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THE PEOPLE: No Different Flesh
THE ANYTHING BOX
PILGRIMAGE

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HOLDING WONDER

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J-LINE TO NOWHERE

IT *was* THERE! It was there all around me. To smell and to touch. To hear and to feel. Our way out—our answer—our escape. And now it's lost. I found it and let it get lost again. But we'll find it! Chis says he'll find it if it takes even until he is twelve years old! We're working on it already, but it's difficult when you daren't ask a direct question. When you daren't tell anyone for fear—well, for fear. Chis is really brighted about looking for it. And nothing ever brights Chis any more—except maybe hopping the forbidden hi-speed freight glides. And I, Twixt Garath, sister to Chis, daughter to Mother and Dad, I'd be brighted, too, if I weren't busy roaring myself endlessly for letting our miracle come—and go again—unlocated, on the J-line.

I remember when it all started—even if I can't tell you why it all happened.

One day in our unit not so long ago, Mother turned to me suddenly and clutched my arm with both her hands. Her nails made dents in my skin, she held so tightly. For a second I was startled. Mother hadn't touched me for so long—so long—

"I can't see out!" she protested and I could feel her hands shaking. "I can't see any way out!"

"Out of what?" I asked, feeling sick inside and scared because she seemed to be crumpling. She even looked smaller. "Out of what?" I repeated. Whoever heard of seeing out of a unit?

"Out of anything!" she said. "Is there still a sky? Do ants still make bare paths through the grass? When will the shell empty? Our bones used to be inside!"

"Mother," my voice wobbled. "Mother, you're hurting me." And she was. Red was oozing up around her nails. She let go, sucking her breath in surprise. I dabbled my

arm with a tissue. "Shall I call Clinic? Are you hurting somewhere?"

"I'm hurting everywhere and all the time," Mother said. She turned away and leaned her forehead against the wall. She rolled her head back and forth a little as she talked. "I'm not quite so crazed across as I sound." Her voice was muffled. "I used to think those ant trails through the grass were the loveliest, most secret things in the whole world. I was charmed to think of a whole civilization that could function without a single idea that we even existed. And that's what I'm feeling now—a whole civilization functioning without even knowing I exist. And it's *my* civilization! And I'm not charmed about it any more!

"Remember that undersea vacation we had two years ago? We saw those shells that were so lovely. And they told us that the shells were the external skeletons of the tiny, soft creatures inside. No one cared about the tiny, soft creatures inside—only the bright shell. They forgot that the soft creatures *made* the bright shell—not the bright shell the creatures. As though the bright shell were the only excuse for the creature!" She turned slowly, her head rolling as she turned, until she finally leaned her back against the wall, her hands behind her. "Most people think we exist for our lovely exterior skeletons. They think we're only the unimportant soft little creatures inside all these shells—these buildings and walls and towers and glides. That we couldn't exist without them. But I have my own bones! Inside me! I don't *need* all these skeletons!"

And she stood there with tears running down her cheeks, her bottom lip caught in her teeth.

What do you do when your mother just stands there with tears rolling down her face? I didn't know either, so I got a tissue and gave it to her. She wiped her face and hugged me tight. I could feel the wetness of her tears above my ear as she hugged. How odd! How odd to feel the warmth of another person, so close! How odd, but how wonderful!

"Twixt," she said, letting go of me to look at me. "Have you ever run barefoot through the grass? Or squished mud up between your toes?"

"We don't ever touch the greeneries." I sounded like a tired First Level tape. "They are the breath of the complex. Maybe one touch wouldn't matter, but who are you that you should touch and others not be allowed to? And there's

no soil as such in the megapolis," I chanted. "The greeneries are all hydroponics."

"Remember when you were taking mythology," said Mother. My head swam as I tried to keep up with her quick switches. "Remember that man who was strong as long as he touched the earth and lost his strength when he was lifted off it?"

I nodded. "Hercules killed him after he held him off the ground so long he got weak."

"We are all like him," said Mother. "And we've been held off the earth too long. We'll die if we don't touch down soon."

Maybe *that* explained the funny feeling that had been growing inside me for so long—and twisting me so much of late. Maybe I was dying slowly because I couldn't touch down. But since I don't remember ever having touched down, how could I be suffering because I couldn't—I snatched back to Now. What I was feeling most was uncomfortable, wondering what to say next.

I was spared, though. Mother glanced quickly at the timeline rippling along near the ceiling, snatched her bag from the table and a kiss from the air in the vicinity of my cheek, and slid the door to the corridor in a wild flurry of haste. I could have looked at the log to find out what she was late for, but I felt too quenched even to flip her info switch to see.

I went to the slot wall and flipped the latch of mine. I kicked off my pneumonosoles and lay down on the bed, clicking the panel shut. The lulltone came on in my pillow, and the conditioning currents began to circulate to adjust to night settings. I was crying now—tears running down into my ears on both sides. "I hate! I hate! The whole unit—the whole complex—the whole everything!" I sobbed to myself. "I hate it, but I'm *used* to it! What can we do else, but be used to it!" I thumped my pillow. "Gonky slot!" I sniffed. "Too stupid to know it isn't night!" Then my tears stopped as I suddenly thought, "Am I any smarter? How do I know it's day? I've been doing day-things just because the timeline says it's day, but how do I *know* it's day?" Tears flowed again. "But I did see the sun once! I did! It's big and up and so bright you can't see it!"

So that's when the whole thing started, or at least that's

when I started knowing there *was* a thing. It had been an odd, mixed-up day all day. This was only another uncomfortable piece to be fitted in. I had been hoping, in some tiny corner of me, that Mother would be willing to communicate and that by having someone to tell, I could get the day pushed down to its true proportions—or at least be able to blunt a few uncomfortable sharp things that jabbed.

That morning, with my usual sense of reaching a refuge, I had slipped into my study carrel at school. When I was in it and facing the viewer, I could shut the whole world out. I could get so absorbed that when break-time came I'd have to blink myself back to Now and wander in a fog down to the physical area. I sometimes envied the kids who were so loose that they could get together before break-time, volunteer one of them as a puncher to cover six or eight carrels besides his own, and then stand gabfesting in a tight little wad in the corridor while the puncher wore himself out punching enough responses to prevent Supervisory from investigating, or calling for a check response from everyone simultaneously.

Our level isn't required to do movement beyond our daily compulsory half hour first thing in the morning, so we usually sit around the area and, well, you know—music and eating and drinking and talking—and boys. At least for some. I had no pash as yet. Time enough. No one can even put in for marriage evaluation until 21—and lucky to get certified before 25. Mother and Dad were married—younger than that—just before Evaluation and Certification came in. I asked them once how they could tell, then, that their marriage could be functional. Dad laughed—he still could laugh then—and looked at Mother. She pinked and he said, "Some knowledge isn't programable. You'll find out."

Well, back to the student lounge. I had headed for my usual bench where my other-end-of-the-alphabet friend would be waiting with our two containers of Squelch—chartreuse was the Squelch month-flavor, and I loathed it, but everyone was drinking it, so— The lounge was overflowing with a waltz—the old dance-form that has been staging a big comeback. Chis and I used to have fun with it at home at night—along with Dad and Mother—way back when we still had fun together. I wonder what happened to us? Most of the kids think the waltz is too strenuous and barbaric really to dance, since it involves continuous large-

muscle movements, but my heart swung with remembered pleasure when I heard the music.

I was cutting across a corner of the area, not paying much attention to the few couples swishing around it. Hardly anyone notices their touching any more. It is assumed that it is with permission. Well, there I was crossing the floor when I was snatched out into the middle of it and into the dance. My feet responded automatically and were waltzing happily long before the top of me had time to wonder what the drill was.

"Hey! You've got two right feet!" The creature who had grabbed me—*without* permission!—was very pleasantly surprised.

"But I didn't intend to—" I began, annoyed, but he just grinned and almost swung me off the floor. I got so interested in keeping up with all the variations that he knew, that I forgot to be annoyed and just enjoyed! It was swinging way out away from anything. It was being loose in such a beautiful way that shouts built up inside me but came out as rhythmical swirling—and the warmth—the round warmness around us and around us and around—

The music stopped and there we were in the middle of the floor, panting and laughing and looking. At least I was looking. The fellow had his eyes pointing at me, but he didn't see me—not really. No more than if we had passed on a glide somewhere. I was just an adjunct to his dancing.

Suddenly very cold and angular and conscious of the ring of eyes around us, I loosened my cooling hands from his. He turned his smile off and mine died. "Lellice is waiting," I said. I didn't even wait for him to walk me the four courtesy steps. I fled to Lellice who stood there open-mouthed —as usual—and clammy-handed from clutching our Squelches.

"Close your mouth," I said, still breathless, my heart not compensating as quickly as it should have. "No cavern tours today."

"That—that was Engle!" she said in an awed whisper. "Engle Faucing!"

"Oh?" I grimaced at the first taste of chartreuse. "Who's he?" I could not-see him too! Besides, I really hadn't noticed.

"Who's he!" Lellice strangled chartreusely. *"Only* the son of Kermit Faucing, megapolis council member! *Only* the Rep of Senior Levels to the Governing! You voted for him! *Only* the utter out of all outness!"

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said. "He looked like a nice kid. Poor thing."

"Poor thing!" yelped Lellice. "Have you crazed across?"

"To have a name like Engle Faucing," I explained. "It's as left-footed as his dancing." I regretted that as soon as I said it. He could dance—could *dance*—but only with his feet, I guess.

"Twixt! You sheerly are double-dump-stuff!" Lellice turned her back on me and loudly went on drinking her Squelch.

The outside of me walked back to my carrel after the break, as usual, but the inside of me, for some reason, crept back unhappily and huddled tightly as I sat down in my chair. I stared blindly at the viewer, thinking nothing—only feeling a three-quarter beat pulsing—I thumbed the response button viciously and went off into history, silencing the tutor's jabbing introductory voice.

And then of course it was Release Time today. I usually like the break from regular school and feel pleased and loose for sure when we all go up to the church floor of the school complex and drift off, each to his own instructional class. I like getting into discussions of matters in which Man is the most important thing about earth instead of his just being an eddy of life around the bottom of the eyeless, towering buildings. But that day we had Immortality for our lesson. I suddenly couldn't even want to believe in it. Not with flesh so soft and unhappy and walls so hard and uncaring. I drooped, wordless, through the class.

Afterwards, everyone else left the building to go to their usual glides, but I cut through another way to go on an errand for Mother. All alone in the school Open, I looked up and up the sheer wall that towered without an opening on this side from Crib Level all the way up to Doctor's Degree. And it scared me. What if it should fall on me! I was so little and I could die! The building looked as though it didn't know I was alive. It looked solid enough to go on forever and ever after I died. I suddenly hammered my fists against the vitricrete and cried, *"I'm* supposed to be immortal, not you! You—you *unlive* you! I've got a soul! Whoever heard of a vitricrete soul!"

But I was the one that bruised, and the vitricrete didn't even plop when I hit it.

And then home to Mother's breaking. And my tears in the slot. And a weary going on with the usual routine.

Dad came home that evening more silent than ever, if that's possible. My tears were long dried and I was sitting on the floor in front of the telaworld watching the evening news. I gave Dad a hi! and cut my picture to half a screen to clear for his sports program. I removed the ear so I could hear what Dad had to say.

"Chis?" Dad asked as he flipped a finger to inflate the chair to his weight before he dropped wearily into its curving angles.

"Not in yet," said Mother guiltily, her face pinking.

"He knows," said Dad. "Guidance warned us—and him. If he glide-hops once more or enters male-subteen-restricted areas, he'll go to therapy."

"And so will we," I thought sickly. "The whole family will have to go to therapy if Chis does. Illness isn't isolated."

"I—I—" Mother looked miserable. "Darin, can't we do *something* for Chis? Can't we get him brighted on anything?"

"Like what?" Dad filled his half of the telaworld with his underwater program and fumbled for the ear. "Even Guidance is stumped."

"But at ten?" Mother protested. "At *ten* to be so quenched on everything?"

"Guidance says they're working on it." Dad sharpened the focus on his half-screen. A shark seemed to swim right off the screen at us. "He's on page 14 in volume 2—of the ten-year-olds. I wonder which page they'd have me on?" He turned from the telaworld. "I don't imagine the list would be very long of malcontent males who stop in midmorning to remember the feel of sand dissolving from under his bare feet in a numbing-cold, running stream."

"I wish," said Mother passionately, "that we could—just go!"

"Where?" asked Dad. "How? We'd have to put in for locale amends, specifying a destination and motivation. Besides, is there any place—"

"Just *any* place," said Mother rigidly.

"Would it be different?" I asked, feeling hope surge up

inside me. Mother looked at me silently for a moment; then she sighed and her wrists went limp. "No," she almost whispered. "It would be no different."

I didn't know when Chis came in. I guess he slid the secondary exit. But there he was, sitting in his corner, twirling and twirling a green stem between his fingers—a green stem with four leaves on it. I felt my heart sag. He had picked a leaf! From greenery!

Mother saw him about the same time I did. "Chis," she said softly, and Dad turned to look. "Is that a real leaf?"

"Yes," he said, "a real one."

"Then you'd better put it in water before it dies," said Mother, not even a tone in her voice to hint of all the laws he had broken.

"In water?" Chis' eyes opened wide and so did mine.

"Yes," said Mother. "It will last longer." She got a plastiglass from the dispenser and filled it. She held it out to Chis. "Put the stem down in the water," she said. And he did. And stood there with the glass tipping almost to spilling and looked at Dad. Then he leaned over and put the plastiglass on the table by Dad's chair. Dad looked at the leaf and then at Chis

"Will it grow?" asked Chis.

"No," said Dad. "It has no roots. But it will stay green for a while."

Chis reached his hand out and touched Dad gently on the shoulder. Dad showed no withdrawal. "I won't ever take another," offered Chis.

"It's better not," said Dad.

"But someday," cried Chis, "I'm going away! I'm going to find a place where I can *run* on a million, million leaves and no one will even notice!"

I hunched there in front of the telaworld and felt myself splintering slowly in all directions into blunt slivers that could never fit together again. This must be what they meant by crazing across. I was immortal, but I must die. And soon, if I couldn't touch the soil I had never touched. I didn't want to touch anywhere, and yet I could still feel a hand enveloping mine and another pressed firmly against my waist. I hated where I was, but sickened to think of change. But change had to come because it had been noticeable that Dad hadn't withdrawn when his own son

touched him. Nothing would be smooth or fitted together again—

I creaked tiredly to my feet. Mother quirked an eyebrow at me. "Only to the perimeter," I said. "I want to walk before dimming."

Outside our unit I paused and looked up the endless height of the building—blind, eyeless, but, because it is an older unit, I could still see scars where windows used to be —when windows were desirable. I walked slowly toward the perimeter, automatically reminding myself not to overstep. With Chis already on warning, it wouldn't do for me to be Out of Area after hours. Someday—some long away day—I'd be twenty-one and be able to flip my Ident casually at the Eye and open any area, any hour of the day—well, not the Restricted, of course. Or the Classified. Or the Industrial. Or the—well, I have the list at home.

Around me, as *up* as I could see, were buildings. Around me as *far* as I could see, were buildings. The Open of our area, ringed about by the breathing greeneries, must have had people coming and going, surely a few, but I didn't see them. I seldom do any more. Of course, you never deliberately *look* at anyone. That's rude. Nor ever speak in public places except when you absolutely have to. You *do* murmur to friends you meet. And because you don't look and don't speak, people sort of get lost against the bigness and solidbuiltness of the complexes. So I walked alone in the outer dimming, my pneumonosoles not even whispering against the resilicrete floor of the Open.

I found myself counting steps and wondered why. Then I smiled, remembering. Twenty-six paces this direction, then fourteen to the left, four small slides to the front, and a settling of feet slightly the other way, and—

I slowly turned my head. Yes, I had remembered my old formula right. I had found the exact spot under the lights. No matter which way I looked, I could see a shadow of me. I was standing in the center of a bouquet of my own shadows! How pleased I used to be with the visual magic. No matter what shadow I saw, it was mine! All of the me's belonging to the one me! How enchanting it had been when I was young. But now the shadows no longer pointed at me —but away. I wasn't being put together any more. I was being pulled apart—thinned to no more substance than my own shadow. I ached. Then I turned back to the unit. All

the other me's went somewhere else. I felt drafty and very small at the complex door.

That night I lay awake in my slot long after inner dimming. Every time I shut my eyes, I was swinging around the lounge again, with a disturbing sense of nearness. I don't like nearness. It interferes. You have to react, even if you'd rather not. And how can you be near to someone who doesn't even see you but just rubs his eyes past the place where you are?

My pillow was hard. The lulltone was off-key. The air exchange was all wrong. And I was dancing again, around and around, farther and farther away from the lounge but nearer and nearer and nearer—

"Engle Faucing! What a gonky name!" I muttered and poked my pillow. Then I was counting. "—Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-one, twenty-one. Five is so many years! So many!"

I flipped up in bed, hunching automatically to keep from thumping my head on Chis' slot. *What* was the matter with me? I couldn't be sickening for anything. Our lavcube is standard—we have the immunispray installation, so I couldn't be sickening for anything. I flopped back down and closed my eyes resolutely. And whirled around and around and shadow and *one* twothree *one* twothree—

At break-time next day I went to the lounge, expecting —I don't know what I was expecting. Engle was dancing with someone, swinging effortlessly around and around. I felt my chest clench on something that wanted to explode. Lellice was waiting for me on our usual bench, clutching two Squelches.

"Too bad," she said, as I grimaced through my first swallow of the gonky stuff.

"Too bad what?" I asked when I could.

"Too bad he doesn't dance with you again," Lellice said. "You sure were brighted."

"Waltzes always bright me," I said, wishing Lellice would cut it.

"But just think," she sighed. "If Engle had danced with you today, and then tomorrow, you'd have been opted, and he'd *have* to bid you to the BB—"

The BB! I'd forgotten all about the BB. Forlornly I let my Squelch dangle from my lax hand. "Ifing never did any-

thing," I said. "And nuts to the BB!" I wasn't about to let her think that I'd ever hoped—

"Twixt!" Lellice's eyes got big. "Such language! Besides, this is the first year you've been eligible to be bid—"

"Fooey on the BB—" I groped for every archaic, left-handed phrase I could remember. "Big Blasts are for the birds! Who needs them! And this Squelch! It stinks!" I dropped the container and kicked it viciously. It rolled out onto the dance area, dribbling that gonky chartreuse in a sticky stream across the shining. And Engle—all unsuspecting—circling with his partner, stepped in the sticky stuff. And fell flat. And pulled his partner down. And her skirts flipped. And I just stood there *looking* and laughing so loudly that everyone in the room became aware of me. And of the two of them because of me.

I think I would have died on the spot if the break bell hadn't rung and emptied the lounge with most unusual speed. No one wants to be around a situation. Not even Lellice, though she did hesitate, her mouth open, before she gulped and fled. Engle left last. He looked back over his shoulder, dabbling at his Squelchy sleeve. *"Three* left feet!" he said. But he *looked* at me! He saw me! And, which was the worst of all, he'd remember me—and the Squelch.

Everyone was gone. I kicked the dribbling Squelch container with short vicious kicks clear across the deserted floor and all the way down the hall. I picked up the half-empty, battered thing and carried it into my carrel. As I sat in the chair that was molded to me from such long sitting-in, the post-break tape was activated.

"Good morning, Twixt," said the history tutor brightly. "If you'll dial the year 1960, we'll begin. Good morning, Twixt. If you'll dial the year 1960, we'll begin. Good morning—"

I slammed the Squelch container down on the viewer. Then I deliberately poured the Squelch, to its last oozy drop, into every hole and crack and crevice I could find. With set teeth, I pushed every button in sight—by the palmsful. And pulled every lever—handsful at a time! Then right in the middle of the morning and just because I wanted to, *I left school!*

I was so quaked that I could feel my toenails curling. I can't remember a thing about leaving the school complex or how many glides I boarded to what other glides, nor can I

remember off-stepping at whatever J-station I off-stepped into. I was too busy to notice anything—too busy arguing in wordless savage gusts with no one.

I didn't even hesitate at the J-station, though I had never in all my life boarded a J-line by myself. I didn't look at signs or colors or sizes. I just pushed into the first empty jerkie I saw, actually pushed, taking with me, defiantly and uncaringly, the sight of the shocked eyes of the woman I had touched with no valid excuse. The door slid and I fumbled at the destination controls, not knowing how or where to punch for. Then I was crying with huge gulping sobs sandwiched between thin, tight whinings. I hammered the controls blindly with both fists and was jerked back against the seat in a sodden heap of misery.

I have no idea how long it was before I was jerked off the J-line to the destination my fists had chosen. Then I was jerked again. And again, bruisingly, the other way. Then the jerkie glided to a stop. I had thirty seconds to exit before the jerkie would be jerked back to the J-line, but I scrambled out afraid of getting caught half through the door. Snuffling and dabbling at my face, I turned back toward the jerkie, hoping no one would notice. And stopped in mid-turn in blank wonder.

Where on earth was I?

There was no J-station. No station list, no line color code, only a narrow rail and a slab of some sort of crete that was cracked across.

And green! Green all around me! Underfoot, ankle deep! Higher than my head, covering the J-line tower completely and the smaller wooden—why, that wasn't a smaller tower! It was a tree! Just like the tapes! I waded through the green, guiltily looking around to find some way to get onto a legal paving. There wasn't any. No paving! Anywhere! I stumbled over to the tree and touched it—the brown, unleafed part—the trunk. I guess I fingered the bark too roughly because a piece came loose. I tried hastily to put it back, but I fumbled and it fell. I dropped to my knees to get it, but there were so many pieces on the ground that I couldn't tell which one I had broken. I picked up one piece and shredded it in my fingers. I tasted it. It tasted like—like a tree! Warm and woody and dusty and real.

And then I saw it. There at my knee. The enchanting little line of bareness running out of sight into the green.

Breathlessly I slid down to my stomach, my cheek pressed to the green. I peered along the shadowy, secret hidden way. Now if only—if only—! And one did come! An ant, carrying something, hurrying along, so tiny! So tiny! On tapes they look so big and quick and armored.

I watched until the ant was out of sight—all unknowing of me. Then with a deep, shaking sigh, I sat up and looked around me. More trees—more green slanting down out of sight towards the smell of water, and a liquid sound. Then something moved across the green invisibly, bending it toward me. I *felt* a flowing around me. Wind! Wind blowing because it was a wind, not because a thermostat told it to!

"Here," I thought, "here is a place that wouldn't be the same! If we could only get locale amends for here!" I scrambled to my feet, suddenly clutched by wonder.

"There's no one," I whispered to myself in disbelief. "Here I am and there's no one else. Not anywhere. No one to see. No one to hear. No one to sense—!"

My arms lifted as though they knew wings and my feet barely touched the green as I surged my whole self up. Then in one swift, collapsing motion, I folded me down and stripped my feet bare. I ran fast, fast, and lightly—oh, lightly! across the green, the bottoms of my feet giggly at the spiky soft of the green and my hair flowing back from my face as my running made a little wind for me all alone. When had I last run? Oh, years! Oh, never before like this —never with boundlessness around me and such freeness!

Suddenly I was plunging down a steep slope unable to stop. Below me was a wide blue glint—water! As big as the ocean! I could drown in it! And I couldn't stop myself. My frightened, clutching hands caught leaves and tore them off the plants as I plunged past. Then I caught a branch and felt my shoulder yank back and pull me to a stumbling stop right in the edge of the glinting. I stood panting and shaken, watching the boiling brown water slosh my ankles. Then the water slowly cleared and I could see the distortion of my feet in the flowing wetness. I took a cautious step. I felt graininess dissolve under the soles of my feet. Sand melting away—just as dad had said, only this water wasn't numbing cold. It was brightly cool. I took another step and felt a squishy welling up between my toes! Mud between my toes! *Squish, squish!*

Like an echo I heard *swish, swish* above me. My chin tilted as I searched for the sound. There! Faintly far away, like a cobweb against the sky, the J-line. How fragile and lovely it looked from here. And here below it, I had found three dreams—Mother's in the little bare path, Chis' in the million, million leaves to run on, and Dad's in the dissolving sand. And the three, held together by all the other wonders, was really what mine had been all the time without my knowing it!

With a sigh, I turned back to the water, but the spell was broken. I was suddenly very small at the bottom of a bigness that had forgotten that Man made it. It whispered its arrogant roar down to me—to remind—

I stepped out of the water onto the green, rinsing first one foot and then the other. Clutching my skirts and looking warily back over my shoulders, I scrambled up the steep slope, loosing one hand to help me.

Fear and panic began to build up. Where were the people? Where was movement and humming? The constant eternal humming of wheels starting or stopping, accelerating or decelerating—moving, moving, moving. The only thing I could see that looked anything like life or units was a huddle of small buildings far away—low and little and lonely with sky showing between them.

Suddenly terrified that I might be the only person in the world, I staggered back to the J-line tower, my shadow, thinly tall, slipping up the massed greenery. There was the slab of crete. And there, quietly and quieting, was a small white flower growing up out of the crack as though no one had ever bothered to mark the line of where things could grow and where they mustn't. Without even looking around, I *picked* it! My chin was high and defiant.

A sudden sound lowered my chin and sent me back into the hanging, swinging green on the tower. I muttered, "Vine," in belated recognition, just as a jerkie rounded the tower and jerked to a stop right in front of me. I pushed the white flower down tight into my pocket. The jerkie door slid. A man stepped out. His brows lifted when he saw me, but he smiled—and went on *looking!* And spoke! And we had never met!

"Want this jerkie?" he asked informally. I could get no words, so I nodded. He pushed the hold button and stepped out. I stumbled at the door and his hand caught my elbow and steadied me.

"Your pardon," he said formally, releasing me. "I trespassed."

"It was permissible," I gasped my part of the expected exchange.

"What J-station?" he asked, showing no awareness that he was asking a personal question.

"Area G," I gulped as though I told my area to any casual questioner. "Where is this?"

"Area G," he repeated and reached in to set the controls. Before I could even repeat my question, the door slid. Through the view-plate I saw his mouth make a word. I thought it looked like Nowhere. How could it be Nowhere? I was jerked abruptly that way. Then this. Then the last jerk onto the J-line. I dropped back against the seat and stared down at my bare, dust streaked feet. I giggled helplessly. Cinderella doubled! Then wonder possessed me and I was back among the green, trying to gather as many rememberings as I could to take home to my family—my waiting, eager family—

I was off-stepping the glide at our complex before the wonder lightened enough for me to start choosing words. Then I was in our unit and babbling the whole thing to my gape-mouthed family, babbling so fast that I didn't make sense even to myself. Dad finally put his hand firmly over my mouth and held me tightly comforting with his other arm until Mother brought me a hush-me and a plastiglass of water. I swallowed obediently.

I leaned against Dad while I calmed. Finally he said, "Guidance has set an appointment for you tomorrow at ten —another Garath."

"It was worth it." I sighed shudderingly and relaxed onto the floor from Dad's arms. I hugged my knees to my chest. "It was worth it."

"But Squelch in the *viewer?*" Chis was admiringly scandalized.

"And no one knowing where you were!" Mother's hand was tight and hot on my shoulder. "School called to ask, and no one knew where you were!"

"Not anyone!" I marveled, realizing all the illegal things I had done without even thinking or caring. "*No* one knew where I was!"

"Out in school hours and you nowhere near twenty-one!"

shrilled Chis, brighted to more nearly a boy after being a solid lump of quenchedness for so long.

"Nowhere," I said softly. "That's where I was. Mother, I saw one of those lovely, secret paths through the grass. And I saw an ant running along it, not knowing I was there. It was carrying something. And the green all bent toward me and the wind flowed around me like—like light going somewhere to shine—"

"Where *were* you?" Mother's eyes were wide and dark.

"I was—I was—" I stopped, stricken. "I don't know," I said, a heavy realization tightening inside me. "I have no idea. Not a single idea. Only—only the man said Nowhere. At least it looked like Nowhere through the viewplate."

Dad's mouth twisted. "I imagine that's just exactly where you were," he said. "Nowhere." His eyes told me untruth as plainly as if he had said so.

"No matter what we call it," I cried, "I was there and I saw it—the little bare path—"

Mother's hand left my shoulder and her eyes flashed. "You're unkind to use my own words to cover your truancy —"

"But—" I protested. "I'm not covering. I really did. I saw it. I felt it—a million, million leaves under my feet. And mud between my toes and—" I turned to Dad. "Sand dissolving under my feet in a flowing stream—"

"Enough," said Dad quietly, his face hardening and his eyes not seeing me any more. "I suggest truthing to the Councilor."

"Honestly! Honestly! I'm truthing!" I cried. "It was just what we are all aching for! Our dreams—"

"We haven't asked you to account for your time," said Father—no longer an informal Dad. "We trust that whatever you did was ethically correct."

"Ethically correct!" Anger surged in me, stung to life by my disappointment. "Most correct! I pushed a lady to get into a jerkie. I rode the J-line all by myself to Nowhere. I ran barefoot across all the green I could. I squished mud between my toes. I looked at a stranger. And *talked* to him. And I picked—" I scrabbled in my pocket. A moist, greenish-black thread caught under my probing nails. I pulled my hand out and looked. The flower was crushed and dead. Only the tip of one petal curled coolly white from the ruin. "It *was* most secret and most lovely," I whispered forlornly.

My fingers cupped the flower protectively out of sight, and I pushed my hand down into my pocket.

Dad turned on the telaworld and reached for the ear. "Don't forget your appointment at ten tomorrow."

"And if I don't choose to remember?" I flared. Three pairs of astonished eyes focused on me. "Why should I go to Guidance?" I asked. "They'll only try to change me—to make me conform! I don't *want* to change! I don't want to conform!" I struggled with breath and tears.

"Let's truth it!" I felt my face pinking with more defiance. "We're non-conform—everyone of us! That's our whole trouble!"

Chis doubled his hands into fists and Mother pinked slowly and painfully. Father just looked at me for a moment, then he said quietly, "Yes, we *are* non-conform. That *is* our problem. But so far we have either truthed it or kept still. Our fantasies we have plainly labeled fantasies—"

"And so have I," I said as quietly as he. "When I *am* fantasing. And *I* think that silence sometimes is the worst kind of untruthing."

I turned away and went to Wardrobe. I undressed hurriedly, clutching my dress back from the renov to rescue the moist mashedness of the white flower.

I was still staring defiantly at the top of my slot when the lull-tone finally faded, thinking I was asleep. Then I heard the click of Chis' slot and knew he was above me. Slots are supposed to be completely contained, of course, so that no one intrudes on another, but long ago Chis and I discovered a long thin crack at one end of our slots. We could whisper there and hear each other. Would he? Or did he think me untruthing, too. Or maybe he just didn't care—

Then I heard, "Twixt!" in a voiceless, small explosion. I could picture him twisted all around in his slot because the crack is at his foot. He's a boy and has to take the upper, and it is so old that the bedcovers pull out from only one end, but I can change where I put my head in mine. That week I had changed my pillow to the opposite end.

"Yes?" I breathed back at him, sitting up cautiously to get my mouth closer to the crack.

"It's true, isn't it?" he hissed.

"True," I said flatly.

"With green and water and trees?" His whisper was hungry.

"True," I said. "And little units far away, low, with sky between—"

"There's no J-station like that in two hours around," he breathed back at me.

"There *has* to be!" I felt my whisper threaten to become a voice. "Or else I was farther than that away. I was there. I saw my shadow slide up the J-tower. Up over the green —"

"Twixt!" He almost broke into speaking. "If you saw your shadow in the afternoon, the sun was in back and the J-tower was east—" he fell silent.

East? Whoever uses directions any more except on maps instead of up and down and left and right. You just get the right transport and it goes where you want. And what has east to do with where my shadow was sliding—

Then Chis spoke again, very carefully. "Twixt, where was the river then, the flowing water—left or right?"

"I—I—" I visualized again the slim sliding of such a tall, tall shadow. "Left," I said. "On my left."

There was a brief breathy silence. "Listen, Twixt," his voice was urgent. "I bet I know what happened to you. You know the grid for J-stations? The same distance between, all the time? Well, it isn't always so. Sometimes there's a non-conform off-J in between. No station. Just an off and on for some reason or other. You have to have the destination code 'relse you don't even know there's an off there. You musta punched a non-conform off-J."

"But where is it?" I whispered back. "How'll I ever find it again? Because I'm *going* to find it."

"I'll find it for you," came his confident answer. "I know more about J-lines than anyone in the whole—the whole megapolis! I've hopped more hi-speed freight glides and stowed in more jerkies—"

"Chis!" I was horrified. "Jerkies *alone?* And you're not twelve yet!"

"Twelve!" His voice dismissed the whole idea of rules and permits. "But, Twixt, I think I know where that river is! If it was on your left and you were facing a J-tower in the afternoon—I'll find it. I'll find it if it takes until—until I'm *twelve!*"

His voice was gone, but I could almost see him so brighted that he shone in the dark! I wasn't very dim myself!

"And he's just stubborn enough to do it," I thought ad-

miringly. "And then we'll bring the J-line destination code to Mother and Dad and *take* them there. *Then* they'll see. They'll believe then. And Dad will put in for locale amends and we'll go! We'll leave this huge external skeleton. We'll be tall, standing there in the green. We'll all strip off our pneumonosoles and—" I hugged myself in delight. "And then foof to you, Engle Faucing! *Fooof!*"

I thumped back down on my pillow, starting the lulltone again. How had *he* got into my dream? I felt the delight melt from my face. The lulltone was a background for my unspoken, mouth-framed words, *Most secret—most lovely.* And I closed my eyes so the wetness wouldn't turn to tears.

Then I hurried back to the wonder, with a twinge of guilt for having roared poor Dad. I had untruthed by silence, myself, drinking that gonky chartreuse just because the other kids did. But I could change now. I felt as though I had split a hard, crippling casing clear up my back. Fresh air was flowing in. I was growing out. At last! Something worth being brighted for! Something to put together day by day until it became a shining, breathing somethingelse! Oh, wonder! Oh, wonder!

And all we have to do is find Nowhere.