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The Origamist

Chuang Tzu dreamed he was a butterfly and when he awakened, he was not certain that he was not a butterfly dreaming himself Chuang Tzu.

—Jerome P. Seaton

I

After cutting the morning newspaper, Homer Warner laid down the roundpointed scissors (his own sharper, professional pair had been confiscated) and began to fold. To avoid glimpsing even one word as he worked, to keep his mind absolutely blank (any intrusion of his conscious will might confound the process), he fixed his gaze on the only other patient in Psychiatric. As usual, the man was lying on his back, inscrutable and silent as a doll. Homer used his upturned face like a mandala, letting his own thoughts drain into the prostrate body until his head felt empty as a scooped out shell. And with precise, nimble movements his fingers creased the newsprint into a thumb-thick head and thorax; conjured six thin legs; twisted the last two strips into delicate, knobbed antennae. Then, in the burst cocoon of his left hand, Homer held the finished butterfly: perhaps four inches long, it looked as real as

the Monarchs he'd collected in childhood — except, of course, for the black letters decorating its wings. His eyes wandered slowly over the print now, and were just beginning to focus when the door to his half of the ward leapt open with an airy gasp.

“Well, Mister Warner,” the white-uniformed Mrs. Havens piped, “are we ready to order lunch?”

“I suppose.” Homer tried to project indifference, even disdain, toward Mrs. Havens. But he found disliking her impossible, even though she was an agent of Dr. Pierce. Plump and matronly, she had an air of genuine concern that reminded him of Rosa . . . Rosa in the old days, at least. Still, he wanted to hold her at arm's length. Otherwise he might weaken and succumb to what he called Dr. Pierce's “sanitation.” Home had been sane once. It hadn't been worth the strain.

“Oh, I see you've made another butterfly.” Pinching one wing, Mrs. Havens flew the creature from his hand to a hovering position some three inches off the tip of her nose. “It *is* lovely,” she cooed, then eyed him over the rims of her glasses. “Just like all the others.”

He pretended not to catch her tone. She disbelieved in his ability to read the future on the wings of his creations, but her lack of faith didn't disturb him. It was Dr. Pierce's clinical smugness that frightened him. “Reasonably,” the young psychiatrist would say, pulling his thin pale lips into a pitiful smile, “I can't reasonably imagine how you penetrate the future. Or how your daughter grew wings.” Of course, Homer himself couldn't *reasonably* explain. . . .

“You are quite a craftsman,” sighed Mrs. Havens. She placed the big insect on the nightstand, then handed Homer a pen and the day's menu card. “I'll take your order now.”

He marked his selections indifferently. What did it matter? Every meal here tasted like every other meal. He passed her the order.

“Good.” She pocketed her pen. “Now, is there . . . Mister Warner, are you all right?”

“Yes, it’s just, I . . .”

“Another headache?”

“My vision’s not . . . my eyes . . .”

“I’ll bring you a Tylenol. What are you drinking? Let’s see here . . . coffee?” He nodded. “Why don’t we just make this orange juice. Where’s my pen?” She fished the pen out of her pocket. “Now let me just . . . scratch this out . . . there. Orange juice. Vitamin C and caffeine free!”

“It’s going away now,” Homer said, half protesting. “More like a . . . *spasm*, of some sort. Actually what I need are my glasses, my reading glasses . . . if Rosa’s got them fixed yet. I think it’s just eye strain.”

“Well I should think so, reading butterfly wings every day. I mean squinting so hard, over and over, it’s no wonder.”

“The glasses, then.” He risked a smile.

“All right.” She gazed down at him with a worried look, then turned and walked out.

Her thick-soled shoes squeaked on the recently washed floor of the corridor, her steps firm and deliberate, precise as Homer Warner’s paper-folding fingers. They carried her stout, big-boned body past door after door leading to semi-private rooms, past metal carts covered with bedsheets and blankets or small paper cups full of pink liquids among hypos and thermometers and brown rubber syringes, and on toward the third floor station just down the hall from the office wherein Dr. Pierce stood talking to a slender, nervous woman in her early forties. “Could be . . .” Mrs. Havens heard through the shut door in passing.

“ . . . stimulus he needs,” Dr. Pierce finished, glancing up through the narrow window in which he’d glimpsed a fleeting figure clad in white. “Yes, that’s my hope. That Amy’s presence might stimulate, might — ”

“Well, she’s damn well done that already, hasn’t she.”

He paused, frowning. “Rosa, do you want Homer to get well?”

“Of course, but — ”

“Then you must be willing to try. To give his mind a chance. It’s not like he’s in control. . . .”

“I *appreciate* that, Doctor. Believe me.”

“He needs you more than ever now. He’s desperate.”

“I know. I’m sorry, but I’m . . . desperate, too. This whole situation’s too much, it’s . . . I don’t know.”

“I understand how — ”

“I just can’t handle it!” Tears welled into her eyes and their rims turned suddenly, fiercely red.

Dr. Pierce plucked a Kleenex from the box on his desk and a new one, as if by magic, bloomed in its place. “Here.”

“Thank you,” Rosa said, dabbing ineffectually at the corners of her now freely-flowing eyes.

“I’m sorry, really. I . . . it’s — ”

“Don’t apologize, Rosa. Just tell Amy to meet me here at five-thirty. I’ll let her know what to expect, what I want her to — ”

“You *will* be there with her, won’t you? In the room?”

“yes, now don’t worry. And especially don’t let Amy feel your apprehension. He’s your husband, he’s her father . . . he deserves your trust.”

Rosa sniffed and blew her nose, then smiled at Dr. Pierce. “I’ll try,” she managed. “I’ll do the best I can.”

“That’s all we can ask.”

They both stood.

“Go home now,” Dr. Pierce added. “Calm down before Amy gets home from school.”

Before Rosa could move the door wheezed open behind her. “Excuse me, Doctor Pierce,” said Mrs. Havens, holding the door and balancing a lunch tray in each hand. “I hope I’m not — ”

“No!” barked Dr. Pierce as both trays dipped and wobbled. But Mrs. Havens skillfully coaxed them back into balance, then eyed the doctor over the rims of her glasses. “No,” he said, “uhm . . . interrupting?”

“Yes.”

“No. We’ve just finished. Now what — ”

“Well,” Rosa began.

“Actually, Missus Warner,” said Mrs. Havens, “I only stopped by to see if you brought his glasses with you.”

“Oh, that’s right! I nearly forgot. Here,” she said and snapped her purse open, “they’re right here.” She pulled out a tan glass case and laid it on the tray Mrs. Havens held forward. “Still consulting his damned insects, I suppose.” She popped the purse latch shut.

“Now Rosa,” Dr. Pierce broke in, “I’ve already explained that. We’ve had him only three weeks, and no one can *force* — ”

“Yes,” she said, holding a hand up like a traffic cop. “I know. I just — ”

“He’s in awfully good spirits,” Mrs. Havens said brightly. “He even smiled at me a while ago. I think he’s beginning to trust us.”

“Good spirits,” Rosa sighed, pressing her lips tightly together. “Yes, well. I’d better go.”

“Don’t forget, now,” said Dr. Pierce. “Show Amy you have confidence in him.” He squeezed her shoulder reassuringly.

“I will. I’ll do what I can.” She stepped past Mrs. Havens, nodding goodbye, and disappeared down the long hallway.

Doctor and nurse exchanged glances. Then Mrs. Havens said, “I’m off.” She swung the trays around carefully to leave.

“Wait, Betty.” Dr. Pierce leaned toward her confidingly. “I want you to tell Homer something. Tell him his daughter’s coming to visit this evening. About five-thirty.”

“He’ll be glad to hear it.”

“And listen. I’ve got a hell of a headache. Think I’ll take a Tylenol and hang up the *Out to Lunch* sign.”

She was silent a moment, watching him. The fatigue his voice revealed seemed more than the toll of long hours and intransigent patients. “Good idea,” she said at last.

“I may even take a quick nap.”

“You do look exhausted.”

He offered her a thin smile. “Oh, I am.”

The hollowness under his words frightened her. It was, she realized, the same hollowness that had infected her husband’s voice so long ago, shortly before his disappearance (she still could not think

suicide without effort, though it surely had been the case). Clarence Pierce's speech had the same thick vibrato now, betraying a deep-structured dissonance of spirit.

"You're not staying late again," she said, almost scolding.

He glanced at the wall, or through it, toward the ward at the opposite end of the building. "They may need me."

Mrs. Havens shook her head. "Always the martyr."

"Not at all. Just . . . what's the euphemism? A *selfless healer*." He paused. "If healer's the word."

"It *is* the word," she said emphatically, then pulled back into banter. "But *selfless*?"

"Strike that from the record. Read *stubborn* instead. Or *desperate*." He released a faint laugh.

"My Daniel wanted perfection, too," she said with a pointed look.

The doctor didn't seem to like the comparison. "Listen, Betty. I'm no struggling avant-garde pianist. Thank God! At least I have a secure position here."

"There *is* that," she allowed. "Nevertheless. . . ."

"I also haven't gambled borrowed money, had my hands smashed by thugs, or taken to whiskey. Really," he mused, "it's amazing he survived as long as he did."

She stared at his feet for a moment, then nodded. She looked defeated, and suddenly he wanted to embrace her. Instead, he gently said, "That food's getting cold."

"Already is," she muttered, then forced a smile. "When shall I wake you?"

"About five," he answered.

She gave him a not quite cheerful wink. "Will do." Then she turned and left the room. She hurried past carts and orderlies, dodging a dollied appendicitis case being wheeled to surgery, past LPNs

lightly holding pale wrists while eyeing their watches, and on to Ward Nine where she eased the door open with her hip.

At the sound Homer started from sleep, his heart drumming. Whatever nightmare images had filled him drained quickly back into his head. Now there was only his breath coming rapidly, a faint fearful vibration in his bones . . . the gallop of blood. . . .

“Here we are,” trilled Mrs. Havens, sliding toward him the narrow table attached to the bed. “Sit up all the way.”

He sat up, still trembling.

“Good. Now, your glasses are right here and there’s Tylenol in this paper cup.”

“Thank you, I . . . I think the headache’s back.”

“Take it now, then.” She turned toward the neighboring bed, which was empty except for the lunch tray she’d placed there. She picked it up, then turned back to Homer. “Oh, I almost forgot. Your daughter is coming for a visit.”

Homer narrowed his eyes. “What for?”

“You *are* her father.”

“I know that, but . . . what about Pierce? Will he be here?”

“I’m sure he will,” she said evenly. “Just to observe.”

“Ahhh.”

“She’s coming of her own accord, Mister Warner.”

“Oh, yes. Of course. Her own accord.”

Mrs. Havens gave her head an exasperated shake. “Five-thirty,” she said flatly. Then she walked across the big, open room to her other patient’s bed and laid the lunch tray on his wheeled tray table. She

helped him sit up, as always, and began spooning vegetables into him (he wouldn't lift a finger to feed himself). She shoved each bit in mechanically, distracted and impatient, like a mother feeding an infant who hadn't gotten used to solid food.

Homer watched for a few minutes, then took some bites of his own lunch — mixed vegetables and mashed potatoes heaped beside a breaded meat patty cloaked in watery white gravy. He chewed thoughtfully, watching Mrs. Havens and the spiritless man at their perfunctory ritual, but he couldn't bring himself to wonder about either of them. Instead, after making a show of trying to eat, he laid his spoon aside, slipped his glasses on, picked up the butterfly he'd made earlier, and began to examine it.

A little over six months ago he'd discovered, quite by accident, that random clues concealed on his creations' wings would, without fail, fall together into premonitory codes. There'd been the crash of the 727 . . . then the forest fires in South Dakota . . . the terrorist bomb that had leveled one wing of the Governor's mansion . . . and he'd foreseen them all, found them indelibly occulted in words written the morning before each disaster. But why could he only find reference to tragedies? Thinking it through over and over, he'd discovered no consistent pattern beyond calamity. Each time, everything would simply come together . . . and then he would know. Sometimes he wouldn't realize until later, after the catastrophe had happened, that the knowledge had in fact come to him earlier; but still, he would know he had known.

If only he'd been able to explain it to Rosa! If he could have shown her, reasonably, that the universe was no hopelessly crumpled, impenetrable page, but a crafted thing like his own origamis. . . . But his knowledge was intuitive, not intellectual. And over the past few weeks, as the intricate spiritual implications of his craft absorbed him, he'd lost contact . . . as if she'd simply shut him out.

"It's become an obsession, Homer," she'd told him.

“Why shouldn’t it? Rosa — I can see the future!”

“Do you *hear* yourself?”

“I do.”

“Well . . . I can’t believe — ”

“That’s your problem, Rosa. You can’t believe.”

“You’re ignoring me! Ignoring Amy, too. In favor of this . . . this . . .”

But his mind was wandering.

Again Homer concentrated on the wings, and slowly the future began to unfold. Obscurely he felt it. Then it was there: “A Warning to Homeowners” read one caption. And from several parts of the left wing the word “death” snapped into focus. Then “midnight” . . . “death” . . . “midnight death” . . . “Homeowner Warning” . . . “midnight death. . .” Suddenly the breath knotted in his chest. The sense of it all was obvious: *Homer Warner, dead at midnight*.

“Dead at midnight,” he whispered.

He knew he should panic. But after the initial shock his breath began to flow evenly once more, and soon a calm filled him. As if drugged, his muscles slackened. He felt . . . relieved. No more Dr. Pierce! And Rosa . . . Rosa would be sorry she’d ever put him in this place.

He scanned the wing again, but could find no clue as to how. Not that it really mattered. He already knew the crucial thing: he would die at midnight.

“Do I have to feed you, too?”

He glanced up at Mrs. Havens. The urge to tell her his insight coursed through him like a mild shock, but he shook it off. If Dr. Pierce knew, he might try to prevent the inevitable. “It was cold,” he said at last. “And tasteless.”

She sighed and snatched up his tray. “You haven’t taken your medicine.”

“Headache’s gone.”

“I see. Well, I’ll just leave it on the nightstand by the water.” Then, picking up the other tray (plate biscuit-wiped, juice glass drained and decorated with a plastic straw), she stacked Homer’s upon it and carried them out.

Homer lay back, sinking his head as deeply as he could into the pillow, and held the butterfly at arm’s length. The mystery of it awed him. He’d been a master of origami for twenty years, a leading Western authority on the subject. Why hadn’t enlightenment come before? Wearily, he placed the butterfly back on his nightstand. For a long while he lay there, staring at the ceiling, blank as the other patient five beds away. Then he slept.

When the door at the ward’s far end huffed and swung open, he woke, alarmed. Heart throttling, he rose expectant on one elbow. For a long moment, fragments of the nightmare hung before him in the air: rose-petals wobbling out of empty space like snow . . . crimson snow . . . and his own cries like receding echoes becoming long pins, nailing the petals to a wall of darkness. . . . Blinking, he shook the images free, staring down at his hands until he grew calm. Then he squinted at the wall clock: five-fifteen. Amy was due.

But the one who’d entered had not come toward him. Instead, she’d stepped to the other patient’s bed and sat carefully on the edge. Homer had seen her before, but only at night, when the ward-light had been too dim to make out her features. Now, in the oblique winter twilight filtering into the room, he gazed at her with a vague sense of recognition. She had long black hair pulled straight back from her face, tied with a green scarf, and her skin was the color of fresh cream, her ears like small white roses. Leaning close to the man’s face, she spoke in low tones which, as always, he didn’t respond to. Then she

turned her face slightly toward Homer, and with the evening light staining her nose and forehead and one palely flushed cheek, she listened. . . .

How beautiful, thought Homer, to listen so deeply.

As if she'd heard him, the woman glanced in his direction. Then she stood, gazed briefly at the vacant face she could not affect, and crossed the ward to the foot of Homer's bed. She smiled at him uneasily and quietly said, "Hello."

"Hello," he answered. Her eyes, he could see now, were as sea-green as Rosa's. Her slim, long-nailed fingers laced tightly together, quivering. "Sit down," he offered, nodding toward the chair near the door. "Please."

"Thank you, I . . . I think I'd better." She sat instead on the next bed, eyes darting in the other man's direction. "I was just . . . wondering about my husband."

"Oh, he'll be fine. I'm sure."

"No . . . well, what I mean is . . . it doesn't look that way, you see."

"Oh." Homer swallowed.

"I just wanted to know if . . . if he — " she lowered her voice, "if he speaks. To you, I mean. To anyone."

Homer lowered his eyes. "Not so far as I know. He never leaves the bed except when Missus Havens takes him to the toilet."

She winced. "I see."

"You know, I feel like we've met before." The woman shrugged. "Are you by any chance . . . a writer?"

She glanced back at her husband. "I am."

“I thought so! Just wish I could place — ”

“Rachel Hunt,” she interrupted. “That’s my pen name, at least.”

“We both addressed the Authors’ Club banquet! Back in July.”

She nodded. “Guilty as charged.”

“You spoke about . . . oh, I can’t remember.”

“‘The Self and Its Art,’” she said.

“That’s it! Sailed right over those old ladies’ heads.”

“And you,” she said. “What was your subject?”

“Non-fiction. I talked about writing craft books.” He could see she didn’t remember and added quickly, “Doesn’t matter if you don’t remember. Damned boring, really. The doing it’s what’s important. I’m an origamist.”

“A what?”

“Japanese paper folding.”

“I’m really sorry, I just can’t — ”

Behind her the door burst open, shouldered by Mrs. Havens, with whom she almost collided.

“Missus Holloway!”

Startled, the young woman stepped back from Homer’s bed.

“What are you doing here at *this* hour?” Mrs. Havens went on.

“Doctor Pierce called this afternoon and changed my appointment,” she said. “From seven to five-thirty.”

“But I thought — ” Homer began.

“I know, Mister Warner,” Mrs. Havens interrupted. “Your daughter changed the time. Had to see someone off, or — ”

“Yes, well . . . I do have my appointment,” the young woman said. “I’m late already.” She turned and walked quickly to the door, opened it, then paused and smiled back over her shoulder. “Thank you . . . Mister Warner, is it? You were very helpful.”

Homer started to say it was nothing, but Mrs. Holloway — or was it Hunt? — had already disappeared.

Mrs. Havens began straightening things up, slipping Homer’s scissors into the nightstand drawer, tucking in the sheet around the bed-foot, ironing bulges and folds out of the blanket with her quick hands. “What did you two talk about?” she asked casually.

“Nothing,” he said. Mrs. Holloway’s visit had unsettled him. For some reason, he now wanted more than anything to tell his secret — tell it to someone who’d listen. “Missus Havens,” he said at last.

“Yes?”

Homer took a deep breath, reached and gripped Mrs. Havens’ wrist. “Stay with me,” he said, his voice husky with emotion. “I’m going to die at midnight.”

II

“Beautiful,” Mrs. Havens murmured, watching Homer’s fingers work. His movements seemed to infuse the paper with an almost living energy. And again — disturbingly against her will — she was reminded of Daniel, of his skilled hands cantering over their cheap upright piano’s yellowed keyboard, his restless music twisting, pounding the walls of their basement apartment. With much the same

urgency, the same intense swiftness, Homer folded and creased as if his very spirit might be forced into the object, even pushed beyond it . . . to leave the thing itself behind like a split chrysalis. Finally, with an ambiguous flourish, Homer opened the flat rectangle and floated on his palm: a slender boat.

“Amazing,” Betty Havens said.

Homer sighed and was silent a moment. “Wish I had time to teach you this. But then I’ve had nineteen years with Rosa, and she’s never learned.”

“Not everyone has the talent, Homer. I know I don’t.”

“No faith in the process, that’s the problem.” He sailed the small boat to the nightstand and moored it amidst a menagerie of exotic beasts and traditional Japanese figures. “Not that I understand it completely either. And it’s wrong of me, but I wish I did.”

“But what’s wrong with—”

“Zen teachers,” he interrupted, “insist that their students accept enlightenment without understanding. By definition, the experience can’t be rationally explained.”

“I supposed that’s true. But then how do you know for sure? I mean, take psychotics. . . .” She broke off what might prove to be a most disturbing thought.

“There’s no proof,” Homer said. “None.”

“But how—”

“I don’t know! Don’t ask me.” He lowered his voice. “I spent a few weeks in a monastery. Kai Province. Do you know what I learned? I learned to hate those coy bastards. Smug . . . I tell you, they were worse than your typical rat-maze watcher.” He fell silent, glowering.

Betty looked at Homer sadly, studying the expression on his face: an abyss-gazer’s baffled anguish at sensing how bottomless the next step will be. She’d seen it before.

“After twenty years,” Homer muttered, “I’m still a damned Westerner.”

Slowly, with a slight hiss, the door a few feet from the bed swung open and a young girl came in, followed by Dr. Pierce.

Homer sat all the way up. “Amy?”

“Hi, Dad.” She stopped at the foot of his bed, hands gripping the rail.

Mrs. Havens nodded hello. “I’d better check on Mister Holloway,” she said, then winked at Homer and walked away.

Amy stood silent, biting at her thumbnail, her hazel eyes turned down.

“Amy,” Homer said, but could not think how to finish his thought.

Amy began to pace between her father and Dr. Pierce, who sat in the straight-backed chair by the door. She was scarcely over five feet tall, older (due to the disjunction of her birth date and school’s registration deadline) than most of her tenth-grade friends, and solidly built, almost voluptuous. But she was also a bit high-waisted, slightly pigeon-toed, and pale. (Homer had once kidded that her skin was as white as erasable bond.) She was dressed in a crimson corduroy skirt with the tails of her cream-colored blouse hanging free below the waist, and she toyed with her bosom button nervously. Her fingers were as slender as Homer’s own, but clumsy somehow. (Homer had long ago given up hope that she’d master origami.) Halting again at the foot of her father’s bed, Amy tore her thumbnail back until it peeled free, then chewed it like a tiny thorn.

“Still nibbling, huh?”

She glanced at Homer and hid the ragged thumb with her other hand. “Sorry.”

Homer swallowed. She was treating him like a stranger. “So. How’s your mother?”

“Fine. I guess.”

“She’s hoping you’ll be released soon,” said Dr. Pierce. His grey eyes, swollen behind the nearly square lenses of his spectacles, seemed to glint. His upper lip held a light glaze of sweat.

Homer fixed him with a narrow stare.

“She is, Daddy,” Amy echoed. “Hoping.”

“I’m sure she is, sweetheart. Why don’t you come sit on the bed?”

Amy’s gaze flitted toward Dr. Pierce. “It’s all right,” he said.

“You’re God damn right it’s all right,” Homer hissed with such vehemence that Amy stepped back. “She’s my *daughter*.”

“Go on,” the doctor coaxed.

Amy moved around the bed and sat carefully on the edge.

“Now,” Homer said, resting his right hand on Amy’s shoulder. “How’s it going at school?”

“Fine, Daddy.”

Through Amy’s cotton blouse he could feel the knobs, the shoulderblade-sized scars, where her wings had been — and sorrow erupted inside him. He was to blame. If only . . . if she hadn’t . . . if he’d left her alone. . . . Now, because of his fervor, she would grow up like everyone else. A dry spasm constricted his throat, then passed. “Did you work out . . . the problem with that boy?”

“Tom Sadler.”

Homer nodded. “Tom. Yes.”

“We’ve . . . separated,” she said.

“Separated,” Homer repeated, trying not to smile. Kids these days took these things so seriously.

“I saw his plane off an hour ago.”

“Really.”

“He’s moved out to California.”

Homer stroked her hair. “It’s for the best. Believe me.”

“He was too old,” she said mechanically.

“That’s absolutely true. A college boy! Far too old. And a rich boy at that!”

“He never acted *rich* around me, Daddy.”

“Maybe not. But I’ve seen his mother. From a distance, of course. Aloof. ‘Aristocratic’ — which in Greek means, ‘Nose scraping clouds.’” He laughed.

“Tom’s different.”

“Still.”

Amy was silent a moment, then began gnawing her other thumbnail.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that.”

“Dad,” she began. Her jaw-muscles were suddenly working. “Look —”

“Amy,” Dr. Pierce interrupted.

“What I said—” she went on quickly, “Doctor Pierce made me put it that way.”

“What she means —”

“The truth,” she said, silencing Dr. Pierce with an angry glance, “is that Tom’s joined the Marines. He left tonight for basic training. Daddy . . . that’s the only reason I’ve stopped seeing him.”

Homer looked away. “Oh.”

“I’ll be *old* enough when he comes back.”

“I see.”

“Homer,” said Dr. Pierce, his voice oddly urgent, “why don’t you tell Amy what you found out this afternoon.”

Homer aimed a knife-like look at the doctor, then looked away. At the far end of the ward Mrs. Havens was walking Holloway back to his bed from the restroom, and with her hand on his back he looked like a huge puppet. The image struck him funny, and he smiled. So were most people the puppets of time. But he, Homer Warner, was different. “Yes,” he said at last. “I guess she should know.”

“Know what?” Amy said, her voice unsteady.

Homer gazed at her fiercely. “You can . . . *live it up* when this Tom gets back,” he said. “If he comes back, of course. Vietnam’s a world away.”

“Daddy, why are you so —”

“I won’t interfere. You can throw yourself away, throw . . . everything away. You see, I won’t be around.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She looked down at her father’s fingers, which had begun blindly folding and unfolding the untucked tail of her blouse.

“I’m dying, sweetheart.”

Her back stiffened. “What?”

“At midnight. I saw the future today,” he told her and gripped her blouse hard, “and I’m going to die at midnight.” The bottom button popped off and skittered across the floor.

“Daddy!” Amy jumped up, tearing away from him. “You’re . . . what are you —”

“Don’t be afraid for me,” he said.

“Afraid for *you*?” Her voice rose. “You’re crazy!”

“Amy!”

“Calm down now,” said Dr. Pierce, crossing to Amy and grasping her shoulders firmly. “Take it easy.”

“But Doctor . . . did you see? Look here, he . . . he tore my blouse! What’s wrong with him?”

“Amy,” the doctor said evenly.

“And why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“I couldn’t take the chance you’d steer him away from it.”

“But you’re supposed to *cure* him!”

“It takes time,” said Dr. Pierce in a low, soothing voice. “And you’ve helped us tonight. Now . . . now Amy — just calm down.”

Mrs. Havens suddenly appeared and slipped her arm around Amy’s waist.

“Take her to my office,” the doctor told her.

Amy was bawling now, her breath coming in short, gulping bursts.

“Come on now,” Mrs. Havens cooed, supporting Amy with her pink, freckled arm. “Let’s go find a place to rest.”

Homer watched them make their way out of the ward. He felt dazed, as if his brain had crumpled like a wad of waste paper. “I should never have told her.”

“I’ll go to her,” said Dr. Pierce, massaging the back of his neck with one hand as he approached the bed. With his thumbs, he hoisted Homer’s drooping eyelids. “I’ll send Missus Havens back with a sedative.”

“All wrong,” Homer murmured as the doctor left. “Shouldn’t’ve said a word.”

Weariness like a dark snow began to descend upon him, and he let his head roll to the left. Five beds away, Holloway lay on his right side. Vaguely, the knowledge that the man was staring at him registered in Homer's consciousness. For a long while they looked each other in the eyes.

Then Betty Havens was there. "Here we go," she whispered.

"Didn't hear you come in," Homer breathed as he rolled his head toward her. He actually welcomed sedation. It was already eight o'clock, and he'd always wanted to die in his sleep. The needle's bite was mild, no worse than a thorn's.

"There." She withdrew the needle and swabbed the puncture with a chilly cotton ball. "How's that?"

"Fine. I'm fine."

"You're worn out, aren't you."

"Yes. Drowsy."

"Remember — I'm here."

"Yes."

"Is there anything you want?"

"Rosa'll be sorry. And Amy, and . . . Rachel. Won't she?"

"You'll make it, Mister Warner." She turned off the lamp.

"She'll . . . they'll . . ."

"Homer?"

"Stay with me."

The ward swirled away. He stood in the dim, second-floor hall of his home, just outside Amy's bedroom door. He'd been standing there a long time — hours, maybe. The grandfather clock tocked

quietly near the head of the stairs, though it telegraphed a secret urgency. Homer recognized the moment — as if he were watching from a farther point in time: early the next morning (it would still be dark outside), Dr. Pierce would come for him, would help him into an ambulance while Rosa stood with a hulking patrolman, shaking her head no over and over, no. . . .

“I want you to let them give you their tests,” she’d told him.

“I’m not insane.”

“Homer . . . I love you. But lately, your craft —”

“*Origami*.”

“I *know* that. It’s just —”

“How easily the name of my life’s work escapes you.”

“That’s not *true*. The point —”

“Mm hm.”

“— the point is, it’s become an obsession.”

“Why shouldn’t it? I can see the future!”

“Do you *hear* yourself?”

“I do.”

“Look. I just can’t believe —”

“That’s your *problem!*”

Rosa took a deep breath. “The point is you’re ignoring your family — Amy and me — in favor of this . . . this . . .”

“Rosa, she’s my daughter. I could pass this on, this . . . *wealth* — if only she’d make the effort. Just *try*.”

“But you can’t *force* her.”

“Look,” he snapped. “Death is absolute. Dark beginning, dark ending. There’s only enlightenment. Transformation. . . .”

“But she has to *choose* it.”

He grabbed her wrist. “Did you know that insight is like a deep sexual rush? Her adolescent thrill with that Tom can’t compare —”

“You’re raving!”

He’d struck her then, struck hard. What did she know of anguish? Of nothingness? Sensing emptiness at the hub of every achievement, feeling the absurdity of every conviction . . . he’d known it all his life. He’d been attracted to it always, and always had fought that attraction. And now . . . now that he stood on the threshold, on firm ground. . . .

He’d knocked her down. Under his feet the floor had rocked as the blood inched out from her nostrils, drawing some terrifying calligraphy across the linoleum.

Now, through Amy’s bedroom door, Homer could hear her moving about. She must be awake.

Downstairs, a chair scraped across the kitchen floor and fell with a clatter. Rosa’s curse reached him faintly. He knew with sudden, absolute certainty that more than tests would be involved when Dr. Pierce got hold of him. And Amy . . . they’d poison her against him.

With a violent twist of the doorknob Homer pushed into the dark bedroom. For a moment — dim hall-light falling on the bed — he thought Amy might be masturbating, and he shut his eyes against her. But when he opened them again he saw what was really happening. Black inside a huge cocoon, translucent as onionskin, his daughter writhed on the narrow bed. He rushed forward. Amy’s head had

already broken free of the sack and was damp and slightly sticky. *Help me*, she mouthed silently. *Help me, Daddy*. Homer frantically climbed onto the cocoon, clamping it between his knees, and began tearing back the papery covering.

“Daddy! Stop it! Let go!”

But already her shoulders were free and his hands could feel soft, moist wings protruding from her back. If only he could free them!

“Daddy!”

He ripped back more of the sack.

“You *bastard*.” Rosa stood unsteadily in the doorway, gripping the jambs for support. “Get away from her, you lunatic!”

“No!” he howled.

But Rosa was there now, the unlit lamp lifted high over his head. “You’re *sick*!” She struck him hard on the side of his head and he tumbled off onto the floor. Through the roaring in his skull he could hear Amy shrieking and knew, *knew* what had happened. Then Rosa struck a second blow.

“Mama! Stop it!”

Through converging beams of night Homer saw Amy standing rigid by her bed, the fresh wings torn completely off and dangling shredded at her sides.

“Sick!” Rosa hit him again, and blackness thundered into his skull.

“Stop . . . stop it . . .” The voice touched him from a great distance. “Stop it, Mister Holloway . . . let go!”

Through half-open eyes Homer recognized Holloway bending over him, staring deep into his dream. He looked like a giant in the dim ward-light. His hands were fastened to Homer's smock, and he shook him . . . shook him hard.

"Mister Holloway!" cried Mrs. Havens, yanking the man's arms until his grip gave way.

"This is it," Homer slurred. "Let him . . . let him . . ."

But Holloway stepped back. His trembling hands fell to his sides and hung there. In the faint light his eyes were luminous, coldly afire. Staring ferociously now, he flashed a grin as sharp as a blade and began to shake his head slowly, awkward as a marionette come suddenly alive. "No." His voice was gravelly from disuse. "No," he said again. "No."

Then the orderlies Mrs. Havens had rung for arrived and helped her lead Holloway back to his bed. When they'd settled and sedated him, she returned to Homer.

"Are you all right?" She laid a cool hand on his cheek.

"Mmm. Groggy."

"I don't think he hurt you, but . . . did you hear? He spoke! He actually —"

"Time," Homer mumbled, rising weakly upon his elbows. "Is it midnight?"

Mrs. Havens sighed. "Not yet. In a couple of minutes."

He fell back heavily, hovering in terror between waking and sleep. Maybe Holloway would come after him again. Maybe something else. If only sleep would swallow him in time! But slowly, against his will, his mind grew lucid. Holloway's one word throbbed in his head: *No*. . . .

"There, Homer."

He awakened fully then. Everything jumped sharply into focus: the ward, Betty Havens' joyful eyes damp with triumph, the memory of Amy's pajamas ripping in his hands. . . .

“Do you see?” she went on. “It’s after midnight.”

The wall clock showed 12:03.

“It’s wrong,” he muttered. “It’s got to be.”

“No,” she laughed. “It’s right! You’ve *survived*. For a while there, I almost . . . almost believed your prediction. But you’re here, Homer.” Tears began wandering down her cheeks. “I’m so glad. . . .”

Confusion and fear began to shake Homer’s body. Burning tears blossomed under his eyelids, and he reached for the butterfly he’d made that morning.

“You’ll need light,” Betty sniffed and snapped on the reading lamp.

In his hands, the creature seemed scintillant at first. But it quickly became what it was in truth: a paper insect built out of newsprint with cleverness and skill. He could see now that the letters were jumbled, random, meaningless. He tried to speak, but the words choked him.

Betty sat down heavily on the bed and slipped her protective arm around his shoulders, whispering, “You’ve survived, Homer. There’s no need to say anything.” She hugged him. “Remember . . . you said it. You said it would be beyond words.”

With each heartbeat Homer could feel the blood-muscle in his chest crumpling more, shrinking, growing smaller and smaller until it was tiny inside its cage of ribs, compact as an acorn. Then he gripped Betty’s arm, thrust his face between her breasts, and began to sob.