**Literature**

**4V**

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"They're made out of meat."

     "Meat?"

     "Meat. They're made out of meat."

     "Meat?"

     "There's no doubt about it. We picked up several from different parts of the planet, took them aboard our recon vessels, and probed them all the way through. They're completely meat."

     "That's impossible. What about the radio signals? The messages to the stars?"

     "They use the radio waves to talk, but the signals don't come from them. The signals come from machines."

     "So who made the machines? That's who we want to contact."

     "They made the machines. That's what I'm trying to tell you. Meat made the machines."

     "That's ridiculous. How can meat make a machine? You're asking me to believe in sentient meat."

     "I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. These creatures are the only sentient race in that sector and they're made out of meat." [photomaxmix](http://photomaxmix.com/)

     "Maybe they're like the orfolei. You know, a carbon-based intelligence that goes through a meat stage."

     "Nope. They're born meat and they die meat. We studied them for several of their life spans, which didn't take long. Do you have any idea what's the life span of meat?"

     "Spare me. Okay, maybe they're only part meat. You know, like the weddilei. A meat head with an electron plasma brain inside."

     "Nope. We thought of that, since they do have meat heads, like the weddilei. But I told you, we probed them. They're meat all the way through."

     "No brain?"

     "Oh, there's a brain all right. It's just that the brain is made out of meat! That's what I've been trying to tell you."

     "So ... what does the thinking?"

     "You're not understanding, are you? You're refusing to deal with what I'm telling you. The brain does the thinking. The meat."

     "Thinking meat! You're asking me to believe in thinking meat!"

     "Yes, thinking meat! Conscious meat! Loving meat. Dreaming meat. The meat is the whole deal! Are you beginning to get the picture or do I have to start all over?"

     "Omigod. You're serious then. They're made out of meat."

     "Thank you. Finally. Yes. They are indeed made out of meat. And they've been trying to get in touch with us for almost a hundred of their years."

     "Omigod. So what does this meat have in mind?"

     "First it wants to talk to us. Then I imagine it wants to explore the Universe, contact other sentiences, swap ideas and information. The usual."

     "We're supposed to talk to meat."

     "That's the idea. That's the message they're sending out by radio. 'Hello. Anyone out there. Anybody home.' That sort of thing."

     "They actually do talk, then. They use words, ideas, concepts?"

     "Oh, yes. Except they do it with meat."

     "I thought you just told me they used radio."

     "They do, but what do you think is on the radio? Meat sounds. You know how when you slap or flap meat, it makes a noise? They talk by flapping their meat at each other. They can even sing by squirting air through their meat."

     "Omigod. Singing meat. This is altogether too much. So what do you advise?"

     "Officially or unofficially?"

     "Both."

     "Officially, we are required to contact, welcome and log in any and all sentient races or multibeings in this quadrant of the Universe, without prejudice, fear or favor. Unofficially, I advise that we erase the records and forget the whole thing."

     "I was hoping you would say that."

     "It seems harsh, but there is a limit. Do we really want to make contact with meat?"

     "I agree one hundred percent. What's there to say? 'Hello, meat. How's it going?' But will this work? How many planets are we dealing with here?"

     "Just one. They can travel to other planets in special meat containers, but they can't live on them. And being meat, they can only travel through C space. Which limits them to the speed of light and makes the possibility of their ever making contact pretty slim. Infinitesimal, in fact."

     "So we just pretend there's no one home in the Universe."

     "That's it."

     "Cruel. But you said it yourself, who wants to meet meat? And the ones who have been aboard our vessels, the ones you probed? You're sure they won't remember?"

     "They'll be considered crackpots if they do. We went into their heads and smoothed out their meat so that we're just a dream to them."

     "A dream to meat! How strangely appropriate, that we should be meat's dream."

     "And we marked the entire sector unoccupied."

     "Good. Agreed, officially and unofficially. Case closed. Any others? Anyone interesting on that side of the galaxy?"

     "Yes, a rather shy but sweet hydrogen core cluster intelligence in a class nine star in G445 zone. Was in contact two galactic rotations ago, wants to be friendly again."

     "They always come around."

     "And why not? Imagine how unbearably, how unutterably cold the Universe would be if one were all alone ..."

     the end

This story originally appeared in Omni April 1991 and was nominated for the Nebula Award. It is taken from the collection 'Bears Discover Fire', available here. You can find out more about Terry Bisson on his website.

A martian sends a postcard home

Caxtons are mechanical birds with many wings  
and some are treasured for their markings –

they cause the eyes to melt  
or the body to shriek without pain.

I have never seen one fly, but  
sometimes they perch on the hand.

Mist is when the sky is tired of flight  
and rests its soft machine on ground:

then the world is dim and bookish  
like engravings under tissue paper.

Rain is when the earth is television.  
It has the property of making colours darker.

Model T is a room with the lock inside –  
a key is turned to free the world

for movement, so quick there is a film  
to watch for anything missed.

But time is tied to the wrist  
or kept in a box, ticking with impatience.

In homes, a haunted apparatus sleeps,  
that snores when you pick it up.

If the ghost cries, they carry it  
to their lips and soothe it to sleep

with sounds. And yet, they wake it up  
deliberately, by tickling with a finger.

Only the young are allowed to suffer  
openly. Adults go to a punishment room

with water but nothing to eat.  
They lock the door and suffer the noises

alone. No one is exempt  
and everyone’s pain has a different smell.

At night, when all the colours die,  
they hide in pairs

and read about themselves –  
in colour, with their eyelids shut.

**Desiree's Baby**

As the day was pleasant, Madame Valmonde drove over to L'Abri to see Desiree and the baby.

It made her laugh to think of Desiree with a baby. Why, it seemed but yesterday that Desiree was little more than a baby herself; when Monsieur in riding through the gateway of Valmonde had found her lying asleep in the shadow of the big stone pillar.

The little one awoke in his arms and began to cry for "Dada." That was as much as she could do or say. Some people thought she might have strayed there of her own accord, for she was of the toddling age. The prevailing belief was that she had been purposely left by a party of Texans, whose canvas-covered wagon, late in the day, had crossed the ferry that Coton Mais kept, just below the plantation. In time Madame Valmonde abandoned every speculation but the one that Desiree had been sent to her by a beneficent Providence to be the child of her affection, seeing that she was without child of the flesh. For the girl grew to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere,--the idol of Valmonde.

It was no wonder, when she stood one day against the stone pillar in whose shadow she had lain asleep, eighteen years before, that Armand Aubigny riding by and seeing her there, had fallen in love with her. That was the way all the Aubignys fell in love, as if struck by a pistol shot. The wonder was that he had not loved her before; for he had known her since his father brought him home from Paris, a boy of eight, after his mother died there. The passion that awoke in him that day, when he saw her at the gate, swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles.

Monsieur Valmonde grew practical and wanted things well considered: that is, the girl's obscure origin. Armand looked into her eyes and did not care. He was reminded that she was nameless. What did it matter about a name when he could give her one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana? He ordered the corbeille from Paris, and contained himself with what patience he could until it arrived; then they were married.

Madame Valmonde had not seen Desiree and the baby for four weeks. When she reached L'Abri she shuddered at the first sight of it, as she always did. It was a sad looking place, which for many years had not known the gentle presence of a mistress, old Monsieur Aubigny having married and buried his wife in France, and she having loved her own land too well ever to leave it. The roof came down steep and black like a cowl, reaching out beyond the wide galleries that encircled the yellow stuccoed house. Big, solemn oaks grew close to it, and their thick-leaved, far-reaching branches shadowed it like a pall. Young Aubigny's rule was a strict one, too, and under it his negroes had forgotten how to be gay, as they had been during the old master's easy-going and indulgent lifetime.

The young mother was recovering slowly, and lay full length, in her soft white muslins and laces, upon a couch. The baby was beside her, upon her arm, where he had fallen asleep, at her breast. The yellow nurse woman sat beside a window fanning herself.

Madame Valmonde bent her portly figure over Desiree and kissed her, holding her an instant tenderly in her arms. Then she turned to the child.

"This is not the baby!" she exclaimed, in startled tones. French was the language spoken at Valmonde in those days.

"I knew you would be astonished," laughed Desiree, "at the way he has grown. The little cochon de lait! Look at his legs, mamma, and his hands and fingernails,--real finger-nails. Zandrine had to cut them this morning. Isn't it true, Zandrine?"

The woman bowed her turbaned head majestically, "Mais si, Madame."

"And the way he cries," went on Desiree, "is deafening. Armand heard him the other day as far away as La Blanche's cabin."

Madame Valmonde had never removed her eyes from the child. She lifted it and walked with it over to the window that was lightest. She scanned the baby narrowly, then looked as searchingly at Zandrine, whose face was turned to gaze across the fields.

"Yes, the child has grown, has changed," said Madame Valmonde, slowly, as she replaced it beside its mother. "What does Armand say?"

Desiree's face became suffused with a glow that was happiness itself.

"Oh, Armand is the proudest father in the parish, I believe, chiefly because it is a boy, to bear his name; though he says not,--that he would have loved a girl as well. But I know it isn't true. I know he says that to please me. And mamma," she added, drawing Madame Valmonde's head down to her, and speaking in a whisper, "he hasn't punished one of them--not one of them--since baby is born. Even Negrillon, who pretended to have burnt his leg that he might rest from work--he only laughed, and said Negrillon was a great scamp. oh, mamma, I'm so happy; it frightens me."

What Desiree said was true. Marriage, and later the birth of his son had softened Armand Aubigny's imperious and exacting nature greatly. This was what made the gentle Desiree so happy, for she loved him desperately. When he frowned she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God. But Armand's dark, handsome face had not often been disfigured by frowns since the day he fell in love with her.

When the baby was about three months old, Desiree awoke one day to the conviction that there was something in the air menacing her peace. It was at first too subtle to grasp. It had only been a disquieting suggestion; an air of mystery among the blacks; unexpected visits from far-off neighbors who could hardly account for their coming. Then a strange, an awful change in her husband's manner, which she dared not ask him to explain. When he spoke to her, it was with averted eyes, from which the old love-light seemed to have gone out. He absented himself from home; and when there, avoided her presence and that of her child, without excuse. And the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with the slaves. Desiree was miserable enough to die.

She sat in her room, one hot afternoon, in her peignoir, listlessly drawing through her fingers the strands of her long, silky brown hair that hung about her shoulders. The baby, half naked, lay asleep upon her own great mahogany bed, that was like a sumptuous throne, with its satin-lined half-canopy. One of La Blanche's little quadroon boys--half naked too--stood fanning the child slowly with a fan of peacock feathers. Desiree's eyes had been fixed absently and sadly upon the baby, while she was striving to penetrate the threatening mist that she felt closing about her. She looked from her child to the boy who stood beside him, and back again; over and over. "Ah!" It was a cry that she could not help; which she was not conscious of having uttered. The blood turned like ice in her veins, and a clammy moisture gathered upon her face.

She tried to speak to the little quadroon boy; but no sound would come, at first. When he heard his name uttered, he looked up, and his mistress was pointing to the door. He laid aside the great, soft fan, and obediently stole away, over the polished floor, on his bare tiptoes.

She stayed motionless, with gaze riveted upon her child, and her face the picture of fright.

Presently her husband entered the room, and without noticing her, went to a table and began to search among some papers which covered it.

"Armand," she called to him, in a voice which must have stabbed him, if he was human. But he did not notice. "Armand," she said again. Then she rose and tottered towards him. "Armand," she panted once more, clutching his arm, "look at our child. What does it mean? tell me."

He coldly but gently loosened her fingers from about his arm and thrust the hand away from him. "Tell me what it means!" she cried despairingly.

"It means," he answered lightly, "that the child is not white; it means that you are not white."

A quick conception of all that this accusation meant for her nerved her with unwonted courage to deny it. "It is a lie; it is not true, I am white! Look at my hair, it is brown; and my eyes are gray, Armand, you know they are gray. And my skin is fair," seizing his wrist. "Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand," she laughed hysterically.

"As white as La Blanche's," he returned cruelly; and went away leaving her alone with their child.

When she could hold a pen in her hand, she sent a despairing letter to Madame Valmonde.

"My mother, they tell me I am not white. Armand has told me I am not white. For God's sake tell them it is not true. You must know it is not true. I shall die. I must die. I cannot be so unhappy, and live."

The answer that came was brief:

"My own Desiree: Come home to Valmonde; back to your mother who loves you. Come with your child."

When the letter reached Desiree she went with it to her husband's study, and laid it open upon the desk before which he sat. She was like a stone image: silent, white, motionless after she placed it there.

In silence he ran his cold eyes over the written words.

He said nothing. "Shall I go, Armand?" she asked in tones sharp with agonized suspense.

"Yes, go."

"Do you want me to go?"

"Yes, I want you to go."

He thought Almighty God had dealt cruelly and unjustly with him; and felt, somehow, that he was paying Him back in kind when he stabbed thus into his wife's soul. Moreover he no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name.

She turned away like one stunned by a blow, and walked slowly towards the door, hoping he would call her back.

"Good-by, Armand," she moaned.

He did not answer her. That was his last blow at fate.

Desiree went in search of her child. Zandrine was pacing the sombre gallery with it. She took the little one from the nurse's arms with no word of explanation, and descending the steps, walked away, under the live-oak branches.

It was an October afternoon; the sun was just sinking. Out in the still fields the negroes were picking cotton.

Desiree had not changed the thin white garment nor the slippers which she wore. Her hair was uncovered and the sun's rays brought a golden gleam from its brown meshes. She did not take the broad, beaten road which led to the far-off plantation of Valmonde. She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds.

She disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again.

Some weeks later there was a curious scene enacted at L'Abri. In the centre of the smoothly swept back yard was a great bonfire. Armand Aubigny sat in the wide hallway that commanded a view of the spectacle; and it was he who dealt out to a half dozen negroes the material which kept this fire ablaze.

A graceful cradle of willow, with all its dainty furbishings, was laid upon the pyre, which had already been fed with the richness of a priceless layette. Then there were silk gowns, and velvet and satin ones added to these; laces, too, and embroideries; bonnets and gloves; for the corbeille had been of rare quality.

The last thing to go was a tiny bundle of letters; innocent little scribblings that Desiree had sent to him during the days of their espousal. There was the remnant of one back in the drawer from which he took them. But it was not Desiree's; it was part of an old letter from his mother to his father. He read it. She was thanking God for the blessing of her husband's love:--

"But above all," she wrote, "night and day, I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery."

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| **Strange Fruit**  *Southern trees bear a strange fruit,*  *Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,*  *Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze,*  *Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.*  *Pastoral scene of the gallant South,*  *The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,*  *Scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh,*  *Then the sudden smell of burning flesh!*  *Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,*  *For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,*  *For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,*  *Here is a strange and bitter crop.*  Lewis Allan | **Vreemd ooft**  *De bomen in het zuiden dragen vreemde vruchten*  *bloed op de bladeren en bloed aan de wortels*  *zwarte lijven bengelen in de zuiderse bries*  *vreemde vruchten hangen aan de populieren.*  *Een landelijk tafereel in het gallante Zuiden*  *uitpuilende ogen, verwrongen mond*  *de geur van magnolia zoet en fris*  *en dan plots de geur van brandend vlees!*  *Dit zijn vruchten waarvan de kraaien plukken*  *waarvan de regen oogst, waaraan de wind zuigt*  *die rotten in de zon, die vallen van de bomen*  *dit is een vreemd en bitter ooft.*  Karel D'huyvetters |

**The silent hostages**

The car carrying the two escaped killers, Wylie Rickman and Art Hoser, nosed carefully into the unidentified desert town, its headlights burning blindingly. It was that darkest hour before dawn of a moonless, starlit night.

Rickman driving, small, dapper with cold saurian eyes and bloodless mouth, judged it to be Parumph in lower Nevada. Somehow they had missed the Fairbank Ranch in the dark.

Ever since they had murdered their three hostages, the woman and her twins and shot their way out of Beatty, north-west of Yucca flat, they had been attempting to find their way south-west towards the Mexican border, twisting and turning, driving without lights on back roads and wagon trails, avoiding the glow of towns, fighting the panic of the hunted.

A few hours back they had listened to a news broadcast that caused them to change their plans and begin searching for a settlement where the alarm might not yet have reached. They desperately needed fresh hostages.

Now they approached carefully a brief main street between the small cluster of buildings that mushroomed abruptly out of the desert. They were jumpy, nervous, half drugged by fatigue and deadly dangerous.

Fat Art Hoser who had needlessly killed the policeman the day after they had escaped from the penitentiary at Carson City had turned into a vengeful jelly of cowardice, for he knew what the police did to cop killers. Rickman was more vicious, for he murdered in cold blood and was prepared to sacrifice a human life for every extended hour of his own if necessary.

He was aware that if daylight found them without a shield of living flesh they were finished.

The town was apparently an early riser for many of the buildings were blazing with lights. But this was not surprising. Life in desert communities frequently began before sun-up.

Caught in their headlights the tall saguaries cacti, which with the stunted greasewood shrubs and sagebrush grew right tot he edge of the town, pointed aloft like warning fingers. But as yet there seemed to be no one abroad in the street.

They passed the usual filling station on the outskirts. Rickman drove cautiously, his Magnum .38 on the seat at his left side. Two rifles and a sub-machine-gun were between his partner and himself. Hoser had a double-barrelled shotgun resting on his lap crossing his fat legs and beer belly.

A sedan with its engine running was standing by the pumps. Inside they spotted the white-overalled attendant with another man, apparently making change. It reminded Hoser of the gas station jockey, no more than a kid, they killed and robbed near Tonopah. Rickman thought only of the hostage he wanted. A woman, preferably with another kid or kids.

As they moved by, Rickman sought to assess the buildings of the town. There seemed to be a two-storey brick hotel, a general store, some shops, a livery stable, several frame dwellings, a café, the usual adobe buildings, and at the end of town a small power station with what appeared to be a tall radio mast next to it.

A lounger was apparently asleep on the porch of the hotel, chair leaned back, shovel-shaped Stetson tilted over his eyes. A ranch wagon was parked in front of it and a rancher sat at the wheel.

Hoser nervously moved the shotgun. Rickman picked up his gun and said savagely, ‘You shoot again before I tell you to and you’ll get this across the bridge of your nose.’

They drove quickly by. The rancher did not even bother to turn his head. It was Hoser’s nervous and wanton shooting of the policeman after they had escaped from the prison that had started the hue and cry at their heels prematurely.

Glimpsed through a grimy window the café appeared to be filled, with the counterman at his griddle and the waitress serving coffee across the bar. A juke box bawled from the restaurant. An asphalt-carrying tank truck and a big freighter with trailer were drawn up in front, their drivers apparently breakfasting inside.

As they drove on, voices emerged from several of the houses where radios had been turned on by early risers. In a nearby house a telephone was ringing and there was a thumping noise of some kind of pump or gasoline engine. A window a few houses down showed a family seated at early breakfast. It seemed as though only the first rays of sun were wanted to send the inhabitants of the town spilling out on to the street and about their business.

They passed a frame house with a big sedan parked in front and the blinds up, revealing the occupants. A man in front of a cabinet mirror. In the kitchen, a woman in an apron was bending over a mixing bowl. There was no one in the living-room from which the radio was playing loudly, but in an adjoining bedroom they snatched a view of a cot with a girl of five or six asleep on it and a crib in which there was a baby.

Rickman’s thin mouth curled with satisfaction. This was a prize he had not expected. With the baby they might even reach the border. And there were keys, he noted, in the ignition switch of the sedan. The two-tone maroon and cream car they had taken from the salesman they had kidnapped and shot between Tonopah and Goldfield was marked.

Hours before they had sat in the vehicle, lights and motor shut off and, concealed by a fold in the foothills miles from anywhere, listened to a news round-up from Las Vegas, which was largely devoted to the harrowing story of the murder trail of the two escaped convicts.

Without emotion, coldly and clinically, Rickman had listened to the list of their killings, the guard at the penitentiary, the policeman at Wilson’s Gulch, the boy in the gas station at Tonopah, the salesman at Goldfield, and finally the woman and two children at Beatty where they had snatched them.

And a mile away, a man sitting in a shack by a gate in a barbed wire fence, sick and clammy, listened to the same broadcast over a portable radio, the beads of sweat running from his cheeks and temples as the announcer detailed:

‘As the chase spread out down the highway from Beatty, with the bandits firing from their car, police did not dare to shoot for fear of hitting Mrs. Nellie Bassett and her twins, Tina and Joey, aged seven, kidnapped as hostages an hour earlier by the fleeing pair.

Apparently when police braving the fire attempted to force the fleeing car off the road, Rickman, Hoser or both shot the mother and two children, threw the bodies from the car and escaped as the horrified pursuit ground to a halt. The children were dead, but Nellie Bassett was still alive and rushed to the hospital in critical condition…’

The man in the shack fought and lost his battle between duty and instinct, switched off his portable, entered his car and drove off to the north. The sound of his motor and the glow of his headlights faded in the distance.

Then they had listened to the details of the tri-state police ragnet set for them.  
‘We gotta get us another hostage. The Fairbank Ranch ought to be where the car came from. There’d be women there.’

Driving blacked out, they crept to the spot from whence the vanished car appeared to have come. The rutty road continued the other side of the wire fence which to Rickman denoted the ranch he sought.

The gate was open and they drove through past the shack and large property posting sign. By star glow he was able to read the big letters ‘KEEP OUT’. He did not want to show the light necessary to read the rest.

Hoser said, ‘You sure you know what you’re doin’?’ and then added, ‘I’m getting sick of all this killing. ‘

Rickman reached over and hit him on the cheekbone with the barrel of his .38. The fat man stared down at the blood dripping on to his hand and said nothing further. He was afraid of Rickman. They had floundered in the darkness for several hours, but found no ranch. Then shortly before five the lights on the horizon had announced the presence of the town in which they now found themselves.

Rickman drew up behind the parked sedan. ‘Shift the stuff into the car ahead and start her up,‘ he ordered Hoser. ‘When she’s running, come in and grab the kids. I’ll take care of the other two…’. He slid out from under the wheel with a movement that almost obscenely sinuous, shifted the heavy .38 to his right hand and ran into the frame house.

From the entrance inside the unlocked door he could see both the man shaving and at the back the woman at her kitchen table. He threw his gun down on the former saying, ‘Don’t anybody move. This is a snatch. Stay where you are. Do as I say and nobody’s going to get hurt. ‘Then he called to the woman, ‘You in the kitchen ; if you open your yap I let your husband have it.’

The man in the bathroom froze obediently, motionless, his razor at the side of his cheek. The gunman could see his own face reflected over his victim’s shoulder in the mirror. The woman, apparently terrorized, did not stir or utter a sound.

In the next room the radio blatted loudly. Rickman did not listen to it, but was satisfied it provided cover. Seconds ticked by. Hoser should have the rifles, guns, ammunition and their small stock of food transferred to the other car by now. The gunman heard the starter whir, then the sound of the engine catching and turning over with a steady beat. He waited until he heard Hoser’s footsteps on the threshold and then pulled the trigger shooting the man through the back on the left side.

Hoser rushed in howling, ‘For God’s sake, you crazy fool! Are you killing again? You’ll have the whole town on us … ‘

For once Rickman did not turn on his partner, but stood with the already recocked pistol, staring blankly at the round hole that appeared in the back of the man’s shirt in the region of the heart.

The fabric of the garment was smoking slightly but the man, oblivious to the shock of the bullet or the fact that he should be dead, remained standing.

Rickman bawled at Hoser, ‘Grab the two kids in the bedroom!’ Then he raised the heavy gun, aimed it at the back of the man’s head, fired twice and endured the shock of seeing his own plae and deadly vision vanish as the cabinet shaving mirror shattered under the impact of the slugs.

With two holes through his head the man, the razor still grotesquely held at the side of his cheek, yet refused to fall and die like the other had.

With a cry of rage Rickman leaped forward and brought the gun barrel down on the fellow’s skull which split like a melon into a hundred pieces just as Hoser came in from the bedroom calling, ‘Hey! These ain’t no kids. These are dolls. What’s going on here?’ In one hand he held the baby made of bisque, its blue china eyes open and staring innocently. By the other, he dragged the department store window-dressing wax mannequin of a five-year-old girl with dark chestnut curls.

Rickman’s nerve broke. He yelled, ‘What the hell is this, a trap?’

Berserk he pulled over the body of the headless dummy by the broken mirror, kicked it, then knocked down the lifelike wax figure of the woman in the kitchen, swearing incoherently. Then ignoring the shaking Hoser he dashed through the door pulling a heavy automatic from a shoulder holster as he did so.

But there was no police patrol car, or posse or amred citizens converging upon the house. The streets were still empty. It was beginning to grow light. From the house across the street the telephone kept ringing.

Down the block at the filling station the customer and the attendant were still immobile at the cash register. The lounger slept on undisturbed, tipped back in his chair on the hotel porch. None of the figures in the Café and Eatery had stirred. In the near-by station-wagon the rancher remained unmoved at the wheel.

Rickman, his gun held before him, ran over, yanked the door open and pulled at the rancher’s arm. The wax figure obediently slipped out from the wheel and fell to the ground.

The gunman suddenly became appallingly aware that for all the noise that filled the village street there was not the sound of any human voice that did not come from a radio, or a single living thing to be seen or heard. Somehow they had blundered into a settlement populated solely by department store dummies. And still the whole truth did not dawn.

He went back to the charnel house of the murdered waxworks where he came upon Art Hoser kneeling in the living-room before the radio, his whole person quivering abjectly from his buttocks to his belly, chin and lips, the sweat pouring off him in rivulets.

He did not even look up as Rickman came in but stared transfixed at the instrument which he seemed to be praying to as a kind of animate responsible being, mumbling, ‘No, no! Please! You got to wait.

Rickman, clutching his two guns which had decided so much for him but would not ever conclude anything again, now focused his attention to the radio as the announcer was saying tensely: ‘Everything is in readiness now, the tanks are in position three miles from ground zero; the Civil Defense workers are in their places on Media Hill. And in just exactly one minute from now, Survival City, or Doomtown as the newspapermen have called it, the guinea-pig village peopled solely with dummies distributed throughout in human attitutes of daily life will be subjected to the disintegrative force of an Atom blast twice that which levelled Hiroshima… Now I will pick up the time signals to zero hour – twenty seconds – nineteen – eighteen – seventeen – ‘

Rickman ran screaming into the empty street where in the house across the way the telephone bell was still ringing. ‘No, no!’ he bawled.

‘Hey! Wait a minute! Do you hear me? You can’t! We’re here. For God’s sake, wait!’

The last thing he saw was the steel skeleton of what he had thought was a radio mast. But now, Outlined against the dawn a dark, torpedo-shaped package hung from the 500-foot tower top. And the last thing he heard was the unison chant from all the live radios in all the dead, dummy-filled houses. ‘Five seconds – four – three – two – one …’

Some while later, the guard who that same morning had deserted his post at the No.3 Desert Gate of the Restricted Area between Beatty and Mercury, returned alone, a half-hour before his relief was due.

His name wa Joseph Bassett and he was the husband of Nellie Basset and father of the twins, Tina and Joey. He had managed to reach the bedside of his wife and hold her in his arms a scant twenty minutes before she died.

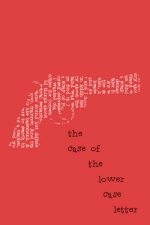
Dazed by the completion of the tragedy he had returned to his duty from force of habit.

Still in state of shock he could not cope with the ominous mystery of the tyre tracks, west toe ast that crossed his post and entering through the open gate went straight as an arrow eastwards towards where the brown mushroom cloud of the recent explosion had begun to lose its shape and drift with the wind.

He stood staring down uneasily at the tracks, wondering who it had been, what had happened tot hem and what it might portend for him – if ever it came out that someone had gone through there during his absence.

The lesson

Chaos ruled OK in the classroom  
as bravely the teacher walked in  
the nooligans ignored him  
his voice was lost in the din  
  
'The theme for today is violence  
and homework will be set  
I'm going to teach you a lesson  
one that you'll never forget'  
  
He picked on a boy who was shouting  
and throttled him then and there  
then garrotted the girl behind him  
(the one with grotty hair)   
  
Then sword in hand he hacked his way  
between the chattering rows  
'First come, first severed' he declared  
'fingers, feet or toes'  
  
He threw the sword at a latecomer  
it struck with deadly aim  
then pulling out a shotgun  
he continued with his game  
  
The first blast cleared the backrow  
(where those who skive hang out)   
they collapsed like rubber dinghies  
when the plug's pulled out  
  
'Please may I leave the room sir? '  
a trembling vandal enquired  
'Of course you may' said teacher  
put the gun to his temple and fired  
  
The Head popped a head round the doorway  
to see why a din was being made  
nodded understandingly  
then tossed in a grenade  
  
And when the ammo was well spent  
with blood on every chair  
Silence shuffled forward  
with its hands up in the air  
  
The teacher surveyed the carnage  
the dying and the dead  
He waggled a finger severely  
'Now let that be a lesson' he said

[](http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/CaseLowe950.shtml)

[**The Case of The Lower Case Letter**](http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/CaseLowe950.shtml)

She breezed into my office one cold September morning. I'd been enjoying a hot cup of Starbuck's finest and surfing the web for local news. The famous lexical semanticist Professor Edgar Nettleston had been found dead, a gunshot wound to the head. The police verdict was suicide.

     She held out an elegant hand as she floated towards me and I glimpsed a wedding band with a stone the size of a peanut M&M.

     "I'm Edith Nettleston."

     "Sorry about the old man."

     "I'm not. He loved me, but he loved words more. I'll be brief. My husband was working on a paper that will rock the very foundation of lexical semantics. It's worth a fortune in lecture tours, but nobody can find it. I believe his suicide note is a clue to its whereabouts."

     She removed a scrap of paper from her blouse.

*"edith. i'm not going to whine, i've had a good life. i've found wealth and happiness as a teacher, a seller of knowledge. but i find myself depressed beyond hope ... and so i'm choosing the hour and manner of my own demise. i have treated you badly. i demanded you dyed your brown curls blonde. i thought i could buy you when i should have won your love. i called you a witch. i'd complain: where's the woman i married? i said you ate too much. if i wanted change, i could have used a carrot rather than a stick. you probably wanted to wring my neck. forgive me. farewell."*

     "It's all written in lower case. My husband was a stickler for correct grammar. I refuse to believe it doesn't mean something."

     "Mrs. Nettleston, I think I can help you. There's a couple of odd things about this letter. Firstly, as you say, it's written entirely in lower case. Mr. Nettleston was a world-renowned lexical semanticist, not a teenager texting his BFFs."

     "Secondly, it has a more than usual number of homophones, words where there is another word with the same sound but different spelling and meaning. When dealing with a lexical semanticist, that's surely no accident."

     "If we read those homophones in order, we have: whine, seller, hour, manner. And translating to their homophones: Wine cellar our manor."

     Several hours later, we arrived at the Nettlestons' country house and immediately headed for the basement. A flip of a light switch revealed tunnels filled with rows of dark bottles.

     "Where is it? It would take years to search this place."

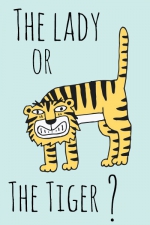
     "Not so fast, Mrs. Nettleston. First I have to ask you something: your wedding ring diamond, how large is it?

     "It's eight carats. Edgar wouldn't stop talking about it."

     "That's what I feared." I pulled out my trusty revolver. "How you must have hated him and his lexical semantics! You figured you'd kill him and keep the money from the paper yourself. You forced him to write that suicide note, thinking you knew where it was. But he was suspicious and he'd already hidden it. And he had another surprise for you: the rest of the note, it doesn't reveal where the paper is, it reveals his killer. The final homophones: dyed buy won witch where's ate carrot wring. That is: died by one which wears eight carat ring."

     As the cops left with Mrs. Nettleston I took a quick trip round the maze of tunnels. It didn't take me long to find it. Most of the wine lay unpacked on racks but in one corner two cases sat stacked, one on top of each other. Carefully, I opened the lower one.

**40 - Love**   
  
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[](http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/LadyTige.shtml)

[**The Lady Or The Tiger?**](http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/LadyTige.shtml)

In the very olden time there lived a semi-barbaric king, whose ideas, though somewhat polished and sharpened by the progressiveness of distant Latin neighbors, were still large, florid, and untrammeled, as became the half of him which was barbaric. He was a man of exuberant fancy, and, withal, of an authority so irresistible that, at his will, he turned his varied fancies into facts. He was greatly given to self-communing, and, when he and himself agreed upon anything, the thing was done. When every member of his domestic and political systems moved smoothly in its appointed course, his nature was bland and genial; but, whenever there was a little hitch, and some of his orbs got out of their orbits, he was blander and more genial still, for nothing pleased him so much as to make the crooked straight and crush down uneven places.

     Among the borrowed notions by which his barbarism had become semified was that of the public arena, in which, by exhibitions of manly and beastly valor, the minds of his subjects were refined and cultured.

     But even here the exuberant and barbaric fancy asserted itself. The arena of the king was built, not to give the people an opportunity of hearing the rhapsodies of dying gladiators, nor to enable them to view the inevitable conclusion of a conflict between religious opinions and hungry jaws, but for purposes far better adapted to widen and develop the mental energies of the people. This vast amphitheater, with its encircling galleries, its mysterious vaults, and its unseen passages, was an agent of poetic justice, in which crime was punished, or virtue rewarded, by the decrees of an impartial and incorruptible chance. [girlplays](http://www.girlplays.ru/)

     When a subject was accused of a crime of sufficient importance to interest the king, public notice was given that on an appointed day the fate of the accused person would be decided in the king's arena, a structure which well deserved its name, for, although its form and plan were borrowed from afar, its purpose emanated solely from the brain of this man, who, every barleycorn a king, knew no tradition to which he owed more allegiance than pleased his fancy, and who ingrafted on every adopted form of human thought and action the rich growth of his barbaric idealism.

     When all the people had assembled in the galleries, and the king, surrounded by his court, sat high up on his throne of royal state on one side of the arena, he gave a signal, a door beneath him opened, and the accused subject stepped out into the amphitheater. Directly opposite him, on the other side of the enclosed space, were two doors, exactly alike and side by side. It was the duty and the privilege of the person on trial to walk directly to these doors and open one of them. He could open either door he pleased; he was subject to no guidance or influence but that of the aforementioned impartial and incorruptible chance. If he opened the one, there came out of it a hungry tiger, the fiercest and most cruel that could be procured, which immediately sprang upon him and tore him to pieces as a punishment for his guilt. The moment that the case of the criminal was thus decided, doleful iron bells were clanged, great wails went up from the hired mourners posted on the outer rim of the arena, and the vast audience, with bowed heads and downcast hearts, wended slowly their homeward way, mourning greatly that one so young and fair, or so old and respected, should have merited so dire a fate.

     But, if the accused person opened the other door, there came forth from it a lady, the most suitable to his years and station that his majesty could select among his fair subjects, and to this lady he was immediately married, as a reward of his innocence. It mattered not that he might already possess a wife and family, or that his affections might be engaged upon an object of his own selection; the king allowed no such subordinate arrangements to interfere with his great scheme of retribution and reward. The exercises, as in the other instance, took place immediately, and in the arena. Another door opened beneath the king, and a priest, followed by a band of choristers, and dancing maidens blowing joyous airs on golden horns and treading an epithalamic measure, advanced to where the pair stood, side by side, and the wedding was promptly and cheerily solemnized. Then the gay brass bells rang forth their merry peals, the people shouted glad hurrahs, and the innocent man, preceded by children strewing flowers on his path, led his bride to his home.

     This was the king's semi-barbaric method of administering justice. Its perfect fairness is obvious. The criminal could not know out of which door would come the lady; he opened either he pleased, without having the slightest idea whether, in the next instant, he was to be devoured or married. On some occasions the tiger came out of one door, and on some out of the other. The decisions of this tribunal were not only fair, they were positively determinate: the accused person was instantly punished if he found himself guilty, and, if innocent, he was rewarded on the spot, whether he liked it or not. There was no escape from the judgments of the king's arena.

     The institution was a very popular one. When the people gathered together on one of the great trial days, they never knew whether they were to witness a bloody slaughter or a hilarious wedding. This element of uncertainty lent an interest to the occasion which it could not otherwise have attained. Thus, the masses were entertained and pleased, and the thinking part of the community could bring no charge of unfairness against this plan, for did not the accused person have the whole matter in his own hands?

     This semi-barbaric king had a daughter as blooming as his most florid fancies, and with a soul as fervent and imperious as his own. As is usual in such cases, she was the apple of his eye, and was loved by him above all humanity. Among his courtiers was a young man of that fineness of blood and lowness of station common to the conventional heroes of romance who love royal maidens. This royal maiden was well satisfied with her lover, for he was handsome and brave to a degree unsurpassed in all this kingdom, and she loved him with an ardor that had enough of barbarism in it to make it exceedingly warm and strong. This love affair moved on happily for many months, until one day the king happened to discover its existence. He did not hesitate nor waver in regard to his duty in the premises. The youth was immediately cast into prison, and a day was appointed for his trial in the king's arena. This, of course, was an especially important occasion, and his majesty, as well as all the people, was greatly interested in the workings and development of this trial. Never before had such a case occurred; never before had a subject dared to love the daughter of the king. In after years such things became commonplace enough, but then they were in no slight degree novel and startling.

     The tiger-cages of the kingdom were searched for the most savage and relentless beasts, from which the fiercest monster might be selected for the arena; and the ranks of maiden youth and beauty throughout the land were carefully surveyed by competent judges in order that the young man might have a fitting bride in case fate did not determine for him a different destiny. Of course, everybody knew that the deed with which the accused was charged had been done. He had loved the princess, and neither he, she, nor any one else, thought of denying the fact; but the king would not think of allowing any fact of this kind to interfere with the workings of the tribunal, in which he took such great delight and satisfaction. No matter how the affair turned out, the youth would be disposed of, and the king would take an aesthetic pleasure in watching the course of events, which would determine whether or not the young man had done wrong in allowing himself to love the princess.

     The appointed day arrived. From far and near the people gathered, and thronged the great galleries of the arena, and crowds, unable to gain admittance, massed themselves against its outside walls. The king and his court were in their places, opposite the twin doors, those fateful portals, so terrible in their similarity.

     All was ready. The signal was given. A door beneath the royal party opened, and the lover of the princess walked into the arena. Tall, beautiful, fair, his appearance was greeted with a low hum of admiration and anxiety. Half the audience had not known so grand a youth had lived among them. No wonder the princess loved him! What a terrible thing for him to be there!

     As the youth advanced into the arena he turned, as the custom was, to bow to the king, but he did not think at all of that royal personage. His eyes were fixed upon the princess, who sat to the right of her father. Had it not been for the moiety of barbarism in her nature it is probable that lady would not have been there, but her intense and fervid soul would not allow her to be absent on an occasion in which she was so terribly interested. From the moment that the decree had gone forth that her lover should decide his fate in the king's arena, she had thought of nothing, night or day, but this great event and the various subjects connected with it. Possessed of more power, influence, and force of character than any one who had ever before been interested in such a case, she had done what no other person had done - she had possessed herself of the secret of the doors. She knew in which of the two rooms, that lay behind those doors, stood the cage of the tiger, with its open front, and in which waited the lady. Through these thick doors, heavily curtained with skins on the inside, it was impossible that any noise or suggestion should come from within to the person who should approach to raise the latch of one of them. But gold, and the power of a woman's will, had brought the secret to the princess.

     And not only did she know in which room stood the lady ready to emerge, all blushing and radiant, should her door be opened, but she knew who the lady was. It was one of the fairest and loveliest of the damsels of the court who had been selected as the reward of the accused youth, should he be proved innocent of the crime of aspiring to one so far above him; and the princess hated her. Often had she seen, or imagined that she had seen, this fair creature throwing glances of admiration upon the person of her lover, and sometimes she thought these glances were perceived, and even returned. Now and then she had seen them talking together; it was but for a moment or two, but much can be said in a brief space; it may have been on most unimportant topics, but how could she know that? The girl was lovely, but she had dared to raise her eyes to the loved one of the princess; and, with all the intensity of the savage blood transmitted to her through long lines of wholly barbaric ancestors, she hated the woman who blushed and trembled behind that silent door.

     When her lover turned and looked at her, and his eye met hers as she sat there, paler and whiter than any one in the vast ocean of anxious faces about her, he saw, by that power of quick perception which is given to those whose souls are one, that she knew behind which door crouched the tiger, and behind which stood the lady. He had expected her to know it. He understood her nature, and his soul was assured that she would never rest until she had made plain to herself this thing, hidden to all other lookers-on, even to the king. The only hope for the youth in which there was any element of certainty was based upon the success of the princess in discovering this mystery; and the moment he looked upon her, he saw she had succeeded, as in his soul he knew she would succeed.

     Then it was that his quick and anxious glance asked the question: "Which?" It was as plain to her as if he shouted it from where he stood. There was not an instant to be lost. The question was asked in a flash; it must be answered in another.

     Her right arm lay on the cushioned parapet before her. She raised her hand, and made a slight, quick movement toward the right. No one but her lover saw her. Every eye but his was fixed on the man in the arena.

     He turned, and with a firm and rapid step he walked across the empty space. Every heart stopped beating, every breath was held, every eye was fixed immovably upon that man. Without the slightest hesitation, he went to the door on the right, and opened it.

     Now, the point of the story is this: Did the tiger come out of that door, or did the lady ?

     The more we reflect upon this question, the harder it is to answer. It involves a study of the human heart which leads us through devious mazes of passion, out of which it is difficult to find our way. Think of it, fair reader, not as if the decision of the question depended upon yourself, but upon that hot-blooded, semi-barbaric princess, her soul at a white heat beneath the combined fires of despair and jealousy. She had lost him, but who should have him?

     How often, in her waking hours and in her dreams, had she started in wild horror, and covered her face with her hands as she thought of her lover opening the door on the other side of which waited the cruel fangs of the tiger!

     But how much oftener had she seen him at the other door! How in her grievous reveries had she gnashed her teeth, and torn her hair, when she saw his start of rapturous delight as he opened the door of the lady! How her soul had burned in agony when she had seen him rush to meet that woman, with her flushing cheek and sparkling eye of triumph; when she had seen him lead her forth, his whole frame kindled with the joy of recovered life; when she had heard the glad shouts from the multitude, and the wild ringing of the happy bells; when she had seen the priest, with his joyous followers, advance to the couple, and make them man and wife before her very eyes; and when she had seen them walk away together upon their path of flowers, followed by the tremendous shouts of the hilarious multitude, in which her one despairing shriek was lost and drowned!

     Would it not be better for him to die at once, and go to wait for her in the blessed regions of semi-barbaric futurity?

     And yet, that awful tiger, those shrieks, that blood!

     Her decision had been indicated in an instant, but it had been made after days and nights of anguished deliberation. She had known she would be asked, she had decided what she would answer, and, without the slightest hesitation, she had moved her hand to the right.

     The question of her decision is one not to be lightly considered, and it is not for me to presume to set myself up as the one person able to answer it. And so I leave it with all of you: Which came out of the opened door - the lady, or the tiger?

Fire and Ice

Some say the world will end in fire,

Some say in ice.

From what I’ve tasted of desire

I hold with those who favor fire.

But if it had to perish twice,

I think I know enough of hate

To say that for destruction ice

Is also great

And would suffice.

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveler, long I stood

And looked down one as far as I could

To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,

And having perhaps the better claim,

Because it was grassy and wanted wear;

Though as for that the passing there

Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay

In leaves no step had trodden black.

Oh, I kept the first for another day!

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,

I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.