

BEEP!

Beyond the Frogpond and Back

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Beyond the Frogpond and Back

A NOVEL

Stewart Parks



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Fundamental notions like order and structure condition our thinking unconsciously, and new kinds of theories depend on new kinds of order.... One of the reasons for doing science is the extension of perception and not of current knowledge. We are constantly coming into contact with reality better and better.

— David Bohm

A FORK IN THE PATH

It is early morning, still quite dark. Bob Pilhaus opens his eyes, awakening from a fitful dream. Close in his view is the ceiling of a Eurorail car. He is in a private sleeping compartment. The rhythmic vibration of steel wheels rolling on rails penetrates through his back as he lies in the Pullman berth. An occasional sway of the car testifies that the dual rails are not always set perfectly level on their wood ties and gravel bed.

"I've dreamt it then," he mutters to himself, as he recognizes his surroundings. The rather pleasant (and slightly erotic) content of his dream is brutally erased from his consciousness, replaced by the hard facts of waking reality. The more depressing, lonelier aspects of his current situation sink back into his brain with the crushing immediacy of a cannonball obliterating a butterfly.

Rolling over, he reaches out to part the heavy curtains covering the window. The small reading lamp is still burning overhead, so all he sees is his own reflection, pale and hollow-eyed. By switching off the lamp and darkening the compartment, he is able to distinguish some of the passing scenery outside, bathed in moonlight. It looks like farmland—flat fields, pasture, some trees, a fence line running close beside the track.

"We must be in France by now," he computes, checking his watch. "I need some help. I feel terrible!" He has a splitting headache, his stomach is growling, his ears are ringing painfully with the noise of the train, his nose is stuffy, and his eyes feel as though they have been lightly sandblasted.

Wincing as he flips the light back on, he surveys the disarray of his belongings strewn about the tiny compartment. Sitting up and reaching across to his backpack, he retrieves a folded, wrinkled postal envelope from one of its side pockets. Opening it carefully, the small paper bundle containing his last gram of Peruvian cocaine is revealed. He spoons out a couple of grains of the chunky, crystalline powder and begins chopping it methodically.

The tools for this job are close at hand, since he never bothered to put them away after the last twenty-hour binge. A single-edged razor blade and his government-surplus emergency signaling mirror make short work of pulverizing the chunks.

As he works, he sings to himself a folksong he had first heard performed a long time ago by Dave Van Ronk. It has somehow stuck with him, recurring every time he finds himself in this situation: "Cocaine is for horses, not for men. They tell me it will kill me but they won't say when..."

"I may be dying, but I'm gonna have a good time doing it," he says to himself, with conflicting tinges of determination and desperation. A dollar

bill rolled up into a tube helps him funnel half the pile up each nostril, after dividing it into two short, white lines. Almost immediately he begins to wake up and overcome the symptoms of his hangover.

"I must have finished that whole liter of wine last night, 'cause there's the empty bottle. And over half that gram is gone so I must've whiffed it, unless I just got sloppy and spilled it somewhere." Such a mishap has been known to occur before.

He is briefly upset with himself, since he had intended to conserve his stash more carefully, but the exhilaration of his latest indulgence quickly asserts itself. All nagging symptoms of discomfort are driven out of his mind by the temporary, electric buzz of cocaine euphoria. He busies himself with packing up his belongings, tidying up the compartment. Getting dressed is no problem, as he had passed out the night before still wearing all his clothes.

Stumbling out into the gently rocking corridor of the train, he makes his way forward to the dining car. He wants some coffee and a cigarette first, then perhaps some food, if his rebellious stomach feels up to the task. By midday, the train should be pulling into Paris, then a short layover and transfer, and he will be on his way to Biarritz. His spirits are buoyed by the prospect that he will soon be surfing on the Basque coast. He is still slightly chagrined about having fled his friend Dominic's home in Rome the morning before, with only the briefest explanation of "I've gotta get wet, Nic," but the coke quickly washes away that embarrassing memory.

There are few of his fellow passengers in the dining car at this early hour. He seats himself and orders coffee when the waiter comes around. He lights a cigarette and checks out the other occupants of the car. At the far end, in the very last dinette, is a curiously-dressed young woman sitting alone, facing him. She catches his eye immediately as he looks her way, and he is excited to see her offer him a brief but warm smile in acknowledgement. Even at a distance he can tell that she is strikingly attractive, with long, brown hair rolling off her shoulder and cascading down over her red dress, which appears to be a cross between an evening gown and a robe. It is low-cut in the front, displaying a bountiful bosom, but full-length, covering her legs in folds and draping to the floor, with a large hood attached at the shoulders.

"What a dish!" he thinks. "I wonder if she's alone?" He watches her until his coffee arrives, and since no one has joined her, he picks it up, screws up his courage, and shuffles down the aisle, stopping in front of her table.

"May I join you? Are you alone? Do you speak English? I hope you don't think I'm being too forward, but I couldn't help it—you look very familiar to me. Have we met? Are you an American?"

"Those are very many questions for one breath," the woman replies calmly, "but yes, you may join me if you wish. I do speak English, and I suppose I am also 'American,' if you include the entire North American continent in that

definition. I am Canadian by birth.” She smiles up at him.

He slides into the seat opposite her, drinking in the vision of alluring, familiar femininity she presents. Though obviously a few years older than himself, she is still within his range, he figures. Her smile is dazzling, her teeth even and white. Her eyes are the clearest, most intense color of green he has ever seen. They absolutely sparkle. “God, she is even more beautiful than I dreamed,” he notes to himself in awe, “but what’s with this outfit she has on? Man, would I like to see what she’s got under that thing....”

He becomes so engrossed in lustful images involving lifting the rich, red velvet fabric of her robe and burying his face in the curvital softness within, that he fails to notice she has not answered all his questions. Worse yet, he does not recognize the truth that he speaks inwardly—he has dreamed of this woman often, and as recently as last night.

With his eyes drooping low-liddedly to the luscious valley of her exposed cleavage, he introduces himself. “My name is Bob, but my friends call me BP, or just Beep, for short. Those are my initials—my last name is Pilhaus.”

“My name is Esmeralda,” replies the woman, bringing her hands up from her sides and rummaging through the copious folds of material mounded in her lap, “and I am not exactly traveling alone. This is my cat, Abraxus.”

Standing up in her lap and flashing onto his screen, like a preview of a bad movie, is a large, black cat, staring back at him with another colder, wilder, feline pair of green eyes. Except for a certain glazed trace of cruelty and selfishness, and a slightly elongated, almond shape to the black pupils, they could be the same irises as Esmeralda’s. The shade of green is identical, the luminosity equivalent.

BP is startled by this turn of events but tries to maintain his casual demeanor. “Y-you have a cat?” he stutters, trying to think of why this fact is so disturbing to him. “D-don’t cats have to r-ride in cages in the baggage car or s-something? How did you get to keep him with you?” He is beginning to shake, visibly trembling. His cup rattles in its saucer as he squeaks out his words while setting it down.

“Abraxus is a she, actually,” explains Esmeralda serenely. “She hates being in a cage and she is very cooperative, so I usually just carry her in my bag on trips like this.” As she speaks, she reaches into the voluminous, woven straw handbag at her side and brings out a small, antique, wood-framed hourglass. Shaking it to empty one side of the glass, she turns it over and sets it deliberately on the table between them. The fine, white sand trapped in the upper chamber begins to flow to the one below.

“What are you doing?” BP is beginning to lose his composure as he follows her words and movements, which seem to him to be strangely disconnected. “Is this how much time you’re giving me to talk to you? Are you playing some kind of game with me?” He fidgets in his seat, eyes downcast, paranoia creep-

ing into his brain through every pore in his skin. The cocaine is a catalyst for this reaction, and it proceeds rapidly.

“My friend, Bob, don’t be afraid,” says Esmeralda soothingly, “I’m just trying to help you remember.”

“Remember what? You’re trying to make me blow it—lose my cool—aren’t you? You probably love to play practical jokes on the men who approach you, right? Or else this is some kind of plot against me—is that it? You’re playing with my brain, here! Who sent you? They put some kind of drug in my coffee, didn’t they? Does this have anything to do with all the weird things that have been happening to me lately?” BP is clenching the edge of the table with his hands, knuckles turning white, ready to use this extra leverage to bolt upright and flee, if necessary. He looks around from side to side quickly, gauging escape routes, checking for any accomplices who might be bearing down on him at this very moment. He sees one of the waiters approaching their table. Is he in on the scheme? Part of her plot?

“No one is after you, Bob,” Esmeralda assures him, “and this is not a joke. Please calm down and pay attention. There is no gigantic conspiracy against you, except for the one that you have constructed yourself. If you recall, it was you who found me! It would be a poor conspiracy, indeed, which depended so heavily for its success on the actions of the victim, don’t you think? As for your theory about drugs, I’m sure that whatever you’ve taken was ingested voluntarily.”

BP ceases his cowering as her words sink in. He straightens up in his chair and clears his throat, trying to control his racing heartbeat. The waiter arrives, takes their breakfast order politely and leaves. “I’m sorry,” he apologizes, calming himself. “I must be in pretty poor shape to be so paranoid. As a matter of fact, I did do a couple of lines of coke when I got up this morning. Things have been going badly for me lately, and I guess I’ve been trying to make myself feel better with a little of the ol’ laughing powder. ‘Better living through modern chemistry,’ that’s my motto,” he quips, trying to be glib.

“That’s unfortunate,” replies Esmeralda without a trace of humor, “because I believe that drugs may be a large part of your problem. Take cocaine, for instance—it can make you feel so good that you can forget things that are very important for your physical health, like eating and sleeping, for days on end. Or perhaps you might be forgetting something much more important, something essential for your mental health, for even longer.”

“You’re probably right. I’ve been getting awfully stoned lately, and I often have feelings that I’m forgetting something. But what does that have to do with this hourglass? Why are you timing me?”

“The hourglass is an instrument for measuring the passage of time, to be sure, but I’m using it here as a prompt, a symbol to jog your memory. I was hoping you would be able to remember where we’ve met before. Tell me, Bob,

do you dream much when you sleep?"

"No, I don't think so," answers BP, defensively. "I mean, I don't know how much other people dream, so how am I supposed to compare myself? Anyway, when I do dream, I don't remember it for very long after I wake up." Her question puzzles him, as does her reference to having met him before.

"Do you try?" asks Esmeralda. "Never mind. Try for me now, will you? Look at the hourglass, relax, watch the sand running through its waist, and try to remember if you had a dream last night. What was it about?"

BP is confused and distracted, but he looks at the hourglass and tries to think, thankful for this small respite. "What's going on here?" he wonders. "Is this woman crazy? Am I? Should I get my butt out of here while the getting's good? Why is she playing with my mind like this? God, she's such a fine-looking lady! I'd really like to get next to her, but she scares the shit out of me...." Her physical attractiveness is overpowering. He has lost the drift of their conversation, and brushed past her question entirely, busying himself instead with preparing strategies for improving his position in her eyes. He can think of nothing else but finding a way to insinuate himself further into her sphere of attention, perhaps even to what must certainly be the sublime center—the creamy, nougat core....

He is drifting mightily, but is perceptive enough to realize that in his short experience of her, she has not been easily dominated, so he rejects the application of a forceful, macho image, his usual approach. Unfortunately, the only other alternative in his limited bag of tricks is to whine, and hope that she might want to be his naughty little nurse for awhile.

"I must really be cracking up," he says, finally getting back on track, managing to fashion his face into a limp and twisted half-smile (which he hopes is suitably endearing and pitiable). "I've been burning my candle at both ends for too long now. I must've burnt out some mighty important brain cells, 'cause I can't, for the life of me, figure out where we've met before, and I don't see how I could forget someone as beautiful as you. I mean, you are incredibly good-looking, and unusual as can be—what with the cat, the robe, the hourglass and all! You do look familiar to me, but I'll just have to throw myself on the mercy of the court, your Honor. I plead 'terminally burned synapses.' That's sort of like *nolo contendere*, I think." He leans back to assess the impact of his ploy. It doesn't seem to be having the intended effect. Instead of melting, she seems to have iced up considerably.

"Perhaps you aren't the man I thought you were," Esmeralda says coldly. "I could be mistaken."

BP plunges into depression as a somewhat stony silence builds up between them. Just when he decides that he has blown it, and is considering getting up and moving on, she speaks again: "Perhaps you can tell me something about yourself and we can discover our mistake."

He is so relieved at this opportunity to reinstate relations on a new basis that he attacks the assignment with the vigor of a capitalist ambassador in a developing nation.

His nausea disappears with the change of subject, and when their breakfast is served he eats mechanically, though he has little appetite for the food. By the time they are finished with their meal, he has delivered a virtual soliloquy detailing his life history (with the standard social editing to render it suitable for breakfast conversation), covering his youth in southern California, how good it was and how bad it went, his move to Hawaii, how much better it was and how much worse it went, and so on....

Throughout his speech, Esmeralda listens quietly and eats, nodding occasionally, acknowledging his words without judgment or declaration [though it is difficult for her to keep from wincing at the regularity with which tragedy has befallen our hero]. Phrases such as "I wish I could have..." "If only I had known that..." "I would have liked to..." "How could I have guessed..." are liberally laced into a fabric of bad breaks, rotten luck and missed opportunities, which make up the shabby clothing of BP's life, as he weaves it.

Nonetheless, she contains her disgust politely and listens carefully, until he has trudged his circular path back to the present and ends his story thusly: "So now my whole life has fallen apart and I don't know where to begin to pick up the pieces. If only I could start all over, I'd do it right the next time. I wouldn't be in the mess I'm in today."

"Everything can be retrieved, but that would not necessarily change anything," says Esmeralda firmly, startling BP with her first statement in twenty minutes. "In truth, you knew it all before."

"Wh-what? I don't think I understand you. How can you bring back something that has already happened? That's impossible!" BP is incredulous.

"That which is beyond one's comprehension always appears impossible. That is the nature of perceptual dependence. What cannot be seen cannot be believed, right? Unfortunately it's our dependence upon perception which creates the illusion of 'time,' the very commodity you feel you have squandered so thoughtlessly, and wish so desperately to have back. Well, my friend, 'time' such as that does not exist, not as you understand it. If you understood the true nature of time, you would realize that you are in a much bigger mess than you can even imagine at this moment, and you would remember where we have met before."

BP is beginning to wish he had not eaten so much—his stomach is starting to churn again. What she is saying sounds terribly ominous, almost threatening, yet he can't help but feel there is something germane, something horribly pertinent to his situation in her words. "I don't think I'm following you. Could you explain that to me again?"

"I'll try, but when speaking of the unspeakable, words are poor approxima-

tions of reality. What I'm trying to say is that giving order to our experience is only one aspect of the nature of time. Our perceptual processes are the means by which our human body interacts with the electromagnetic array that confronts us constantly, in our normal waking state. These processes filter, divide and code the radiation they receive so that the incoming information can be processed, transmitted, and stored, by means of the electrochemical conduit we call our 'nervous system,' and ultimately be transformed by our brains into outgoing responses to our environment. Without knowing which signal came first and which came second, we would be lost."

"OK," says BP, slowly. "I think I get that part. I know what all those words mean—I went to college—but what're you driving at?"

"The problem is that an organism's first priority is to survive. It deals with the input necessary for survival first, almost constantly, in our 'normal' state of consciousness. But the regime of perception exacts a price, a prerequisite, so to speak, a structure—what you call 'time'—within which it can function."

"Of course it does. Time is a constant. Everyone knows that." BP's mind is reeling from the esoteric, metaphysical twist their discussion has taken. He's extremely curious about where she's going with this.

"Time might not be exactly what you think it is," continues Esmeralda. "It's the baseline of our ordinary reality, our normal waking consciousness, and it's within this background that each moment comes and goes—but what happens when you sleep? Are you aware of time in the same way? Where does each moment go when it has passed? Is it destroyed? Is it lost? No! It still exists. It's just no longer available to us in fullness, in our normal state of consciousness, although we are connected to it partially by our memories. If one knows how to look, all things can be seen—past, present and future—but they are not seen with the eyes, as one usually sees. When reality is beheld in an altered state of consciousness, the world is transformed. The universe is a different place. You've taken enough mind-altering drugs to know that, certainly."

"Maybe I have, but you're talking craziness, here—hallucinations!" protests BP. "That's just a bunch of occult mumbo-jumbo. It's superstitious nonsense!"

"Believe what you will, I'm merely telling you what you asked to hear, I can't force you to accept what I say. It's very difficult to comprehend anything which doesn't resemble one's previous knowledge—isn't framed in the same format, or the same categories and hierarchies."

"But I wanted to know how you could bring back the past. That's what you said, isn't it—everything can be brought back? If I had only known then what I know now, I wouldn't have made such a mess of my life. I would've been able to see how things were going to turn out, and I would've been able to avoid all my silly mistakes and failures—really made something of my life—made the

world a better place for myself and for everyone around me!”

“Well, Bob, explaining the mechanism by which such a change could take place is even more difficult and abstract than what I’ve already told you, which you don’t seem to accept anyway. Why confuse you more? Suffice it to say that by altering your consciousness, it would be possible to project your essence, with memory intact, back into the past to witness your life again, but it would be naive of you to believe that you could change anything by doing so. If you were capable of accomplishing such a feat by your own effort, you would also be capable of understanding the total perfection of your past experience, and how needless of change it is. It has brought you here, and for that, alone, you are fortunate, indeed! I wouldn’t push my luck if I were you. I would leave the past behind and concentrate on the present in order to gain more control over your future.” Esmeralda’s voice has taken on a tinge of impatience.

“You’re just trying to weasel out of what you said, and I’m calling your bluff—if it’s possible, then show me! I’d love to go back and live my life over and remember everything I’ve experienced up to now. If you truly can, then do it. Talk is cheap, I want action!” He feels fairly confident, at this juncture, that he might have her absurd argument fairly well countered.

“Such a wish should not be made frivolously, Bob,” warns Esmeralda. “These are very serious matters we are discussing here, and not without dangerous aspects.” She pauses, choosing her words carefully. “It so happens that you are making this request of one of the few people within your realm of experience capable of fulfilling it. I could direct your consciousness into your past even though you are not prepared for the experience, and may not be able to deal effectively with the change. I could send you back in time to any point in your life that you might choose, and your present memory and knowledge would remain intact, for as long as you wished them to do so, but I am warning you that with your current level of understanding, you would find it difficult to accomplish any but the most minor changes in yourself or the world.”

“You’re saying you could actually do that?” BP gulps in amazement. “What are you, some kind of witch?”

“That’s a poor choice of words. I am certainly not a witch, whatever you think that may be. I prefer to think of myself as an ‘evolved’ human being. But whatever you call me, the answer to your question is ‘yes,’ it is possible—I could do it, but it would not make things any better.”

“Not make things any better! How can you say that? Why if I could only...”

“Enough!” Esmeralda cuts him off shortly, to save herself some dreary repetition. “Where did all your problems begin, Bob? Think back and tell me, quickly, and I will send you there. But be sure you get to the root, the very beginning of your troubles—be sure to go far enough back. You only have this

one chance!”

BP is astonished. An intense adrenaline rush is building in his body, and it is not due to the effects of the cocaine, which have already dissipated. He leans back in the small dinette, heart pounding madly. He feels compelled to answer but he must calm down enough to think about the question clearly, to try to grasp where this bizarre situation is headed. “Where did it all begin,” he wonders, “where did I first go wrong? Was it all the time I wasted when I was younger? Was it the rebellion against authority at home and at school that cut me off from other people? That must be it—I always felt I was so different from others—so much smarter, so much stronger and more righteous, that I could just make my own rules and ignore all their silly beliefs, their stupid laws, the conventional morality. It was easier to condemn it all. Why couldn’t I simply embrace authority and become like other people? Where did it all start...?”

“The Bears,” he blurts out, finally, as it comes to him, “when I was in Little League—that was the name of our team. I was only twelve years old, so young and innocent, without any notion of where my path might lead, and yet I did things, stupid and arrogant things, which ended up having a tremendous effect on my life. There was this one game we had with the Elks, when the coach busted me for showing off on the field and not hustling. If only I could go back to that game and know what I know now—everything would be different. I could make it all right, if I had another chance!”

“If you have decided, then,” says Esmeralda, “you will go back as you wish and remember everything, as long as you do not choose to forget! Do you agree?”

“Sure!” BP nods assent, still disbelieving, wondering how she will recover from this sham, this hoax.

Esmeralda rustles through her straw bag, as if she were searching for something. BP waits, following her movements, finding them curious and distracting. He wonders what she might pull out of the bag this time.

Just then, Abraxus the cat jumps up on the table between them and walks closer, stretching leisurely along the way, slinking finally into his lap, purring, brushing his chest with both ears, turning around in a full circle while leaning heavily against him, before curling up roundly.

BP looks down at the cat in his lap. She raises her head and gazes back at him with green eyes glowing. In the distance, he hears the faint music of chimes over the railway noise—a growing crescendo of peeling bells in a seemingly random but grand harmony. Something like a flashbulb suddenly bursts alight in his brain, right behind his eyes, blinding him, as the music of a thousand carillons ringing in unison rushes towards him madly.

AT THE GAME

It is a warm, summer, southern California day in mid-1960, featuring a Little League baseball field in a sunny suburb of San Diego. Two teams of small, uniformed figures occupy a dirt diamond. A chain-link backstop and outfield fencing delineates the dusty space, with parents in rickety wooden grandstands built behind home plate and down each baseline looking on.

Bobby Pilhaus jerks awake. On his perceptual screen is a view of the field from the third base dugout, through the wire fencing. Panning down, he spies his own, small, rubber-cleated feet, a pair of short, skinny, twelve-year-old legs, wrapped in a gray uniform with purple trim, and an enormous-looking leather baseball glove folded in his lap, where a black cat had been in the previous moment.

His mouth is wide open, his eyes bulging out: “What is going *on* here! Where *am* I?” His thoughts virtually scream into his brain, laden with fear, invoking panic. “Am I dreaming? Is this real? Am I awake?” Sitting straight up and struggling for breath, he stares out at the commotion on the field, as the batter hits a long ball to the outfield and players run about.

“It’s so *real* looking, this is not like a dream at all.” He pinches himself hard. It only hurts. “I must be awake, but it’s just not possible, I’m a little *kid*! I mean, I’m *myself*, but this is not *now*, this is twelve years ago!” The possibilities for confusion are endless.

He snatches a glance left and right, studying the details of the scene around him for any signs of fogging or fading, any flaw in the reproduction. Everything appears to be normal. A chill runs down his spine.

“I was on the train with Esmeralda—I know I was! Is it possible? There was the cat—it was just here—or was I just there? What in the world is happening? Am I going to wake up soon? Did she put me here?” He leans back rigidly on the bench, trying to relax, attempting to remain calm. He feels like a fugitive, an imposter, some kind of a felonious voyeur, watching and waiting for the sound of sirens to come wailing up from the distance. But nothing so radical occurs. The game goes on. He seems to be engaged in his normal, waking consciousness.

“This is unreal, it’s just lasting so long—usually I wake right up when I realize I’m dreaming. What’s strange is this is the very place I was thinking of a minute ago. How could she make me dream about *this*? And worse than that, if this is *not* a dream, how did I *get* here? And how do I get back?”

BP is still sitting open-mouthed at the end of the bench as the third out of the inning is made and his teammates troop out onto the field past him, chiding him playfully. “Hey Beep, did you snooze out, huh? Grabbing a little

nap, Sluggo? C'mon, look sharp, we gotta hold 'em." He doesn't know what to do, how to react. He is still questioning the reality of everything before him.

His decision is made for him as the coach, Mr. Miller, walks up, a hairy wrist pushing his cap back on his head to mop his sweaty brow, his voice tinged with exasperation: "Look, Bob, I don't care how much of a hotshot you think you are, or how much you think this team can't do without you—if you don't show a little hustle and go out there and stick to good fundamentals, I'm going to jerk you right out of the game. Do you understand? Now get out there! Let's go!"

BP looks up, glassy-eyed, groping for a way to explain that he is not prepared for this, that it is all just a dream, a radical hallucination that has gripped him. But the glowering figure of his coach is extremely lifelike, completely compelling, and will not admit its illusion to his frenzied stare.

"I better go along with him," he thinks, trying to remain calm. "I need some time to sort things out." Without saying anything, he pushes himself shakily off the bench and stumbles out onto the field to assume his position at shortstop automatically, exactly as he had done so many times before, so many years ago. It comes easily to him once he starts.

Luckily, the kinetics of playing the game, the unexamined involvement of his body in the process, eases his consciousness of the contradictions which lurk explosively beneath each moment's thin veneer of reality. The enforced activity allows him to buffer his brain from the stream of questions his inner voice is insisting on presenting (in ever shriller and more strident tones) concerning the dangerous, absurd, and utterly insane situation he is confronting. He manages to survive this first crisis by just becoming a twelve-year-old boy again, simply warming up for another inning of Little League baseball on a hot, July afternoon.

The first-baseman throws a bouncing ball towards him and his body moves to field it, timing the hops unconsciously, snagging it with his glove and throwing it back to first, in the usual warm-up ritual. The demands of the immediate task, requiring his perceptual awareness and complete attention to direct a complex physical response, give him respite from the fragmented clamor of his rational mind.

"Coming down," yells the catcher. BP moves towards second base fluidly, spears the practice pick-off throw from the catcher and flips it under-handed to Donny Miller, the coach's son, who is playing second base and backing him up on the play. As long as he is absorbed in the flow of the game, the task of the moment, he is able to forget that only a short time ago he had been a 24-year-old fugitive on a train to Biarritz, and that he is currently experiencing something he had always assumed was impossible—something miraculous, to say the least. It is in the lulls, the lapses in the action, where that agitated inner voice comes creeping back.

“Batter up,” yells the umpire. As the batter settles into the box and the pitcher checks the sign from the catcher, BP crouches down, bending his knees, spreading his legs, dropping his hands close to the ground, in position to field the ball if it is hit. As the pitcher winds up and delivers, BP is creeping forward on the balls of his feet, concentrating intently on the pitch as it arrives at the plate, ready to react instantaneously to any contact. On each pitch this ritual is repeated, and after five pitches, the count is three balls, two strikes. The batter has not yet taken a swing.

BP’s attention begins to lag slightly when the batter strikes out on the next pitch. After throwing the ball around the infield, there is a short break in the action and his mind wanders. Strange thoughts fill his head, driving a wedge in his concentration on the game. Disturbing questions and even more provocative memories—memories of his own *future*—flood in through the crack.

He is standing straight up, flat-footed, stunned by these remembrances, when the next batter steps to the plate and hits the first pitch to the hole between third and shortstop. Caught off-balance and making a late start, he just manages to field the slow grounder with a backhand stab and throw across the diamond to first base, forcing the runner out, but the play is needlessly close.

Coach Miller is standing up in the dugout, shouting at him: “Get down and get a jump on those, Bob! Get ‘em right in front of you and charge ‘em—how many times do I have to tell you? C’mon—play good fundamentals now!”

BP blinks and shuffles back into position. He knows the coach is right. He knows he had plenty of time to get in front of that ball, but it had surprised him. He had been distracted, thinking about things he had known as an adult—about sex, about politics, about surfing, about drugs—and he thinks now that this game of baseball and this frail, little boy’s body he inhabits are so absurd and out of place that he will soon break out laughing, or crying, or wake up from this nightmare.

But then the next batter hits another grounder to the same spot, even slower than the first. BP is so late getting to it that the runner beats his throw to first base and is safe.

Coach Miller immediately calls a time-out and walks out onto the field, straight up to BP. “Listen, kid, I don’t know what has gotten into you,” he says, speaking through clenched teeth, “but I told you I was going to do it and I am. You’re out of here! Go sit on the bench.”

BP is dumbfounded and embarrassed, but he obeys. There is little else he can do. His mind is in turmoil, attempting to straddle two worlds.

The enforced inactivity of sitting on the bench turns out to be the very worst therapy for him at the moment. He alternates between feelings of involvement and feelings of separateness, his peculiar schizophrenia raging.

On the one hand, he is a small boy who has been disgraced in the presence of his peers. Feelings of frustration, of unfair punishment, well up in his breast

and are focused into hatred of Coach Miller, whom he holds responsible for his plight. His pride is injured, for he feels he is easily as good a player as any boy on the team, even better than most.

On the other hand, his adult persona knows that he bears full responsibility for his situation, and that his problems extend far beyond this game. He attempts to break his situation down into sensible, cause-and-effect patterns that can be analyzed and manipulated to his benefit, in order to chart a clear course through a very treacherous sea. He feels like a convicted murderer on Death Row, a man who is totally innocent, yet trapped by insane circumstances into certain execution. Between violent bouts of hatred for his prosecutor, his judge, his jury, the guards, the warden, and society-at-large (for ignoring his plight), he works deliriously on his legal appeals, as his own attorney (self-taught).

His internal dialogue at this point is tragi-comedy of epic proportions: "What the hell is going on here? This can't be happening to me. This can't happen to anyone. It's against the laws of physics! How can I be here? How can I be twelve years old again? What has that witch done to me? If I'm here, then who is with my 24-year-old body that I left on the train? Is it going along without me? Is the twelve-year-old mind that used to be in *here* running *that* show now? If *this* is real, then did I just *dream* a whole half of my life in a nap? And if I am still on the train, then is *this* a dream?" BP is close to tears. Logic does not seem to be a very helpful tool in this situation.

"Maybe I'm still on the train and Esmeralda has just hypnotized me, or drugged me and I'm just hallucinating all this." This thought has some comforting aspects so he hangs onto it, while trying to assemble additional plausible scenarios.

"It'll wear off, whatever it is, or she'll bring me out of it, I hope. All I have to do is wait—but it's lasting so long! Maybe I caught some exotic fever and I'm just delirious in my bunk.... Maybe I died and this is...." This last possibility strikes BP with chilling severity. "No, the possibility that Hell consists of living half your life over again must be pretty small. And I've never heard of anyone claiming to have been reincarnated into the *same life* again either, especially halfway through!"

Unfortunately, as time wears on and his immediate reality shows no signs of changing, or wearing off, he is forced to abandon the more comfortable hypothetical positions.

"I guess if she hypnotized me, it could last for a long time—she wouldn't have to bring me out of it for days, I suppose, maybe weeks! But what would she do with my *body*? Have me hospitalized? Feed me intravenously? Could I be in this trance and still functioning as a human being on the train? This is all too bizarre!" BP is starting to become very afraid.

"What if she really did what she said? What if she was not kidding, or

tricking me? What if I am stuck here? She didn't tell me how to get back! And I *asked* for it. How could I be so stupid? What am I going to do here? Look at this puny little body. My voice is so high it could break glass. Who's going to believe anything I say? I've got no credibility. I'm no prodigy with a Ph.D., although I guess I could be one now, if I wanted to....

"What should I do? Write a letter to the President? Lemme see, now. Kennedy is running against Nixon this year, so I could say: 'Dear Jack, I'm writing to you because yesterday I was living in 1972. You are going to kick Nixon's ass this fall, but he will make a comeback later on, unfortunately. Please think twice about sending any more troops over to Vietnam—that's really going to be a much bigger mess than you think. And watch out when you go to Dallas in '63—someone is going to shoot you! I can't tell you who, exactly, because they're still arguing about that.' Shit, there'd be F.B.I. and Secret Service agents swarming all over my house—until they find out I'm only twelve and probably don't know what I'm doing.

"Maybe I could make a fortune in the stock market—buy a bunch of Polaroid and Xerox and IBM. But where am I going to get the money to invest? My allowance? Who's going to put up thousands of dollars on the advice of a pre-pubescent punk? Oh, man, I really fucked-up! Why did I ever want to come back here? It was bad then and it's bad now. What did I think I could accomplish by becoming a little boy again?"

Before he can explore this line of thought far enough to remember his exact intention in coming back to this point in his life, it is too late. While he is sitting on the bench, leaning forward, with his face buried in his hands, on the verge of emotional collapse, Donny Miller walks by him in the dugout. Donny is watching the action on the field rather than where he is going, and his elbow accidentally collides, rather smartly, with the side of BP's head.

BP is startled and angry, his eyes watering, and he lashes out at Donny, shoving him against the wire front wall of the dugout and cursing him. Donny overcomes his initial surprise and responds with a shove of his own. In a matter of seconds the two boys are rolling on the ground, grappling for an advantage, fists flying.

BP channels all his pent-up frustration, anger and fear into the struggle and quickly turns it into a massacre, locking his arm around Donny's neck and flailing at him with the other fist.

Their teammates try to pull them apart, shouting. BP notices through a haze of fury that Donny has a very bloody face. This perception is quite sobering. He lets Donny go and slumps back.

He closes his eyes and has a vivid vision of himself, strapped to an electric chair in an empty room, while behind a glass partition the smiling warden is closing the switch that will send fifty thousand volts of deadly electric current coursing through his body.