

then stood.
 "Of course you can; I've seen you. Why, you're one of the best rope-skippers I've ever —"
 "No I can't!" She wailed, and turned to the wall. For a moment she was silent, but then she spoke again.

"I can't understand the words. I get all tangled up in them, then I get all tangled up in the rope. If only I could figure out what they mean..."

"Wait a minute," confused, "What words?"

"The rhymes. Like this:" and she had intoned softly, "Girl guide, girl guide, dressed in green..."

He knew enough not to laugh this time. Instead he took her onto his lap, cornsilk hair tickling his chin, and explained to her that the words were nonsense rhymes, that they weren't meant to have internal logic of their own. He explained cadence, and showed her how the rhymes helped establish and maintain rhythm. When he was finished she squirmed down and raced outside. He had watched from the window, grinning with pride and relief, until he grew dizzy from following the arc of the yellow vinyl rope.

Dizziness dogged him again now; not the elated dizziness brought on by too much sunlight or too many joyful visions, but the nauseous fog of too much vigilance with no relief. Melnyk shook his head and dialed the number of Anna's home without turning away from her bed.

Martin slumped in his chair, his attention divided between the door and information from Anna's file. The papers were sorted and placed in the file folder; the crystal paperweight which had held them down was in his fingers. He slowly turned it over and over, watching it catch and scatter the sunlight against the walls and ceiling. Random facts drifted in his mind, first jumbling, then fading under a cloud of sleeplessness.

Martin started at a noise. The paperweight clattered to the floor as Melnyk's face appeared around the edge of the door.

"Come in, Les. Have a seat." Martin rose and bent to retrieve the crystal, scrambling to recover the thoughts and half-thoughts that fled from his mind.

Melnyk perched himself in a chair and watched the older man gingerly place the paperweight on top of the folder and settle into a seat. When the furrows on Martin's brow had turned to creases, flattened, and creased again, he broke the silence.

"Her parents said they would be here in an hour or so," he said, but Martin took no notice. He ran both hands across his forehead and down his temples. The creases softened when he spoke.

"Les, I think I know what's causing those convulsions." He waved Melnyk's incredulous reply aside. "Describe the latest attack."

"Between attacks, she's unconscious: metabolism down, no

rapid eye movement. During the convulsions everything goes way up, but there's no connection between her and us. She doesn't respond to noises or lights. Most of the time her eyes are closed, but even when she opens them they don't focus, not on us, anyway. Dilated, jumping all over the place, but no trace of conscious recognition. It's as if she was waking up somewhere else, somewhere in the middle of hell. She . . . doesn't . . . I . . . we can't . . ." Melnyk tried to pull his thoughts together, let the statement trail off. "I'm scared, doctor." The words skittered away under the weight of articulation.

Martin spoke. "I've got nothing definite yet. Every tentative



answer contradicts every other, but I have a direction. The counselling sessions we've had lately have exposed the beginnings of a sexual identity conflict. She may possibly be going through some sort of anxiety reaction to that."

Melnyk frowned. "For this long, with no recovery of consciousness?" he asked.

"There are still a lot of chinks in a theory like that; but remember that Anna's no ordinary child. She can abstract words and verbal images the way you and I approach crossword puzzles, only on a much higher level. However, no matter how much training we give her she's still a child; still susceptible to the same emotional problems as any other five-year-old."

"But she would react on a much higher level as well," said Melnyk, thinking of the skip-rope rhymes.

"Precisely. She's capable of one hell of a fantasy. Les, have you ever considered the difference between a brilliant intellectual and an artist? The best the intellectual can do is understand the emotions which produce a work of art. The artist, however, must live with those emotions; his actions are shaped and altered by feelings that he can't describe or analyze or come to grips with, except through his art. The artist is the servant of his emotions, which often makes him anti-social, or worse. We excuse his maladjustment as part of his 'gift'."

"And instead of training a stable critic we've allowed Anna to become a neurotic child-prodigy artist," Melnyk said.

"What can we do about it?"

"As soon as she regains consciousness we can start some routine therapy. Before we can really do anything we have to pin down the source of the fantasies, and I'm pretty well stumped right now. As soon as I saw the trauma developing I went over everything she's been exposed to, and I ironed out every wrinkle I could find."

"But with her talent for abstraction, couldn't she make some connection that you or I would consider unimportant?"

"That's a possibility, but I'm more inclined to think that she's drawing on something that she assimilated before she came here."

"That sort of thing would show up in the therapy sessions, wouldn't it?"

"Only if she was consciously aware of it at the time. In the first three years of her life she accumulated enough information to completely determine her intellectual capacity. Most of it lies below even the subconscious level, so dormant that she isn't affected by it in the least. One day a certain sequence of events opens the mnemonic lock, the right memories slip into the conscious in the right order, and..."

"And we have to sit and wait until she's able to tell us what memories are bringing all this on!"

"We can't possibly guess at her experiences before her enrollment, can we? It's the same old problem: too many random unknowns for us to keep track of. We've got to get them in here earlier."

"You're asking people to abandon a child-rearing tradition that's as old as the family," said Melnyk.

"I know it, I'm going to do it too. We've got no choice. There's no way we can achieve the degree of precision I have in mind if we have to get around all that random learning first. What we have to make people believe is that there's no way we can fail if that block is removed."

"So what are you going to say to Anna's parents; that they should have enrolled her sooner?"

"For the time being I'm going to tell them that we haven't a clue what's causing these attacks. If we tell them what we suspect they'd more than likely go into some wild panic and put us in the middle of a scandal; you know, turn us into child-destroying villains with no conscience." Martin straightened in his chair, looked squarely at Melnyk. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Les. Officially you're in the dark about all this, but I want you to keep track of anything she might do or say to give us an idea where it's coming from."

"What if she doesn't give any sign?"

"Then we have to wait until she comes round," Martin said with a tremor in his voice, "... if we can."

After Melnyk had left Martin swiveled again to the window. The sun had risen until it struck his window squarely. Squinting, he contemplated the paradox he was caught in. As long as his pupils brought unaccountable knowledge with them to the Institute he could never hone their minds as keenly as he wished to; yet he had to sharpen them enough to convince people that his methods were working. If his pupils became too astute they often collided with the past, with unpredictable results. How many Anna Carters would he create before he arrived at the point of balance? How long after that before he could enroll students who were young enough to be truly impressionable? He reached for the paperweight, held it in the light and slowly rotated it, watching its inner surfaces trade colors until the phone rang again.

... She opened her mouth to scream and choked on a mouthful of slime. Gasping, she sensed that she was covered with it. She tried to vomit, doubled up with cramps, her empty stomach heaving against itself. She flailed blindly at the green body which bent over her in the clearing, pawing, probing, smearing what was left of her with the same caustic ooze that clotted her throat, cauterized her lungs. He waited until her diaphragm stopped heaving and her blistered tongue stopped trying to coax sounds from the ruined larynx. Then he released her arms and lifted her to his shoulder. Cooing and belching softly, he carried her into the heart of the bog.

Anna's mother wandered into her daughter's bedroom, something she had done many times in the previous two days, under the influence of countless contradictory emotions. Rage, bitterness, shock, had all propelled her to this room; this time she was moved by a curious sense of loss. Anna had been removed once from the warmth and security of her body, once again from the close circle that was family. Now she was far beyond the perimeter of any circle that could be cast. When she tried to conjure up a memory of her daughter she found a series of vague, disjointed fragments, none of which would fill the hollow emptiness in her chest. She was driven by the need to find a touchstone, something which would forge the fragments into a textured whole, a satisfying memory of all Anna had been.

She sat on the bed, idly stroking the coverlet. Her eyes fell on the bedside book stand. Perhaps one of her favorite stories would bridge the gap between remnant and reality. She settled on a worn, illustrated volume and let it fall open in her lap. She forgot the words as fast as she read them, until they blurred beyond recognition. She rocked numbly, eyes unfocused, her fingers tracing the embossed illustration, the picture of the princess kissing the enchanted frog in the middle of the magic forest.