horrendous dimension. Instead of a cave, the wanderer found himself in a concrete passageway, ventilator grates in the walls, water pipes and electrical conduit undulating along the ceiling like sleeping snakes, and up ahead, the dim radiance of fluorescent lights glowed eerily.

The traveler was possessed with dread. The air grew stuffy. Smells of crowdedness added to ever closer sounds of rustling. And restless breathing. The passageway turned to the right at a ninety degree angle. Trembling legs carried him along in drunken terror. Around the turn he came to the end: here was no northern mountain meadow, no high and majestic, peaks-encompassed, morning mist-enshrouded muskeg glade,

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with ice-falls sparkling the first sun's rays amongst its frozen pools.

Before him stretched a great square, low-ceilinged hall, poorly lit and filled with hundreds of people, children clutching school books, men and women in business clothes, workers crouching together in dirty coveralls—anxious faces, weary and hushed. A person, wearing a hard hat with "Civil Defense" stenciled across its front, sat at a folding table in the middle of the vast storeroom and scribbled tediously in a notebook. The furnace was there, too, silent, sprouting its many ducts up into the ceiling. And the chairs! *The chairs....*

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"Blimey, Joe, you look terrible! Come, sit down, warm yourself by the fire." Geoffrey Shelly, the proprietor, takes me by the arm. "A Watney's? Or, 'ang on, mate, 'ow about a Gran Marnier for a change?" Turning off toward the bar, Geoffrey motions to his wife, Brenda, "Darlin', Mr. Stendorff needs your best Cafe Grand Mariner. He's warmin' by the fire now, love." All this in one continuous motion, Geoffrey disappears into the kitchen.

I lean back against the cushion with a sigh and gaze into the magnificent open hearth. Three large logs burn atop a massive grate, each in a different state of flaming decomposition, their blackened carcasses dropping off intermittently into the glowing cinder-mound beneath. The heat of the rising, turning minuet of flames struggles to seduce the cold and bitterness from my body. I feel sick. My head is spinning. No Gregory, thank you. Decided to take the streetcar...I'll get you for this, and your little dog, too...waiting for the dreams to end, the dreams to end, "the dreams to end...."

"Here's your drink, Joe." Brenda Shelley, the envy of any barmaid that ever made a bar, stands quietly beside my seat before the fire.

"Brenda! Thanks," I sigh between still cold lips.

The cinder-mound grows a little larger, and the hearth's radiating heat battles valiantly the stubborn, maniacal dream-frost deep within me.

Brenda is back at the bar drawing Whitbread. My shoulders up against the cushions, I stare at the prancing, horse-frolicking flames, merry-making in their own contentment, surely not mine, as if there was nothing more...and the cinder-mound grows a little larger.

Then the fire begins to fade. Wildly blowing curtains flash in and out of my vision only half-concealing a monstrous sky, the heavens crashing in bloody defilement at my feet, the chairs no longer still!

"Ay Joe, tonight we have the best cottage pie—"

"What!" I jerk abruptly at the sound of my name. "Geoffrey—you startled me. Sorry, I'm terribly distracted these days. This coffee's good. Thanks."

"Quite all right, mate." Like his wife, Geoffrey stands quietly beside me. There's an old-friends gentleness about the place.

"Geoffrey. Do I seem like I'm going mad to you?"

"Sure, Joe. All me best friends are mad."

"Boy, that's a relief. I just wanted to make sure it wasn't all in my head, you know." I sip at the brandied coffee. "Geoffrey, I think this is the last haven of sanity on the whole bloody planet."

"You'd better believe it, mate," Geoffrey beams.

"Yes, right. There's a strange gale a blowin' through my brains, Geoffrey. Can't you hear it?" I point at the side of my head. "Beating like some great and raging woolly mammoth at that rocky coast of a front door of yours? Say yes, Geoffrey, I may be dangerous. And I think your fireplace is haunted. You had it cleaned lately?"

"Huh? Oh, we're all dangerous, Joe ol' chap. The whole world's flippin' daft!" Geoffrey's sparkling eyes gleam brightly above his red beard. "Fireplace 'aunted, eh?" We both stare in silence into the dancing flames.

"Geoffrey, is it all right if I put you in a book I've recently decided to write? I'll change your name to confuse your analyst. It's about a poor soul who has this paranoid fascination with chairs. Like the idea so far?" Doin' great, Joe.

"You see," I continue, "this fellow has the crazy belief that everyone in the world is going to turn into a Morris chair—from genetic corruption!—you know, generated by massive radioactive fallout and environmental chaos following World War Three. Now his analyst, see, is utterly confounded by this strange paranoia—especially when our sad hero admits that he doesn't even know what a Morris chair looks like. Finally, the psych is at his wit's end trying to rid his patient of these delusions. Then, after the destruction of the world following a partial nuclear exchange, our hero loses entirely his sanity from an inability to accept the fact that neither he nor his analyst have realized their Morris-chair metamorphoses. Dying from lack of food, water, shelter, and putrefying radiation sickness, the psychiatrist—forsaking all professional demeanor and bedside manner—simply points his ulcerated finger at our likewise decrepit hero, crying, 'You just wouldn't believe me! Well, I told you! See! No Morris chairs! No chairs at all as a matter of fact! See! I win! No chairs at all! See! I win! I win!'"

"Sounds interesting." Geoffrey pauses. "No, really." We both smile. "Now for tonight's menu, we've got the best cottage pie, creamed onions, an' carrots, 'omemade bread an' jam, cheese cake—sometime I've got to sit in on one of your lectures, Joe—and a complimentary pint o' Watney's."

"Show me to my table, Geoffrey, my appetite has been resurrected," I happily confess, struggling up from the couch's embrace. "Doc," I exclaim, "I think you've cured me." Yes...well, for awhile, anyway.

"My pleasure, mate. But always remember, 'herein lie no cures, only respite from the storm'."

As I stand up, I glance over to a neighboring couch. A small, dark, neatly dressed man, in his forties maybe, stares back at me as if he had been listening to the conversation Geoffrey and I had just concluded. I start to turn away but he continues to look at me with a kind of worried, searching concentration. His expression almost seems to be one of comprehension, as if he had somehow understood all that lay beneath my words, as if he recognized my obsession, or madness—as if he knew about the chairs. I half nod, then hastily turn toward the dining room to catch up with Geoffrey.

Now, the Kearney Hotel is a member of that diminishing number of survivors of San Francisco, Victorian-era architecture. It is a massive, many-chimnied, dark brick, leaded-windowed, William Bournes creation—actually an enlarged, hotel-version of his own Washington Street residence, which still stands to this very day, unkempt and haggled over by dispassionate realtors and devoted Historical Society activists. The front, exterior entrance, one door up from the Darlingscott cafe, is a great double-door affair, carved with some of Bournes' favorite creatures: rams, elephants, and salamanders.

Entering from the cafe, one is greeted by a modest-sized lobby with deep black, ebony wood paneling, dark burgundy carpeting, and the curve upon curve of Art Nouveau lamps and sculptures.

"Good evening, Dr. Stendorff. How was dinner tonight? Good as usual, I trust," Fred the night clerk goes through his friendly litany of greeting.

"Very good, thank you. Exceptionally good, actually." I've always liked Fred. He's the very opposite of frivolous. A really nice guy.

"We've got one quiet winter's night, tonight," the clerk offers openly. "Only one other room booked on your floor."

"Oh?" I take my old familiar key from the front desk counter-top. A gold number 302 is etched upon its small wooden tag. "Well, good night, Fred. Hope it stays quiet for you. Oh, wake-up call at 7:00, OK?"

"Right, Dr. Stendorff. See you in the morning. Good night."

"Good night," I respond.

I take the elevator up to the third floor and settle in with a shower and a little late-night KGO radio. How civilized.

Ten minutes till eleven. I open the curtains and crack a window for some fresh air. From the bed I see the city now sleeping deep in a coastal-thick bank of fog, a cold mid-winter night's fog, tiny dripping halos of light barely perceptible atop the mist-shrouded street-lamps across from the hotel.

I fall asleep....

Before the Hall of the Mountain King, I stand motionless, my blood, frozen cataracts! A hundred or more people fill the over-crowded air-raid shelter. As I drop my backpack to the floor in the open doorway, everyone looks up, their eyes, empty, pure white pearls, fix upon me. In hellish unison they open their hundred mouths, as if to beat me back from transgressing their precious space, this tiny refuge of a soon to be blasted world. But instead of scorn and screaming hatred, their mouths exude sputtering rivers of foul, smoking, blackish steam and blood!

Then, with a shuttering roar, as if the whole earth has fallen into the sun's fusing cauldron, the cryptish chamber rumbles and dances like a puppet from a medieval play held dangling over the pit. The hundred pairs of empty eyes never loosen their maniacal grip upon me. No longer from human mouths, but out of gaping, face-rending massive wounds, the dripping, steaming putrefaction turns into oozing torrents flowing toward me along the crumbling floor. I step backward in vivid, sensuous, inconceivable horror. The passageway by which I had come is gone, only a blank wall against my back!

Whimpering, trapped, the air grows hotter and hotter, the slime swirls over my feet. The creatures, once human but now writhing, tormented beings, smolder as if burning slowly from within. They rush toward me with a mad vengeance, their blistering hands stretching outward at me. The walls around us drip downward, melting. I turn away hoping for a quick death to take me from this hell-hole. My face is smashed painfully against a door—an elevator door! I reach for the button on the wall, burning hands gripping my arms and legs. I manage to push it! The door slides open. My flesh, everywhere they dig their claws into me, flames and sloughs off.

I tumble into the elevator grasping for the door-close button, pounding it frantically. The creatures pile in after me. They fill the elevator, shredding each other to pieces trying to get to me, to tear into my own flesh. Chunks of my legs and stomach are ripped away, sucked down vast, stinking, worm-like gullets. Soon the whole elevator is crammed, every corner filled to suffocation. It trembles as the door closes, crushing three of the softened, pulpy creatures in half. The elevator drops a foot with a terrible jerk, and then, screeching metal against concrete, the massive steel coffin plunges downward in its shaft.

Merciful God! I die, now! Please!

The creatures, even amidst that terrible, rushing descent, dig into my body, tearing out my intestines and stuffing them into their insane, drooling-dripping faces.

Now, now!

The elevator crashes to the bottom! Concrete and steel merge violently into a deafening indiscernibility—likewise its nightmarish cargo.

Hell of all ghastly and ghoulish visions! I live on!

In a great, slow, consummate crescendo, the hideous beings pile on top of me as the elevator hits bottom. And just as slowly, they flow and crush into me, merge with my own half-eaten, festering form, entering into open wounds, filling my stomach, my mouth, my veins, my brain, their hundred eyes fusing with mine; and I see all that they too see—the end, the anguish, the delusory shelter, the inconceivable pain, the madness of waiting for nuclear death, dissolution into subcosmic oblivion.

Grinding slowly, the crumpled elevator door opens upon the vast and crowded lobby of a wealthy hotel. I look out with my hundred-humanity's eyes. I see people seeing the horrible apparition that is now me. I see them, and too, I see me-it through their eyes as well, all together. Raving frenzy seizes all who look upon the thing in the elevator, throwing-up-their-brains madness! And it's my madness, too! I throw up, but it's the remains of blackened bodies that spew forth instead of bile, while our blood flows in rivers along the deep burgundy carpeting. Someone thrashes their head against a stone pillar, tearing their skull open before my hundred eyes, my brains dripping down my crushed forehead. I-it struggle screaming onto the carpet, into the lobby, like a great gelatinous mass. The lobby is strewn with the crushed and moaning remains of humans. They also absorb into my steaming corpulent form as I sluggishly roll over them toward the hotel's magnificent front doors.

But, out in front of the hotel there are no fine cars, no bellhops or taxis. ONLY CHAIRS! A vast, Daliesque landscape of chairs, as if from every dark and dusty corner of human history! And as I look through mankind's eyes, and see her pained confusion, I cry blood from darkened shafts of human suffering. My tears are all our tears—we all spawned them, share them, reap them from past's sorrows only we have sown. And even the chairs...as with a child's fears they moan. And I look out and see these fears of ours.

And as we stand before the massive windows, the chairs scream and scream, on and on their howl a gale like the world has never known before, a solar storm whose flare of anguish engulfs the human spirit a thousand times over, a cosmic flame of our own creation. And with the siren's piercing scream, Even The Chairs Cried Out! They fill the front lawn and the streets and the whole universe with their wail and their lamentation—a shrieking requiem to the dissolution of rhyme and reason. And I know

it isn't we who scream, because we want to and can't. We can only weep, while the chairs scream on and on and the whole earth melts away into broken atoms and utter darkness, and only the wail of the chairs is left in the void....

Sitting up in bed, I stare into the blackened room, drenched and dripping sweat in the cool of the night. "Why do the dreams come to me? Who the hell am I that they come to me? Go haunt the Secretary of Defence, damn you!"

I crawl from the wreckage of covers and sheets, drag myself through the darkness over to the hotel room desk, and switch on the small reading lamp. I slump into the chair.

Who am I...you should come to me?

For nearly an hour, I sit there, transfixed, trying to make sense of things.

I squint at my watch: 4:20 a.m.

"What am I supposed to do? What do you want us—me!—to do? Stay cool, Stendorff. Think. OK. Leibniz! That's it. Study some Leibniz. Right—"

I stumble over to the closet, rummage through my briefcase, then spread books and papers about on the small desk, seeking desperately to avoid the dark corners where Insanity lies in wait. The room spins. I grasp at the back of the chair—and as the white whale rose up from the sea and dove toward the Pequod, "I saw the opening maw of hell!"

Within a few minutes I'm bent determinedly over Leibniz' "Considerations on Vital Principles and Plastic Natures." I can almost feel the white fog rising up from the sea and rolling in great billowing waves over the city at the edge of the world.

I look at my watch: 5:38 a.m.

Just then I recall an ancient epitaph—maybe it was a joke, I was never quite sure. It had been carved in Latin upon a medieval tomb near Glastonbury and read, 'The Mystic Sees, The Artist Tells, The God Only Knows'.

"The God only knows? Ha, I'll say!"

I peer out the window at the icy currents of night washing up against the building like a diluvian vanguard.

"Oh, Britta, we don't know. But at times, at time we see? *I've seen*. Yet, unlike the mystic who chooses silence, unlike the mystic... 'The Artist Tells'? Yes. Right. The artist tells."

Maybe then the dreams will leave me?

I close Leibniz, put the book off to one side, take out some clean paper.

A little while later, I look up from my work. "All reality a war," I whisper, "every person a soldier at the front."

The window is still open a crack. The cold, coastal-winter air rustles the papers on the small desk. The world smells of brine and ancient ocean memories. Listening intently, I can just make out the foghorn from under the bridge, its deep bellow prowling about the fog-sodden streets and alleys of the sleeping city.

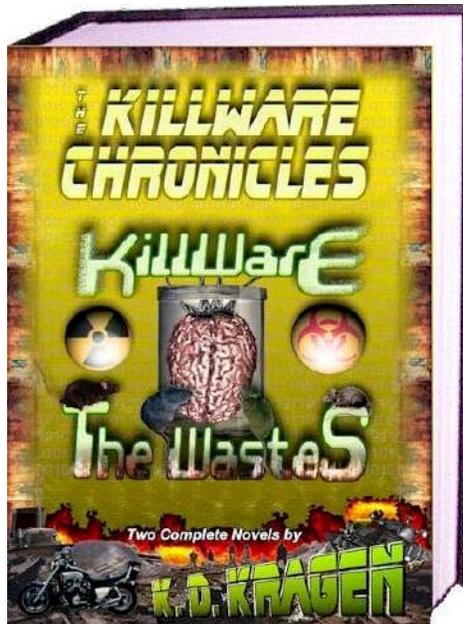


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