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The Man Who Made Himself

by

Charles Beaumont

Pete Nolan knew everything about his past life up to the present; but the trouble was he couldn't find anybody to verify his existence!

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The Man Who Made Himself

“I WAITED, MISTER,” the old woman said. “For thirty years; yes sir.” She smelled of hospital corridors, pressed ferns, dust: age had devoured her. Now there was nothing left, except the eyes which flashed.

The tall young man did not smile. His hands were almost fists, but the fingers were loose.

“All my life, since I was a little girl, can you imagine? Then it came, out of a clear sky, while I was ironing. Ironing on a Sunday, God save me. It came.”

“What did?” the man said, because he had to say something, he couldn’t just walk away or ignore her.

“The good Lord’s Own sweet breath, that’s what,” the old woman said. “Like an electricity shock. I was revealed. Praise God, Mister, and praise His good works.”

The man looked quickly away. The station was deserted. Its floor sparkled fiercely and this gave the impression of movement, but there was no movement. And there was no sound, either, except for the miles away roar of the train, and the old woman’s voice, whispering and whispering.

Please, lady!

“Mister, I wonder if you’d tell me something.”

The young man did not answer. *Please!*

“Do you read the book?” She cocked her head and arched and smiled.

“What book is that, ma’am?”

“Why,” her eyes blinked, “the *good* book, of course.”

His fingers laced together, tightly. “Yes,” he told her. “All the time.”

She nodded, then raised one hand. It was thin and the flesh was transparent. “You’re sure you’re telling the truth now? We may be a mile underground, but He hears *every word*.”

“It’s the truth.”

Suddenly the old woman leaned forward. Her face was sharp bones and dry flesh and tiny white hairs. “All right,” she said. “All right.” The smile altered. Then, almost hissing: “Leviticus; Chapter Five; Verse Two!”

Where are the people!

“Well?” She was clucking her tongue. “Well, Mister?”

The young man rose from the bench and walked to the edge of the platform. In either direction there was darkness. He stood there, watching the darkness, listening to the growing thunder of the train.

It’s got to come. It’s got to come soon!

The old woman’s shoes rang along the cement. She looked feeble and very small. About her shoulders an orange fox lay curled, its head beneath her chin, its eyes beady with cunning.

Train!

“Or if a soul touch any unclean thing, whether *it be* a carcass of an unclean beast, or a carcass of unclean cattle, or the carcass of unclean creeping things, and *if* it be hidden from him; he also shall be unclean, and guilty.’ ”

“Go away.”

“Mister,” the old woman said. She reached out and touched the young man’s arm. It was hard and well-muscled, as the rest of him was.

He jerked away. “Leave me alone!”

“You want His infinite love, don’t you?”

“No, goddamn it, no,” he shouted. “Please, lady, get away from me.”

“He forgives His sheep, Mister. Maybe you’re afraid it’s too late but you’re wrong.” She moved in front of the young man. “We are all His lambs . . .”

Her words became lost in the hollow roar, growing.

Jess!

The single headlight appeared, an immense, blinding circle of sharp brilliance.

The old woman’s hands were fluttering. She blinked behind thick lenses and opened and closed her cracking lips.

The first car appeared.

The young man pulled his head around. The station was still deserted. It sang piercingly, and trembled, and shook loose flaming splinters of pain.

The old woman had stopped talking.

She stood there, smiling.

The young man took a step backwards and put his hands about the old woman's shoulders.

Her eyes widened.

He waited; then, as the Express burst out of the blackness, its dark metal tons lurching and jolting along the tracks, he released his hold and pushed.

The old woman fell over the edge of the platform.

“Good-bye, Walter!”

The train scooped her up and flattened her against the headlight and held her there for half an instant like a giant moth. Then she came loose.

The young man turned around and ran up the stairs.

Outside, the streets were crowded . . .

THE door was opened to the length of its chain by a girl who was mostly shadow.

Peter Nolan put his hands behind his back and smiled. “Well, ma’am,” he said, “see, I’m a member of the Junior Woodchucks—”

“The what?”

“—and all I got to do is sell one more subscription to get my genuine toy dial typewriter. What do you say?”

The girl said, “No,” and closed the door.

Then she opened it again. “Hi, Pete.”

“Hi.” He stepped inside. The apartment was thick with heat. Through the drawn shades he could see the beginnings of sunlight. “Ready?” he said.

“And willing,” the girl said. “Are you disappointed?”

“Just a little surprised.” He put his hand on the back of the girl’s neck and pulled gently. He kissed her.

“Pete! I’ve told you, there are lines I just don’t cross.”

“I was going to wait till after we got married, but then I figured what the hell.” He touched her nose.

She wriggled out of his arms. “How come so late?”

“What am I, three minutes off schedule?”

“That’s close. You miss by only half an hour.”

He walked over to the couch, lay down, and groaned theatrically. “I keep telling you to get rid of that sun dial!”

“Okay, so you overslept,” the girl said. “God knows leaving at six o’clock wasn’t *my* idea.”

He lit a cigarette. “I did not oversleep. I left the hotel at four-thirty A.M., got on a subway, got off the subway, and came directly here. Therefore—”

“Therefore, you’re nuts. It’s now five past six.”

He sat upright, pulled back his coatsleeves, glared at a small Benrus.

“Don’t worry about it, dear,” she said, patting his knee. “I’m just glad I found out now.”

She sniffed. “Oh-oh.”

“Oh-oh what?”

“I think I smell the maid burning.” She rushed across the room and into the kitchen. “You said you wanted to bring some food along, didn’t you?”

“Sure.”

“So I roasted us a chicken. We can have sandwiches.”

He rose and walked into the kitchen. “You,” he said, “are only the wildest.”

She did not turn around.

He leaned against the refrigerator. “I know what you mean,” he said. “It’s too good.”

“No.” Jess did busy things with the chicken. “It’s just that I’m happy—understand? And that’s enough to give any girl the creeps this day and age.”

He watched her work and was quiet for a while. Then he said, “Maybe you ought to change your mind.”

She tried to press her hand against his mouth.

“I mean it. Do you really know what the hell you’re doing?”

“Of course I do. I—a twenty-eight-year-old-spinster, of sound mind and body—am going to run away to a town I never even heard of for the purpose of marrying a guy I’ve known exactly seven days. Is there anything odd about that?”

“I’m serious, Jess. Shouldn’t you know a little more about me, or something?”

“Like what? I know that your name is Peter Nolan. I know that you live in Coeurville, New York, in a big white house surrounded by rose bushes and trees. I know that you do scientific research on a bomb—”

“Not a bomb,” he smiled. “A computer. Electronics. See, you’re romanticizing me already.”

“Don’t interrupt. You are visiting New York City for the pure morbid pleasure of it, currently rooming at the Chesterfield Inn. You make five hundred dollars a month, but have saved nothing—which tells me a good deal more about you than I care to know. But—let me finish! Apart from the libertine side of your personality, you are moderately intelligent—and immoderately handsome—kind to small dogs and old chestnut vendors but cool towards the rest of humanity. You prefer Basie to Bach, Grandma Moses to Van Gogh, and haven’t made up your mind about this Faulkner critter. Above all, you’re lonely and in desperate need of a woman five feet nine inches tall with black hair answering to the name of Jessica.” She exhaled. “Now, is there anything important that I’ve missed? Not counting the multitudes of dark women out of your past, of course.”

He picked up the wicker basket. “Okay,” he said. “You got me dead to rights.”

“In that case, let us away—before you start asking questions about *me*.”

He kissed her very hard and held her.

“You’ll like Coeurville, Jess,” he said. “I know you will.”

“I’d *better*, if I expect you to make an honest woman out of me! That town is rough competition.”

“It’s a good town.”

She took the basket and waited for him to gather up the suitcases. “Homesick already,” she murmured, “after not even two weeks away.”

“You’ll see,” he said. “It’s quite a place.”

She nodded and looked around the apartment. Then she closed the door and locked it.

“Come on,” she said, “let’s go make it legal.”

F^{IRE!} *A bright leaf on the rotted curtain first and then two leaves and three, and then the curtain falling and the leaves turned into blazing yellow ivy, reaching up the wall, across the floor, over all the tables and chairs, growing—*

“Walter!”

—a forest of flame, hungry . . . and the man with the bandage quiet, still and quiet, waiting to be eaten . . .

Peter Nolan opened his eyes, quickly. The dream lingered a moment, and vanished.

“Has nightmares,” Jess said, “screams, twitches, talks gibberish. *This* you didn’t tell me.”

The dream was gone. He tried to remember it, but it was gone. “Must have been the pastrami,” he said, yawning, vaguely aware of the heat inside his skull. “Pastrami doesn’t care much for me.”

“I’d say it hates your guts.” She whistled. “And who, may I inquire, is Walter?”

“Who is who?”

“You kept yelling Walter.”

“Well,” he said, “this is a poor time to be telling you, I suppose, but . . . he happens to be my brother.”

“What?”

“Yes. We keep him in the cellar. I don’t like to think about it.”

“Pete.”

“I don’t know any Walter.”

“Really?”

“Not that I can remember, anyway. Maybe he’s the Father-Symbol . . . or would that be the Mother-Symbol?”

“Probably,” Jess said, “it’s the Sex-Symbol. Walter is your repressed libido, and he’s champing at the bit.”

The highway sloped gently and curved past an immense field of wild growth. Beyond the field there were farm houses and straggles of horses and wide shade trees, small and bright in the clear air. The thunder of rockets rumbled distantly.

Peter Nolan stretched and yawned again. “Want me to take over?”

“If you want to.” Jess stopped the car and they switched seat positions.

“Which reminds me,” she said, “just how far is this rustic paradise?”

“Well . . .” He studied the countryside. “I *ought* to know, but I generally come through at night . . .”

“Pretty country, anyway,” she said.

“The prettiest.” He squinted, leaned close to the windshield. “I know where we are now. See that scatter creek?”

“Yup.”

“Used to play there when I was a kid. Every time I ran away from home, this is as far as I got. Water’s ice cold.”

“Good old Scatter Creek!”

He nudged her. “Don’t be so damn big-city. I intend to acquaint you with every square inch of Coeurville, and you’re going to love it.”

“Aye, aye,” she said, sleepily.

“Over there’s Lonely Yew Lane. Great place for sparking with the girlies.”

“How would you know?”

“Among sparking circles,” he said, “I was referred to as *The Electrode*.”

She made feline movements against him. “I’ll just bet you’re the best known figure in town.”

“Only one of the best,” he admitted. Then, “Lean your head on my shoulder—we’ve got an hour anyway.”

She closed her eyes. In a tired, contented voice she whispered, "Pete Nolan, you have the sharpest, boniest, damndest shoulders in all the world."

He slipped his arm around her, and they drove in silence for a while. Things, he thought, are very good. Things are about as good as they can be. If they were any better, I would go berserk.

He thought of how he and Jess had met, only a week before. It had been late at night, and he had been walking . . . where? Somewhere. And he was in the middle of the street, when the light changed to red. Then something happened—he couldn't figure out what, or why. Shock, maybe. Anyway, suddenly he was lying on his back, with the bumper of a car less than three feet from his head. This car. And Jess, standing there, white-faced and trembling, '*Are you hurt, Mister?*' '*You never laid a wheel on me.*' '*In that case, I don't mind telling you, buddy, you have reduced me to a nervous wreck.*' '*How about a drink?*' '*A drink would be fine.*'

THE field gave way to lawns and small houses and fresh-fruit stands.

Peter Nolan eased off the accelerator. They passed a sign which read: *You are entering Coeurville, N.Y.—Pop. 3,550.*

Then the houses multiplied and soon there were stores and motels.

"Mah plantation," he boomed. "Fur as th' eye kin see!"

It was a very small town, and very narrow, pressed by grassy knolls and shaded by giant poplars which burst from the sidewalks. The streets were white and clean. Above the streets banners announcing a fair drifted calmly in the breeze, all reds and greens. There were a lot of women, but also a number of old men.

Peter Nolan smoothed the powerful turbines down and dropped rapidly from 114 miles-per-hour to a calm 40. He sighed. "There's the New Brunswick," he gestured. "Got an ice cream parlor and a magazine shop. You can get cigarettes there, too, if you can prove you're over twenty-one—Mr. van Brooks is very strict about that."

"I shouldn't have too much trouble."

"Over there's the Foodbag grocery where we trade. Depot's over to the right, you can't see it now. And—"

He narrowed his eyes.

He looked at a large red office building on the corner.

“Come on, don’t stop now.”

He shook his head, almost imperceptibly. “—library’s down Elm street, there—”

A red office building in Coeurville?

As he tried to place it, a clothing store glided slowly past the car window. Helmer’s Men’s Wear. Wide glass front, yellow plastic shade, perfectly ordinary and not in the least peculiar—except, he couldn’t recall any Helmer’s Men’s Wear.

It was brand new to him.

Brother, you’re an observant one, all right. Too much work . . .

Town could burn down, you wouldn’t know it.

Burn down . . .

“Pete, do me a favor.”

“Sure.”

“Let’s get a quick one before meeting the gang, huh? Just one quick one.”

“No can do,” he said. “Have to go into Temple for liquor. That’s four miles away.”

“I thought I saw a bar back there on the main drag.”

“Not in Coeurville you didn’t.” He frowned, felt a tenseness spring into life inside him. “How about coffee?”

“Okay.”

He nosed the car onto a shoulder and cut the engine. *Burn . . .*

“Hey.”

They walked past a dry goods store and a motion picture theatre and a drugstore.

And entered a small hotel lobby.

“Pete, what’s biting you?”

He dropped the frown. “Nothing. The nervous bridegroom is all.”

“Maybe we ought to get married right away,” Jess said. She looked around the deserted lobby. It was dark and musty. “You want to get coffee

here?” she said, dubiously.

“Down the street,” someone said. Jess turned and faced an amiable old man in a blue suit. He was standing behind a desk. “Four stores down. Kelsey’s Cafe.”

Peter Nolan walked over to the man. “This is the Imperial isn’t it?” he asked, and thought, Of course this is the Imperial. What a stupid question.

“Sure is, Mister.”

Sure is, Mister. Who is this old bird, anyway?

“You close up your coffee shop?”

“Nope. Never had a coffee shop. Just the hotel.”

The tenseness increased. “That’s certainly very interesting,” he told the man, remembering the five hundred or more times he’d eaten lunch here.

He snorted and walked across the lobby. It looked the same. Even the dust looked the same. He returned to the desk. “Is this a gag?”

The old man took a step backwards. “Beg pardon?”

Jess laughed. “Come on,” she said, “they’re probably using it for an orgy, stag only.”

“But—”

Outside in the sunlight, Peter Nolan looked at the building carefully.

“It was here,” he said, pointing to the brick wall. “At least, I think it was. Or else—did he say Kelsey’s Cafe?”

“That’s what he said.”

“I never heard in my entire life of a Kelsey’s Cafe.” He turned his head, peered up and down the street. It was the same, and yet, somehow, it wasn’t the same.

“You sure we’re in the right town, Petese?” Jess said. “I know how absent-minded you scientific men are.”

“Of course I’m sure.”

“Well, don’t snap at me . . .”

“Look, Jess—let’s go on home, get something there. I think maybe I’m a little upset. All right?”

“Sure.”

They went back to the car.

“Is it far?”

“Just a few blocks.” He felt the tenseness growing. As the houses passed, it grew. He thought about the red building, the bar Jess said she’d seen, and now this ridiculous business with the coffee shop . . . Just a mix-up, of course, that and his natural nervousness.

No. Something was wrong. He knew it, he could feel the wrongness all around him.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” Jess said. She was looking at a large square white house.

“Yeah.” The familiarity of the house restored his spirits. The feeling drained away. “Your future home, Miss Lang.” He stopped the car.

“It’s beautiful, Pete. Really.”

HE got out of the car.

“Think I better go in first,” he said. “The shock would be too great for Aunt Mildred.”

“I thought you’d written her.”

“I did, but I forgot to—” He took the letter from his inside coat pocket, and grinned.

“God, and you worry about forgetting coffee shops!”

He walked across the porch and tried the door.

It was locked.

He removed a key from his pocket and inserted it. It didn’t work.

The feeling came back, sickeningly. He twisted the key first one way and then the other, and examined the chain to see that he’d not made a mistake.

The door opened.

“What is it?” A fat man with a fat red face stood glaring.

Peter Nolan glanced at the house numbers: 515. He glared back at the man. “Who are you?”

The fat man closed one eye. An old friend of Mildred’s, probably—Mildred had so many screwy friends. Or a plumber, maybe. “Look, my

name's Nolan. I live here. I own the house."

The fat man scratched his chin. He said nothing.

"Where's Mildred?"

"Who?"

"Mildred Nolan! Say, what the hell are you doing here, anyway?"

"It's none of your business," the fat man told him, "but I happen to live here. I've lived here for nine years, bought the place from Gerald Butler, got the deed to prove it. There ain't nobody named Mildred here and I never saw you before in my life." He started to close the door. "You got the wrong house."

"Look, fella, you're headed for a lot of trouble. I mean it. Now open up, and—"

The fat man slammed the door hurriedly.

Peter Nolan walked back to the car. He turned and stared.

"What's up?" Jess asked.

He looked at the house. At the curtains he'd never seen, and the *fresh* white paint, and the green doormat . . . He thought about the key that didn't fit the lock.

"Pete."

Goddamn it, what was happening? This was his house, all right, there wasn't any doubt of that. No doubt at all. None.

He looked at Jess, opened his mouth, closed it, and walked quickly across the street.

He went up the steps of a brown shake bungalow, and rapped on the door.

"Mrs. Cook! Hey, Jennie!"

A young girl appeared at the open window. "Who'd you want?" she said.

"Mrs. Cook. I've got to talk with her."

The girl leaned on her elbows. "Mrs. Cook died," she said. "Didn't you know?"

"What . . . did you say?"

"Three years ago. You aren't her cousin from Chicago, are you?"

“No,” he said, dazedly. “No, I’m not. Sorry.” He walked slowly back across the street and got into the car.

Jess was frowning, searching his face. “What is it, Pete?” she said. “Don’t you think you better clue me in?”

“I don’t—” He ran a hand through his hair. “The kid over there claims Mrs. Cook has been dead for three years.”

“So what?”

“I had lunch with Mrs. Cook just before I left for New York . . . a week and a half ago.”

FOR a long time now he had driven in silence, gazing directly ahead at the road, his hands tight about the steering wheel. The tachometer needle was hovering around the danger mark.

Jess sat close to the door. The smile that usually played about her face was gone. She looked different, just as everything looked different, and she no longer had the sixteen or seventeen year old’s look.

For Peter Nolan the tension was now like a steel rail bent almost to the breaking point. It would snap at any moment, he felt sure. Because there was no suspecting now, only knowing, knowing absolutely. They’d driven from his house—*that* house, he wasn’t sure whose it was any longer—to the city hall. Fred Dickey would clear things up, make the proper explanations, good old Fred. Except good old Fred hadn’t recognized him. Neither had Bert Zangwill over at the sheriff’s office—Bert, who used to tell him stories, who was a hero to him! And the others, the friends he had known all his life—all dead, or gone away, or unable to remember him . . .

But not completely unable. That was the strangest thing of all. The way they would stare and seem about to greet him and then shake their heads . . .

He felt like screaming now, as he remembered how Jess’ face had changed in the past two hours, how her eyes had changed, how she looked at him, the suspicion and the wonder only too obvious.

God, maybe I am nuts, he thought, maybe I really am. Then, No, dammit! This is Coeurville and this is my home and I know every foot of it. That tree over there, the strawberry patch we’re passing, everything. I do!

Jess was rubbing the back of her neck. “Pete—”

“Yes?”

“You said something a little while ago, back in town . . . You said it was as though Coeurville had aged twenty years. Didn’t you?”

“That’s right. Twenty years—in a week and a half.”

“Maybe not,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not really sure, but—this is going to sound corny. I just mean, what if it’s true? What if twenty years actually have gone by?”

“Rip van Winkle?”

She shrugged. “Well, why not? At least it’s a possibility.”

“No,” he said. “I thought of it, but it doesn’t hold up. For a lot of reasons. One, it would make me at least forty-five—unless I left at age ten. Which couldn’t very well be, because I went to high school and college here. And that,” he sighed, nervously, “brings us to the real beaut. There are no records of my having attended Coeurville High. Remember?”

She nodded.

“And the university I work for, dear old Coeurville U., it doesn’t even exist. It never existed.” He thought of the feeling in his chest when they’d driven out onto that unbroken field of grass which had been a campus, had been, he knew, had to have been. “And what about Mildred?”

Jess shivered slightly.

“Mildred was the head of the Garden Club,” he continued. “She got around town like a visiting Congressman, all the time. Everybody knew her. And now there isn’t a single trace of evidence to show that Mildred Nolan ever lived in Coeurville, New York.”

“Okay, so it won’t work. It was an idea.”

The berry patches became fields once more, golden brown and dark, almost black, green. Peter Nolan turned down a small gravel road and decelerated sharply and drove the road that wound through the fields.

He hit the brake at a curve and slid to a stop.

“Wait here,” he said.

He got out of the car and walked through the rusted wire gate of the cemetery. It was a small place, and very old. The gravestones were ornate

carvings of fat children with wings or great scrolls or filigreed crosses, all grimed with age.

He walked across the raised humps of neglected lawn, toward the east end of the cemetery. Beyond the fence was rich grass, dairy cows grazing in utter silence, and a dark stream crossed by a trestle.

Peter Nolan approached two marble tombstones, and remembered with every step the sadness he had felt when he had stood exactly here, in the foul rain, and watched them lower his mother's casket, down close to the father he had never known.

The memory was alive and strong. It was the one thing he was sure of, now.

He knelt and stared at the twin epitaphs on the tombstones.

And felt the steel bar of tenseness inside him snap and explode into a million white-hot fragments.

The epitaphs read:

MARY F. CUMMINGS
1883-1931
and
WALTER B. CUMMINGS, SR.
1879-1909

THE sky was a deep red stain now. Jess pushed hard on the pedal, keeping it at a steady 140. Her lips were dry.

"We'll be home in a little while," she said, softly, "and then it'll be okay. Go on, pass out again. Rest."

The speed lane merged with the narrow highway and the traffic thinned and disappeared. Barns and farmhouses flashed past the window in a darkening blur.

Peter Nolan sat very still. He clutched his knees.

The pain that was not precisely that vanished and returned and grew and diminished. He fought it with all of his strength. But it would not stay away. Nothing he did would make it stay away.

Memories skirted close, and he kept reaching for them.

Fire. A man with bandages. A house.

He reached and sometimes came very near, and always missed. No. It would take something more than reaching. But what? And for what?

The car pulled into a service station and he shut his eyes against the sudden brilliance.

What was she trying to do, anyway, blind him?

And who the hell did she think she was to order him around?

He looked at Jess. She smiled.

Then he remembered that she had used the word *doctor*. Why? To cure him, or—to get rid of him, quietly?

Of course. One of her doctor friends would slip him a needle and that would be that. Never mind the reason. Women have their own reasons.

He waited until the sky had turned almost completely black, then he said, “Jess, would you please stop the car?”

She pulled over onto the dirt. “You going to be sick?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’ll be back in a minute. I don’t feel so good.”

He went outside, leaped the shallow ditch, and walked into the dense foliage.

His shoe scraped. He bent down and patted the ground and closed his fingers about a large jagged stone.

Good. We’ll see about doctors now.

“Jess!” he called. “Could you give me a hand?”

A pause. Then the sound of the metal door opening and slamming and the sound of movement in the brush.

Jess walked over to him and touched his arm.

“Is it better?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Her eyes moved to his hand.

He raised the stone, stood there with it raised, staring; then he turned and threw the stone into the foliage in back of him.

“What is it, Pete?”

“Stubbed my damn toe.” He moved toward Jess and pulled her close. “Stubbed my toe on the rock.” The pain was leaving. It had torn across his mind like a sheet of flame, until there had been only a dancing blackness. Now it was leaving.

Jess put her fingers against his face, gently. “Come on back to the car,” she said.

He took his hands from her.

“Come on, Pete.”

“All right. You go on—I’ll be there in a minute.”

She looked at him helplessly, then she walked back. When she was gone, when he heard the door again, Peter Nolan closed his eyes. He waited for the pain to return, but it did not return. He tried to hang on to the memories that had been flying quickly through his brain, but they were elusive. Something about an old woman, something about a train, they were, and fire, and—

He realized, suddenly, why he had picked up the stone.

He had meant to kill Jess.

Why?

He bunched his fingers into fists and drove them, hard, into a tree, again, and again.

Then he stopped. The moon slid out of a clump of blackness, and spilled light over the land—cool, soft, clear light.

Peter Nolan looked at his hands. He turned them over and looked at them.

They were white and dry.

The tree bark had torn away small strips and pieces of flesh, but there was no blood.

He carefully pulled a flap of skin down three inches below the wrist, and focused his eyes.

Beneath the flap of skin, where veins ought to have been, and cartilage and bone, were hundreds of tiny flexible rods, jointed and gleaming, and infinitesimal springs, turning, and bright yellow coils of wire.

He looked at his wrist watch for a long time. Then he wrapped a handkerchief around the torn section, and went back to the car.

Jess was waiting. “Better now?” she asked, in the same genuine, unfrightened tone she had used before.

“Better,” he said. Everything was returning now. Like relays clicking into place. Everything.

He threw his head back. “Drive to your apartment,” he said, expressionlessly. “Let me off when I tell you to, then drive to your apartment and wait for me.”

Jess said nothing. She started the car.

Soon they were in the outskirts of the city.

HE walked up the circular driveway and stood for a moment, looking at the house. It was fat and sprawling and ugly: a little of 1860 and a little of 1960, brick and wood, gabled windows, false pilasters. Its color was gray. Where once had been white paint was now only this grayness. The age-bulged slats were pocked and cancered, held by crumbling nails.

He walked to the machine-carved door.

The knocker put out deep sound.

He waited, knocked again.

The door opened.

“Hello, Walter.”

The tall man with the bandaged face sighed. “Pete,” he said, extending his hand. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

Peter Nolan walked with the tall man into a large room.

There were hundreds of books in this room, all shabby and worn, a few heavy pieces of furniture, mostly ancient, fancy letter openers, dark lace curtains.

“Sit down,” the tall man said. “Over there.” He walked over to a small cupboard and poured whisky into a glass. “You’ve been to Coeurville, haven’t you?”

“Yes. Tell me about it, Walter.”

“But you know already. How else could you have come here?”

“I asked you to talk. Please.”

The tall man paused, then shrugged. “All right.” He reached up and tore loose from his forehead the upper strips of adhesive tape.

The bandage fell.

Peter Nolan stared at an exact duplicate of himself. Except for the stitched scar running from just below the left eye to the mouth, the face was a mirrored reflection.

“As you can see, you nearly blinded me with those scissors.”

“From the beginning, Walter.”

“But this *is* the beginning,” the tall man said. Then, “All right. Your name is Peter Nolan—you know that.”

“Yes.”

“And you know that you were born eight days ago. I made the delivery: Doctor W. B. Cummings, Jr., Ph. D. I’m your mother. I’m also your father—and every single one of your ancestors, too, unless we count the first adding machine.”

“You’re drunk.”

“Aye. Drunk as an owl. Drunk as a lord. Care to join me? It’s quite possible, and I guarantee no hangover—”

“All I want is for you to stow the colorful dialogue and tell me things.”

The tall man tilted his glass. “You’ve been to Coeurville, so you’ve learned that Peter Nolan never lived there. You also know that you’ve been behaving—oddly—of late. And from the handkerchief around your hand, I should judge you know about that, too. With this information what can *I* tell you?”

“Who am I?” The heat was beginning again.

“You’re nobody,” the tall man said. “You’re nobody at all.”

“Stop it, Walter.”

“Who is this watch I’m wearing? Ask me that. Who is the refrigerator in the kitchen? Don’t you understand?” The man’s eyes glinted briefly. “You’re a machine, Pete.”

Memories took solid form. They came into focus.

But not entirely. Pieces were missing.

“Go on.”

The tall man pulled his dressing gown closer about his unshaven throat. He seemed to talk to himself alone.

“You were born a long time ago, actually,” he said. “Inside my head. All kids have dreams, don’t they? You were mine. The others thought about ice cream mountains and success with the F.B.I. and going to Mars, and swapped their dreams, and finally forgot them. I didn’t. I thought about one thing and longed for one thing, always; just one: a *perfect* artificial man. Not just a robot, but a duplicate of a human being.” He laughed. “It was harmless—and not even terribly imaginative for a child. But then I stopped being a child. I became an adult—only, I didn’t forget my dream.”

Peter Nolan picked up one of the letter openers. It was sturdy and sharp.

“All right,” the tall man said, “I made you. Is that straight enough? It took a lot of years and a lot of money, and more failures than I like to think about. But I was patient. I studied, I read, I experimented. I’d already built a man—also Peter Nolan: I like the name: no reason—but he was nothing. A crude job. So I started all over again from scratch, duplicating from every manner of material the physical elements of the human body. People helped me, but they didn’t know what it was for. Some of them solved problems I could never have solved. But—don’t you see? I wanted to give my man a brain that worked like a brain; and emotions; and intelligence.” He refilled the glass, took another swallow. “All that—I dreamed. Of course, intelligence was the most difficult. You have no idea how difficult. My man had to have memories, he had to have reasoning power—abstract reasoning power—a past, a personality—millions of intricate facets multiplied by millions to make up *intelligence*. Inventing these things from whole cloth would have taken forever. So I worked and found the answer. I would use myself. On certain cells I made certain impressions. My own memories went into the cells. Some of my talent. Some of my knowledge. Bits and pieces, of myself. It took a long time . . . a very long time.”

THEY were silent for a time. Peter Nolan gripped the letter opener and struggled against the heat.

“You were perfect, I felt,” the tall man went on. “But I had to be sure. Ten years ago you would have been impossible: since the discoveries in plastics, however, you were merely improbable. My plastic felt like flesh to *me*, and I had cushioned the mechanical parts so that they felt exactly like human bones when touched, but—it would be the final test: to let you mingle with crowds, and observe closely their reactions. I blocked out—or

tried to—all memory of me and your actual construction. You were Peter Nolan, research scientist, in New York on a sabbatical . . .”

“You lived in Coeurville?” The question leapt out.

“Of course. For your past, I gave you my memories of the town. Some of them were probably quite inaccurate and incomplete—I left Coeurville many years ago. Going there must have been an experience . . .”

“It was.” Peter Nolan closed his eyes. “What about the University?”

“Fictitious. I had to give you a job.”

“And Aunt Mildred?”

“A conceit. All the old women I’ve known in one. I worked out your relationship with her very carefully—not at all necessary, I suppose. The female conquests, by the way, are also—I regret to report—imaginary.” He shook a cigarette loose from a pack. “That’s about all,” he said. “You can fill in the rest. Up to last week, anyway.”

“What about last week.”

The tall man shook his head. “I wish I knew,” he said. “Something went wrong, something mechanical . . . I couldn’t tell. You attacked me with a pair of scissors and I couldn’t stop you. As you know, I’ve been unable to find you since.”

“What’s wrong with me?”

“I’m not sure. But—look, Pete. You’re me. Everything you know or feel or think reflects some portion of myself, Walter Cummings. If you wished to kill—I’ve read the papers, I know about it; the conductor caught a glimpse of you—it could only mean that there is some part of me that wished to kill. *My own death-wish, inverted.* Everyone has it. I mean, we’re all potential suicides or murderers or rapists or thieves. We all have the seeds of paranoia, schizophrenia, or worse, lying inside us, somewhere—from the moment we’re born to the moment we die. But—and here’s the thing—if we’re normal, we’re protected. We’re protected by our inhibitions. These instincts are never given a chance to get out of hand. We may *want* to kill the loudmouthed woman downstairs, or we may *want* to commit suicide at times—but usually we don’t.”

“So?”

“So, Pete, it would appear that my own ‘seeds’ are more developed than I’d realized. In you, they are. In giving you parts of myself, I also gave you

—although unintentionally—my latent psychoses. Big ones. Big enough to break through . . .”

There was a long silence.

“To put it even clearer,” the tall man said, “you’re insane.”

Peter Nolan rose from the couch and walked over to the window. The night pressed, moved, tugged at the branches of dead trees.

“Can I be—fixed?”

The tall man shrugged.

The heat dripped faster, melting into pain. Whirlings and bright dots and pain. “Can I?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you know?”

“Because . . . much as I hated to admit it, luck had a great deal to do with your success.” The man stared at the letter opener in Peter Nolan’s hand. “Skill alone wasn’t enough. There were so many failures before, they should have made it clear—but they didn’t. I was obsessed.”

“What are you saying?”

“That you were an accident. I was a blind man with a machine gun, Pete. I kept shooting and reloading and shooting and finally I hit the target; but it was off-center. I don’t know that I could even come close again.”

Peter Nolan fought the pain, grasped at the picture of an old woman falling toward dark tracks.

THE tall man smiled, wanly. “But that’s the story of my life, right down the line. A long series of failures. I told myself that I wanted to make an artificial man, but I think my real aim was simply to build another Walter Cummings. Only, without the shyness, without the frustration—a reverse Jekyll and Hyde. All I wished I was. The ‘real’ me . . .”

Peter Nolan turned. “I came here to kill you,” he said.

The tall man nodded.

“I was going to kill you and set fire to the house.”

“I know: I felt like doing it myself. It’s what I’d do if I were in your shoes.”

“There’s a girl, Walter.”

The tall man raised his eyebrows; then he lit another cigarette, slowly, off the old one.

“Does she know?” he said.

“No. I took her with me to Coeurville; we were going to get married there; and she thinks I’m probably nuts—but she doesn’t know. She’s in love with me.”

“Pretty?”

“And intelligent. And lonely—something you ought to be able to understand. She’s got a fine life all mapped out, for her and me, together.”

“That’s—too bad,” the tall man said. He pressed his fingertips into his temples. “I’m truly sorry, Pete.”

“Her name is Jessica Lang. She has old-fashioned ideas about virtue: that’s why she never found out, I imagine.” Peter Nolan gripped the edge of the chair. “That would have been a nice scene.”

“No,” the tall man said. “You’re perfect. It would have gone all right—that is, if she’s a virgin. It would seem strange, but then, it always does. Or so I’ve heard.”

The pain jabbed in and out, fire-tipped needles, jabbing.

The tall man rose from the couch-arm on which he had been seated. “Well,” he said, “what are we going to do?”

“You can’t fix me for sure?”

“No.”

“You can’t stop me from killing. You can’t make me grow old, either—I’ll always be like this. I’m insane and I’ll stay insane, until something goes out—then I’ll die. Is that it?”

“I’m sorry, Pete. I wanted you to be all the things I wasn’t; that’s the truth. If I’d known—”

Peter Nolan put his hands out. “She’d learn about it, some day,” he said.

“Yes. She would.”

“She’d find out, or I’d kill her—I almost did, tonight. I might kill Jess.”

“You might.”

The two figures were very quiet for a time. The wind beat against the loose window panes, and against the shutters of the house.

They were quiet, listening.

Then Peter Nolan said: “Do you want to make it right, Walter?”

The tall man clenched his fists, “I would give anything to do that.”

“Are you telling the truth?”

“Yes.”

“Then listen to me carefully. You’re going to build another Peter Nolan ___”

“What?”

“That’s right. You’re going to build another me, and it’s going to be right, this time, and you’re going to do it tonight. This Peter Nolan is going to marry Jess; and he’s going to be happy, for the first time in his life.”

The tall man stared.

Understanding came into his eyes, slowly.

“It’s something you can do—*now*—isn’t it?”

“I think so.”

“Then let’s get to work, before I jam this letter opener into your chest.”

“Pete—”

“Come on.”

Together, they walked into the hall and down the long flight of stairs to the laboratory below.

Hours later one of them returned to the study.

THE door was opened to the length of its chain by a girl who was mostly shadow.

The tall man put his hands behind his back and smiled. “Well, ma’am,” he said, “see I’m a member of the Junior Woodchucks—”

“Pete, get in here this minute. I’ve been worried sick.”

The tall man walked into the apartment. He paused for a moment, then he took the girl into his arms and kissed her. She pulled away. “And now,

before I go crazy,” she said, “will you please tell me what this is all about?”

The tall man smiled. “I’ll tell you what it’s all about,” he promised. “But let’s not talk here.”

“I want to know if you’re all right,” Jess said, looking at him. “What’s that scar on your face?”

“I’m all right,” the tall man said. “Come on, a drink. Get your coat.”

Jess went to the closet and pulled out a jacket and slipped it on.

They went out of the apartment.

A cold gray moon spread light across the streets.

“Pete, something is wrong. I know it is.”

“No,” the tall man said. “Other way around. Something is right, for a change.” He held her arm and looked at her and then she saw his smile and stopped talking.

They went into a bar.

At a table, after they ordered, he lit a cigarette for her. Then he lit one for himself. He held the flame of the lighter before his face for a long moment, and he heard her exclaim as he ran his index finger through the flame. Hot pain seared through him. He pulled his finger away, snapped off the lighter and grinned at her.

“What did you burn your finger for, Pete? You did it deliberately . . .”

He laughed. “Couldn’t help it. Had to prove something to myself.”

“What?”

He shrugged, still smiling. “Had to make sure I was really flesh and blood and not some part of a plastic nightmare . . .”

“I don’t understand, Pete.”

“Not necessary, honey. Not at all. Everything’s ok. The past is gone and for the first time in my life I’m looking forward to the future. In a way I guess we’re seeing each other for the first time. What I see is nice.”

The waiter brought their drinks. He raised his, wiggled his burnt finger for her to do likewise, and proffered a toast.

Outside the bar an old man in a dirty white raincoat walked up and down, carrying newspapers.

“Subway killer still at large!” the old man shouted.
His voice was a whisper in the wind.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Book name and author have been added to the book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Man Who Made Himself* by Charles Leroy Nutt (as Charles Beaumont)]