The Girl from Bodies, Inc.

By Randall Garrett

Ghostwritten by Robert Silverberg

FANTASTIC, OCTOBER 1956

THE GIRL FROM BODIES, INC.

First published: Fantastic, October 1956, credited to Randall Garrett. Ghostwritten by Robert Silverberg.

Cover: Ariadne, Oscar Gustav Rejlander, 1857, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This story is in the public domain. Copy it, print it, pass it on. More at gaslight.neocities.org.

A Gaslight zine from HOUDINI Magazine.

"The trouble with bodies," said the new rub-down specialist at the Gotham Baths, "is that after a while they just wear out."

"Glmph," said Hugh Horner as the skin-sleeking oil was applied liberally to his face, making a drawn-out reply impossible.

"Ain't it funny, though," the rub-downer said, "how you can buy a new set of piston rings for your car or a mainspring for your wristwatch or a new gizmo for the old lady's mix-master, but you can't even buy a new appendix, if you should need one, for yourself."

The quick hands left Horner's face and began to knead the sagging muscles in his pectoral region. "If you look at it that way," Horner said, "you have a point." He was alone in the massage room with the attendant. He felt worn and drained out, as he always did at the end of a heavy week's work at the office. A steam bath and a massage helped, but he had to admit it: he wasn't as young as he used to be.

"Of course I have a point, Mr. Horner," said the attendant. "Folks spent all that money on machines, what I mean, and almost nothing on themselves. Tell me what happens when a guy develops a bad ticker—Wait, I'll tell you what happens. He sits somewhere in a soft chair, on a porch maybe, sucking on a dry pipe and waiting for the next attack, which will probably kill him."

"I've heard pleasanter talk," Hugh Horner said in sudden distaste.

"What's the matter? Afraid of the truth?"

"Now really!" said Horner.

"How old are you, Mr. Horner? Forty-five?"

"I'm forty-seven," Horner admitted. His age, thus objectively stated in his own voice, came as a mild shock. Forty-seven! He was virtually middle-aged.

"Forty-seven! How many years before you change the car's battery?"

"Why, two or three, I guess."

"The tires?"

"Every twenty-five thousand miles. That would be about three years."

The attendant leaned down over him, still kneading the flesh of his chest. "How much you got in the bank, Mr. H.?" he asked in a tight whisper.

"I don't see where that's any business of yours," Horner replied in a shocked voice.

"You get a car on time, it's the finance company's business, isn't it? You take out a mortgage, it's the bank's business—right?"

"Yes, but—"

"How much, then?"

"Well, er, six thousand dollars."

"Joint account with your wife?"

"Y-yes."

"Happily married?"

"Now, just a minute!"

"Are you or aren't you?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"You suppose so!"

"Yes, I'm happily married. Naturally, Jane isn't exactly the same girl she was twenty years ago, when we were married. She's put on some weight and she's got wrinkles and she's not exactly a sweater girl—"

"I see. Any children?"

"No, we were never blessed—"

"Blessed, is it? Well, that's good. No children. I think you'll do, Mr. Horner."

* * *

"Do? Do for what?"

"Congratulations, sir," the rub-down man said, smacking some oil on Horner's abdomen and squashing the flesh around to show Horner how soft he'd become.

Horner said, "Say, what happened to George, anyway." George was Horner's usual attendant at the Gotham Baths.

"George wised up. He's out getting a body job."

"Oh, something happen to George's car?"

"Not his car."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"He's getting a body job," said the attendant. "He's getting a new body."

The hands went slap-slap against Horner's abdomen. He could hear the attendant's heavy, regular breathing. "Ha-ha," he said. "You're pulling my leg."

"I just now explained—"

"You said George was out getting a new body. That's a joke, isn't it?"

"It's no joke to George. It's costing him four thousand dollars, all the money he has. But he thinks it's worth it. Wouldn't you?"

"A new, er, body, you mean?"

"Yes. To start life at age twenty-five again, aware of all your mistakes, your short-comings, your—"

"All right," Horner said finally, "that's enough. I've been lying here and listening because I've had no choice, understand? But you've worn that joke out, fellow. I wish you'd stop."

* * *

The masseur mumbled something under his breath, then said, "Well, that does it on the front side. Care to roll over?"

"Yes," said Horner dutifully, and did so. He thought: funny, the way this bird delivered that new body pitch. Such a straight face. So utterly serious, almost as if he were interviewing me. The silence stretched. Horner regretted having asked the attendant to stop his yarn about new bodies. He finally said, in defeat, "Er, about what you were saying—"

"You want an appointment? That's what I'm here for."

"An appointment? With whom?"

The attendant wiped his hands on a large towel and tossed its twin to Horner. From somewhere, he plucked a neat white business card and gave it to Horner. The card said:

BODIES, INC. *By appointment only.*

There was a telephone number and an address out on Long Island. There was nothing else.

"Three thousand is what it will cost you," the attendant said. "You're lucky it's a joint account you have."

"Three thousand dollars!" gasped Horner. "For what?"

"For a new body, naturally. Twenty-five years old and in sound health. Fit as a pin, you're guaranteed that. I think it's a bargain."

"But three thousand dollars—"

"What kind of car you drive?"

Horner told him.

"Buy it brand new?"

"I never buy second-hand cars," Horner told him haughtily.

"Then it cost you damn near as much as a new body is going to. What are you complaining about?"

Horner clucked an answer and then was told he could go to the locker room and climb into his clothing. He tipped the usual fifty cents, showered, dressed in his street clothing. He did all this, trying not to think about what he had heard—but the more he tried not to think about it, the more he did think about it.

Calling himself a fool, he returned to the massaging rooms. He poked his head inside the room in which the new man had given him a rub-down.

An attendant with a stocky build and shell-rimmed glasses stared out at him, squinted myopically, and smiled. "Evening, Mr. Horner," he said.

It was George, who had given Horner his weekly massage every week for the past five years—except tonight.

"Why, you're here!" blurted Horner.

"Sure am, sir. Wondered why you were late. Go ahead and undress, now. I'll reserve your usual table...."

"But I just had my massage."

"Oh?" said George, trying to make his voice sound indifferent. "Trying one of the other masseurs?"

"Not at all," snapped Horner. "You weren't here. Well, were you?"

"Never even stepped out. Been here all night," George said.

"But the other man, the new man—"

"No new man, Mr. Horner, sir. Haven't put on a new man in six-seven months. I'd know, wouldn't I?"

"You'd know," said Horner slowly, after a silence.

* * *

"Something the matter, sir?"

"It's nothing. Nothing."

Horner got out of there very quickly. He took a cab home, which was unusual for him. If George and his nameless friend had been playing an elaborate practical joke, they had also been playing hob with Horner's digestion. For now a hot sensation flooded his middle—his damned ulcer acting up. Ulcers, he thought with a sudden wry smile, ulcers and what else? You're forty-seven, Horner. A mildly successful life, a good marriage, a middling business, no children, no outstanding debts—any regrets?

Yes, Horner thought. Regrets. His ulcer was a regret. He had to be careful what he ate, couldn't drink much. His rising blood pressure would one day be a regret, even if it wasn't yet. And generally, vaguely, his insignificance was a regret. He was not a meek man, but he was no Tarzan of the Apes. He was not a small man, but he was no Goliath. He was not a low-brow, but he was no Einstein. He was not without an eye and some appeal for women, but he was no Don Juan. He sighed, knowing you could extend the list indefinitely. Hugh Horner, small businessman. Hugh Horner, small man.

"Here's your address, Mac," the cab driver said.

Horner got up with a start. He realized he had been sitting there for some time with the cab perfectly still. He somehow sensed that time had passed, more time than the thirty-odd minutes it would take a cab to deliver him to his home on the other side of the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel.

"Where—where are we?" he asked the cabbie. For some reason, he fingered the business card in his pocket. The one the new masseur, the masseur who apparently did not exist, had given him.

The cabbie, shrugging, told him an address which was not immediately familiar. Then, with a sudden quickening of his heart, Horner realized it was the address on the business card in his pocket.

"You mean," Horner demanded, "we're on Long Island? I don't remember telling you to take me here."

* * *

"Well, I didn't dream it up myself, Mac," the cabbie said. "Look, I don't care if you get out or you don't get out. The flag is still down and I'm still making money. So, what'll it be?"

"I ought to call my wife," Horner said.

The driver shrugged. "You getting off here?"

Slowly, Horner nodded. He looked outside. He saw night darkness, a dimly lit driveway, a hemlock hedge twelve feet high.

"Sign said 'Positively no vehicles,'" the cabbie told him. "So I guess you walk from here."

"I guess I walk," Horner said. He consulted the taxi meter, took four dollar bills from his money clip and a half dollar in change from his pocket. Then he got out.

The cab door closed. The driver put the clutch down, then up, and the cab rolled away into the darkness. Horner lit a cigarette. It tasted harsh and bitter, stale. The darkness engulfed him and a pulse hammered, of all places, in his right leg. He felt all at once old—or at least aging. He sighed and it was not a sound a young man would make. In the darkness on the unknown road, he longed for his youth, his lost youth. Then he walked resolutely up the dimly lit driveway flanked by the high hemlock hedge.

* * *

The door-knocker was brass, and Horner let it fall. It made a resounding noise and the door opened within a second, as if someone were standing half a foot away on the other side with no job but to admit Hugh Horner the instant he knocked.

"Come in, Mr. Horner," the girl said. "Naturally, we were expecting you."

She was tall and she wore a cashmere sweater, loose but not so loose that it failed to reveal high, maidenly breasts. She wore a skirt not provocatively tight, but tight enough to suggest the good thighs that she had. Her hair fell almost to her shoulders in abundant

auburn waves. She had a lovely face and Horner thought she was about twenty years old.

"You were expecting me?" Horner said.

"Of course. You see, *Bodies, Inc.* carefully screens its applicants...."

"But I didn't apply!"

"Ah, but we knew you were going to. We have to be sure of our clients. Because if a single client decided to talk, we'd be out of business."

"The authorities?"

"Certainly. But since you're here, we can get down to business at once. You have the three thousand dollars with you?"

"Why, no. No, I don't."

"Bankbook?"

"Yes, I have that."

"It's good enough. Tomorrow we can take your identification papers, driving license and so forth, and get the money ourselves. That is, unless they know you personally at the bank?"

Horner said that he did his banking by mail. He supposed they were going to forge his signature, but made no comment because he had decided, all at once, to call the whole thing off.

"See here," he said. "This is a little awkward. But you can trust me not to talk."

"What's a little awkward?"

"I—I've decided not to go through with it," Horner said lamely. "My wife, my friends...."

The girl said nothing. She took two steps forward, placed her arms around Horner, and kissed him. She wore a subtle perfume. She was beautiful. Her lips were soft and warm, inviting. Her lips were hot. Her lips burned....

Horner broke away breathlessly. His heart was pounding. He knew his face was flushed, he could feel it. His legs were unsteady. He wanted to respond, but his energies were dissipating in the hard-pumping heart, the trembling limbs, the flushed face. It was a middle-aged response. It lacked the drive and direction of youth.

* * *

"Did you like that?" the girl asked, taking one of Horner's hands and holding it.

"Yes," came his breathless reply. "Oh, yes! I liked it."

"But you didn't...."

"Respond? I have a wife."

"That wasn't the reason."

"We're happily married!"

"And I like this sweater I'm wearing very much, but I have others and will wear others."

"The mores of our society...."

"Mores baloney! You were just plain scared. Middle-aged scared. Look at you. You're soft and you're getting wrinkles. Do you think I was really attracted to you? Do you think that's why I kissed you? No, you fool. That wasn't the reason."

"Then you...."

"Wanted to make this point. Wanted to show you you're old, too old to enjoy the most obvious pleasures of a younger man's life. Twenty-five, Mr. Horner! That's the age! The age not of boyishness but of mature youth! Twenty-five! The perfect age for you, and you know it." She smiled at him. It was a deliberately sexy smile, a come-on, an invitation which Horner, under the circumstances, had to decline. "Are you convinced?" she said.

"That I'm not as young as I used to be? Of course."

She gave him a deliberately daughterly kiss, pecking at his temple with her soft warm lips. "Then you're ready to go to the observation room."

The observation room, thought Horner. Did he do the observing, or was he observed? He sighed. It was not a young man's way of expressing what Hugh Horner felt. He knew it was not. He said slowly, bleakly, "I'm ready for the observation room."

The girl did not even nod. She had known he would be ready all along.

* * *

It was a small, utterly bare room with three walls of dull gray metal and the fourth of dazzling floor-to-ceiling glass. On the other side of the glass was a similar room—except that it was furnished with a single bench running across its length.

Men were seated on the bench. Young men, apparently staring at Horner and his lovely companion.

"They can't see us," the girl explained. "One way glass."

"But do they, er, know why they are here?"

"Naturally. Everything's on the up-and-up with *Bodies, Inc.*, morally if not legally."

"And they are...."

"Your choice, Mr. Horner. As you can see, there are eight young men in there, each twenty-five years old, each guaranteed in good health, each perfectly willing to switch identities with you. I must tell you in advance, however, that the switch is quite permanent. There is no recourse. You understand?"

"Yes, but...." Horner looked at the eight men who could not see him, and lapsed into silence. The eight all looked like sound specimens, all right. All seemed healthy and alert, even cheerful. Horner said, somewhat suspiciously, "My reason for wanting to switch places is obvious. And theirs?"

The girl licked her lips before she spoke. They were very nice lips. They were delicious lips. Horner had tasted them. He was suddenly reminded of a magician who makes diverting passes with one hand while performing his magic with the other. "Money," the girl said laconically.

"Money? But I'm only paying three thousand dollars. Surely a man wouldn't surrender his youth for such a sum!"

"Our regulations call for a man's total savings. In your case, three thousand dollars. But most of our clients are extremely wealthy, Mr. Horner. Now, since half of the fee goes to the youth who will become Hugh Horner while we keep the other half...."

"But fifteen hundred dollars only!"

"I should have said it goes into a pool. A yearly pool, you see. The average last year was four-hundred sixty-five thousand dollars,

Mr. Horner. Don't you think some young men would be willing to surrender twenty years of their lives for half a million dollars?"

"I wouldn't if I were young," Horner said at once.

"Between you and me, that's because you aren't. But it's their choice to make, and it's a free choice. Now, have you made a selection?"

Horner looked at the eight men again, and shrugged.

"I see," the girl said. "And I agree. They're all choice specimens, is that what you're thinking? All strong, all healthy, and all will probably be in better shape than you are, twenty years from now."

"Do I get some kind of a guarantee on their health? I mean, what if ... if I should pick one of them with an incurable disease or something?" Although he asked this very practical question, Horner still hardly expected to go through with anything as incredible as switching bodies with one of the young men on the other side of the glass partition. After all, he told himself for the tenth time, such things just weren't possible. This was either an elaborate joke or an elaborate dream. He decided—hopefully—that it was the latter. He recalled that the doctor had given him reserprine to calm his nerves recently, and the doctor had told him that one of the side effects of reserprine was an abundance of nightmare.

"That's it," he said. "Reserprine."

"What did you say?" the girl asked him, an amused look on her face.

"Er, I said, that one's fine," Horner blurted, pointing at random at one of the men on the other side of the glass partition.

"Good," the girl said. "Then everything is ready." She touched a section of the wall and the dazzling glass sheet abruptly went opaque. This lasted for some five seconds, then the wall became transparent again.

* * *

All but one of the men had disappeared. Horner assumed it was the individual he had singled out quite at random.

"Now really ..." he began.

"Look at me," the girl said.

That was easy. She was beautiful.

Her eyes grew very large. Incredibly large. They filled her entire head. They filled the room. They were two enormous blue pits. Horner jumped into both of them just before he fell into a deep hypnotic sleep.

* * *

His hands were raw and bleeding. His first thought was that the guards would know something was wrong when they saw his hands. He was down on his knees in foul-smelling dirt, but his head scraped the low ceiling. He was digging mechanically with his bare hands. He had had a shovel, but it had been lost in a slight cave-in.

"Hey, Lonnie!" a harsh whispering voice called. "Stop dreaming, for cryin' out loud. If we don't do it tonight, we'll never get another chance. Forbish is out."

"What do you mean he's out?" called back Horner, whose name now seemed to be Lonnie.

"You know what I mean. Out. Another cell-block. Forbish got a mouth like the Holland Tunnel. What I mean, if he ain't here to cash in on the deal, he's gonna spill it. And fast. How you comin'?"

"I'm digging," Horner responded. "I'm digging ... and digging." He was doing that, all right. The work should have been tremendously tiring, should have exhausted Hugh Horner in his run-down forty-seven-year-old body. But he found it almost exhilarating. He looked at his hands. Dirty hands, and bloody. But large—larger than they should have been. Horner had had small hands, almost delicate hands. He dug and dug, thinking.

Either it was another reserprine dream—or he wasn't Hugh Horner.

Then was he the man whom he'd selected—more or less at random? But that wasn't possible, for the man in question had been in the *Bodies, Inc.* establishment on Long Island—unless, somehow, that had merely been a projected image of the man, like three-dimensional television. Then ... where was he?

"Want me to take over, Lonnie?" demanded the harsh whisper. For the first time, Horner realized that it was not close by. It was a loud whisper and it came from a considerable ways off. Wanting time to think, Horner said, "Yes. All right."

He backed out of the tunnel slowly, awkwardly, his body stiff. Stiff, but not painful. Hugh Horner's limbs would have ached terribly in this cramped position, but Lonnie's did not. Lonnie scurried more rapidly now—backwards and not minding it at all—out of the tunnel. The walls of the tunnel, Horner observed, were of bare soft earth. If his elbows or knees struck them, some of the earth sifted down, and sometimes a rock. He had the sudden impression that the tunnel had been dug over a considerable period of time with crude implements or by hand.

Finally, Horner emerged into a small square room. There were two bunks, one over the other, he observed as he stood up. The walls were bare plaster. There was a sink and a lidless toilet. There was a small mirror. Only three of the walls were plaster. The fourth consisted of a grim row of vertical bars.

He was in a prison cell.

* * *

He gazed about wildly. He wanted to scream. He didn't understand how this could be, but understanding was decidedly secondary. He looked at his bloody hands. It was his own blood—Lonnie's, that is—but it was symbolic to him. A man was sitting on the edge of one of the bunks, smoking. He was watching Horner. He was a short man with immense shoulders. He wore gray denim and Horner did not have to be told it was a prison uniform or that his clothing was identical.

Somehow, Horner had traded places—identities!—with a convict.

"'Samatter, Lonnie? What you staring at?"

"Nothing. Nothing, I guess." Horner went on staring. The other man's name was Jake, he knew that all at once. He knew other things. Other memories came flooding back ... not his memories. Lonnie's. Because he was Lonnie now. His mind was numb. Numb.

He was Lonnie—Lionel Overman—and he was in jail on a twenty-to-life rap. His behavior, the river of memory told him, had not been exemplary. It would not be twenty years. It would be life.

"What—what am I in for?" he demanded in a soft voice, for that particular memory would not come.

"You're kidding," the man named Jake said.

Horner went over to him and grabbed his denim shirt with dirt-and-blood-caked hands. "I asked, what am I in for?"

"Hey, take it easy," Jake growled. "Don't get yourself in an uproar. We got other things to think about."

"Tell me," Horner said grimly.

* * *

Jake looked at him. Jake had the widest shoulders Horner had ever seen. Probably, Jake was incredibly strong. But his shoulders shrugged and he said, "When you get like that, Lonnie, I guess you got to have your way." He added one word. He added, "Murder."

"Murder," Horner said slowly.

"Hell, yeah, murder. Now snap out of it, will you?"

"Murder. Why didn't they electrocute me?"

"You was young at the time. Twenty, I think. Hey, what's the matter with you? Will you leave go the shirt so I can go down there?"

"Yes," Horner said. "Yes, of course." There was more on the river of memory now. There was Jake. And Lonnie Overman—Horner. And a man named Forbish, another convict. For eighteen months they had been digging.

Digging.

The entrance of their tunnel was concealed behind the toilet. For eighteen months they had kept a model cell and inspections had been only cursory. Eighteen long months.

And tonight, according to the missing Forbish's calculations, they were ready to strike paydirt. Which, naturally, would make Forbish very bitter. Because now he wasn't with them. Forbish had been transferred to another cell-block when the three-man cells had been converted to two-man cells. Forbish was a bitter, brood-

ing fellow to begin with. Forbish might be bitter enough to spill everything.

"... Don't forget," Jake was saying. "We're close enough now. Forbish knew what he was talking about. I hope to hell you can swim, Lonnie."

"I can swim."

"On account of the tunnel lets out near the river, remember? So, don't forget. The guards come now, it'll probably be on account of Forbish told them. The guards come now, don't bother giving me the signal. Just come crawling in and we'll try to bust through. It got to be no more than inches now. Ain't that right?"

Horner said it was right. Forbish, now departed, had been their tunnel expert. The whole plan had been Forbish's, and now Forbish was deprived of it. There was no telling what the bitter Forbish might do.

"Well, wish me luck, kid."

"Good luck," Horner said dutifully. Jake got down on hands and knees and squirmed down behind the toilet and soon disappeared into the tunnel.

Horner wanted to think. Desperately he wanted to think. But now his stunned mind was a blank. The thoughts would not come. He sat there, all but mindless.

And heard footsteps.

He shut his eyes. The bunk was hard, but not too hard. If he shut his eyes and tried to think very hard of Hugh Horner and Hugh Horner's life, pretty soon he would wake up and the nightmare would be over.

He shuddered. He was only fooling himself, he knew. This was no reserprine dream. This was—incredibly—the real thing.

He heard footsteps.

He stood up, adrenalin coursing through his veins and making him feel vital and alive and ready for anything. Footsteps meant the guard was coming, but the gray light streaming in through the window told Horner that it was barely dawn and there would be no reason for a guard to come so purposefully in this direction unless

Forbish had squealed. So, if the guard came now, which seemed likely, the guard would come seeking their tunnel.

* * *

Lonnie's and Jake's—not Horner's. Horner had had nothing to do with it. No. Certainly not.

But Horner was going to serve Lonnie Overman's life-term in prison—for murder. And Horner would be punished for the attempted escape. Punishment? He was already serving a life-term. Solitary-confinement, probably. He was innocent. He had done nothing, except wish for youth. It wasn't fair, he told himself. It was terribly, tragically unfair. He wanted his freedom.

"Hey you, Overman," the guard said. He stood outside the cell, holding the bars. "I can't see so good in there. Where's Halrohan?"

Halrohan was Jake. "Sleeping," Horner said.

The guard scowled and squinted. "Bunk looks like it's empty," he said.

"The top bunk," said Horner.

"Can't see the top bunk," said the guard. He searched for his keys, inserting the right one, turning the big tumblers.

Horner tensed. He had committed no murder. He had done nothing. He was no criminal. He wanted his freedom but could not tell them, by the way, I'm not who you think I am, I'm a fellow named Hugh Horner and I never committed anything worse than a traffic violation in my life, so please get me the hell out of here and give me back my old body, it's all right, I don't mind being forty-seven years old. He could tell them nothing like that. He could only do what Lonnie Overman was trying to do, and try to do something later about this unexpected place-changing with a convicted lifer.

He could only try to escape.

The heavy bars swung in, all but soundless on oiled hinges. The guard swaggered into the cell, expecting nothing. He walked to the bunks, peered at the upper one.

He reached for the whistle, lanyard-dangling from his neck. He got it in his mouth and blew on it. It was the loudest sound Horner had ever heard.

A second later, Horner grabbed the guard's shoulder and swung him around and hit him.

Horner felt the numbness and pain of it to his elbow, but it had been a good blow. Lonnie knew how to use his fists. The guard went down and stayed down and Horner wondered how much time they would have until the whistle brought help.

He scurried to the toilet and got down on hands and knees behind it, crawling into their tunnel.

* * *

"Forbish must have talked already," he called out, making his way on hands and knees through the pitch-dark tunnel. The shaft was barely wide enough to admit him and angled sharply several times where Overman, Jake Halrohan and Forbish must have encountered large rocks.

Horner estimated the distance at fifty feet or more before he came up against Jake's back. He had expected complete darkness here at the nether end of the tunnel, but faint light seeped in from somewhere.

"Made it!" Jake cried hoarsely. "Listen to the river."

Horner heard it, a faint rushing of water. "The guards," he said. "I took care of one, but not before he blew his whistle. We don't have much time."

* * *

There was not enough room for both of them to dig. Horner waited on hands and knees while Jake clawed at the earth again with his fingers. Soon Horner heard a pounding sound and realized Jake was using his fists to enlarge the hole in the soft mucky ground.

"I'm squeezing through!" Jake finally cried, and Horner felt the man's bulk ahead of him shift over to one side and then forward. A moment later, Horner felt cool fresh air caress his cheek. He had not realized how close and fetid it was in the tunnel until now. He sobbed, breathing deeply of the night air. A wind stirred, and hard rain pelted his face. For a few tormenting seconds his shoulders

became wedged in the opening, then he was through. Suddenly there was no footing and he rolled over and over down a steep embankment, taking loose earth and stones with him. He came to rest very close to the river. The water sounds were much closer now.

"We made it, bucko," Jake said in a low, jubilant voice. "We made it."

Just then a siren wailed above them and the night gloom was punctuated by a quick-swinging searchbeam. Horner looked up quickly, knew the light would never spot them down here because of the hill. But the tunnel was something else again. Armed guards could be expected through the tunnel momentarily.

"Do we wait, or beat it?" Jake said hoarsely.

"What do you think?" Horner called over his shoulder as he got up and bounded down to the river. The bank was steep here; he took four splashing strides and had to swim. The water was icy, the current swift. Horner took a look over his shoulder, saw Jake wading more gingerly into the water as the mouth of the tunnel suddenly erupted in a bright flash of light that illuminated everything.

"Stop or we'll shoot!" a voice cried, and Horner let the current take him, his head twisted back so he could see. Jake, the fool, had not yet allowed the water to take him. He was still standing, still floundering uncertainly in the shallows, when the flashlight beam at the mouth of the tunnel caught and held him.

"Stand perfectly still, you!"

Jake shouted a curse and splashed into deeper water.

He did not get far enough to swim. There were three explosive sounds and three flashes of light brighter than the searchlight and Jake threw his hands into the air, spun completely around and staggered back toward the embankment. Shuddering in the cold, Horner kicked easily with his legs. He'd already removed his shoes. He was careful that his kicking did not break the surface. He changed to a safe underwater scissor and a breaststroke, swimming silently, unseen. He was an innocent man in a killer's body, but could never prove that. He had to get away.

"There were two of them," a voice called behind him.

And another, louder: "You out there! Stop or we'll shoot!"

It was meant to scare him: they couldn't possibly see him. Nevertheless, Horner's heart almost stopped when he heard a volley of shots. Then, in the silence that followed, he felt a momentary sorrow for Jake Halrohan, who was either dead or a prisoner again. But his case and Halrohan's were different—Halrohan had been duly convicted for some crime; Horner was innocent.

He swam, and grew gradually numb with cold. He became aware of a stronger current, surrendered himself to it and was borne along. The voices had faded behind him; there had been only the first volley of fire, then silence. He could not judge how far he had gone, nor did he know the geography in the vicinity of the state prison. In all probability there would be a three-state alarm out for Lionel Overman—which now meant for Horner. He had to hurry.

* * *

The first false light of pre-dawn had faded. It was as dark now as the middle of the night, but in half an hour daylight would come. Rain fell in fitful squalls now; the rain seemed to be stopping. Horner had never been so cold in his life. He thought hours had passed, but knew that was impossible because dawn had not yet chased the night. He shivered and broke for shore in an agonizingly slow crawl. He dragged himself out of the water and lay there, gasping, panting, still shivering. After a while he got up. The sullen sky seemed brighter across the river now; dawn was coming. He had to get away. He had to get out of his tell-tale prison denims before it was fully light or he would never get out of them at all.

Very faintly he heard the wail of the prison siren. Slowly he walked up the muddy embankment, then set out in a southerly direction. The rain came down harder now, as if determined to make things as miserable for Horner as it could. He came to a fence. It was barbed wire and it meant people weren't far. He decided to climb the fence, parting the top two strands and going through. He found himself in a pasture. Something big and blocky loomed ahead—a barn. At least he could sleep there for a few hours. He would be comparatively safe if he could find a place up in the loft somewhere, but of course that would be delaying the inevitable,

for if he waited till night he would still be within siren distance of the state prison.

He lifted the lock bar cautiously and let the big barn door swing out. There was a faint protest of rusted metal and Horner allowed a full two minutes to pass before he went inside. The cattle smell was strong. A cow lowed uncertainly off to his left, but he could see nothing. He passed a smaller door, not meant for cattle, and the smaller door was not locked. He smiled as it swung on its rusty hinges in the rain and the wind. If anyone was about, that would explain the other hinge noise. Meanwhile, Horner was ravenously hungry. He would eat anything, even cattlefeed.... He stumbled suddenly, reaching out awkwardly to right himself. A bucket clanged against wood, and he froze.

* * *

Then, not ten feet above Horner's head, a sleepy girl's voice said, "Go back to sleep, will you, Caleb honey? It wasn't nothin'."

"I heard someone down there."

"It wasn't nothin', Caleb honey," the girl repeated. "One of the cows kicked inter somethin', is all. Put your arm back around me Caleb love, there Caleb, ah Caleb."

"I still thought. I—"

"Caleb. I swear, boy, what is the matter with you! My old man will be up an' to the barn a few minutes fum now an' all you can do is talk. Caleb Wilson if you don't ... ah...."

The gloom inside the barn was less complete than it had been outside, only moments ago. Rain drummed on the roof as Horner groped slowly forward, found the foot of a ladder which probably went up to the loft. The boy named Caleb and the farm girl were up there and, from the tone of their conversation, probably undressed. Horner needed Caleb's clothing. He wondered for a moment if it would be tell-tale farm clothing, a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt, perhaps. He couldn't get very far in New York with that, not when an alarm was out for an escaped convict. But if Caleb had come a-courting in his Sunday best....

The sounds above his head made Horner blush furiously as he mounted the ladder one slow rung at a time. The wood creaked and Horner froze, but the sounds of love did not abate. Horner could see blacks and grays now, charcoals—but no pale grays and whites of day.

* * *

Suddenly, he was in the loft. He stood there, wanting to breathe hard but barely daring to breathe at all. From the sound of *their* breathing, Caleb and the girl had abandoned themselves completely. Hay crunched underfoot, and Horner froze in his tracks, crouched there. But Caleb and the girl were beyond hearing. He could not see them: he was very glad that this was so. His sense of privacy had already been violated in a shocking fashion, both from their point of view and from his.

They made animal sounds. Blood flooded Horner's face again. The hell with it, he finally decided. They sounded happy enough, at any event. He got down on hands and knees and groped for Caleb's clothing.

With one hand he found the clothing. With the other he struck something warm and slightly yielding. Again, he froze.

"Caleb! How'd you get down there?"

"Down where?"

"My foot."

"I ain't down there."

"Caleb!" The foot explored Horner's arm, his shoulder. The foot drew away as if Horner were flame. "Caleb," the voice was shocked. "Caleb, I think it's somebody."

There was a gasp, a stirring, a creaking of wood and a crunching of hay. Horner remained in a motionless crouch, one hand still gripping the pile of clothing. He was aware of a dim shape as Caleb got up. He wondered if Caleb could see him crouched there and decided that for the moment he could not.

When Caleb was very close, when he would have stepped on Horner had he advanced another two strides, Horner flung the pile of clothes in his face and propelled himself forward head-first. His

head struck Caleb's belly as he hoped it would and the air rushed out of Caleb and the farmboy did a jackknife over Horner's shoulder. Horner backed away quickly and hit Caleb as he went down. He was not happy about that, but he had to make sure. He connected twice with Caleb's face.

* * *

"Daddy!" the girl demanded in a choking sob. It was half question and half frightened guess. She didn't raise her voice, though. And she would not raise her voice, on the chance that it was not Daddy and Daddy, maybe, would not hear. Because she was as much afraid of Daddy finding her here with Caleb as she was afraid of Horner.

"Just be quiet and you won't get hurt," Horner whispered.

"Who are you?"

Instead of answering, Horner commenced stripping off his prison denims. He changed into Caleb's clothing while the girl administered to her lover, stroking him and cooing at him in the growing light. Horner could see the clothing now: it was shirt and loud tie and farm-catalogue suit and while Horner never would have picked these particular items for himself out of choice, they would get by in New York without too many second glances.

"Got a car?" Horner asked.

"Daddy has a—"

"I mean Caleb."

"Y-yes, sir. He come in a pick-up truck."

"Where are the keys?" Horner asked.

"But you ain't a-takin'—"

"Where are the keys?"

"You're wearin' them in your left-hand pocket, I think."

Horner checked the pocket. The keys were there.

"Where's the truck?" he asked.

"Round behind the barn. You take the lane there over to the fence. On t' other side of the fence, but it's Caleb's uncle's truck, mister. I swear, he'll tan Caleb's hide if you—"

"Well," said Horner righteously, and then felt foolish, "he ought to."

Then he heard Caleb sighing, knew the boy would be all right. He also knew that he would be safe in the pick-up truck for at least an hour or so. For the girl wouldn't dare tell her father, at dawn, coming from the barn, that Caleb's pick-up truck had been stolen. And even Caleb had a problem. Apparently it was some distance back to his uncle's farm—and there was still the problem of accounting for his absence in the night.

Horner went down the ladder quickly, and out of the barn. It was still raining outside, but dawn light had finally come. Abruptly, Horner flattened himself against the wall of the barn. He'd heard something. Footsteps squelching through the mucky pasture. A big burly man went by and Horner waited ten seconds before he dared to move again. Then he found the lane behind the barn and marched along through the mud until he reached the three strands of the barbed wire fence, parted them and went through. He had come several hundred yards and now saw the truck ahead of him. He wondered if he dared start the engine with the farmer so close. He decided he had to chance it, swinging up into the truck and inserting the key in the ignition.

Moments later, he was driving through the rain. The lane took him to a two-lane blacktop which led to a concrete highway heading south for the city. Grimly, Horner clung to the wheel. It was still quite early and almost no traffic was on the road. Horner expected pursuit almost momentarily.

* * *

Miraculously, he was in Brooklyn. He still couldn't believe it. He had driven the pick-up truck down through the rain to the northern outskirts of the Bronx, where he'd parked it near a subway station. A series of subway rides had brought him through the Bronx and Manhattan to Brooklyn, where he lived with Jane. He thought his trail was covered quite well. There was something hearteningly anonymous about a subway passenger.

The rain had stopped. The time, on a bank clock, was quarter past eleven. The bank was around the corner from where the Hugh Horner lived. Horner's steps became swifter: he had already decided to see his wife. Jane must have been frantic, he told himself. Naturally, Horner couldn't just barge in on a wife now apparently twice his age and announce himself. In the first place, she wouldn't believe him. In the second, there would be the element of shock. In the third, he was still wanted by the police—as Lonnie Overman.

Horner shrugged. He would *have to* barge in on her. He had to get off the streets, or sooner or later he would be spotted as the escaped convict. Every couple married twenty years, and moderately happy, Horner told himself, had certain shared secrets. Given time and the opportunity, he could prove his identity to Jane beyond the shadow of a doubt, new body or not.

He reached their apartment building and went into the lobby. He stood there longer than was necessary, for the self-service elevator had already come down. He studied his reflection in the lobby mirror. The clothing was a pretty good fit, but the suit was a cheap sharkskin in a loud plaid, and the tie was a clashing polka-dotted affair. You look just great, Horner told his reflection. But he had to admit he was not really sorry. He was young again, strong and healthy, and not bad looking in a dashing, devil-may-care way. Despite Lonnie Overman's troubles, the face was one used to smiling. Horner could see that. It was a strong-looking face and the eyes, which Horner had expected to be furtive, were frank and bold. The furtive look, then, belonged to Overman's personality and Overman's personality no longer inhabited Overman's body.

* * *

Whatever happened, Horner was suddenly determined to keep this good, sound, healthy body. A lifer in prison, Overman did not need it. Whereas Horner....

He shut the thoughts off. There was no predicting the future, no sense raising his hopes, only to have them dashed, sundered, when the law overtook him. He entered the elevator, went up to the fourth floor, walked uncertainly along the hallway. Suddenly, he

was frightened. Could he explain the situation to Jane? It hardly seemed likely. It was asking a lot of anyone. How could Jane believe the wild story he would tell her? How could he...?

Horner shrugged, and jabbed a finger against the bell-button. He waited a few seconds, hearing no response inside the apartment. Perhaps Jane was out. Perhaps, even now, she was down at the police station, tearfully describing Horner to the policemen on duty. "But officer, I can't imagine *what* could have happened to him. He was always so punctual...." All at once the door opened.

Standing there staring at Horner was—Hugh Horner!

* * *

Horner's first impulse was to run. What could he explain to Jane now? Whatever he tried was doomed to failure by the simple presence of the other Hugh Horner—of the convict, Lionel Overman, in Horner's body, he now realized. He should have expected it. Overman and the other seven men in the observation room, the auburn-haired girl had said at *Bodies, Inc.*, had approved of the switch. It was a question of money, the girl had said. And now Horner knew that was a lie. It had to be a lie. It wasn't a question of money at all. Lionel Overman was a convict. And the others? Convicts too, Horner decided. Glad to trade twenty years of their lives for freedom.... Apparently they had been recruited in prison by hirelings of *Bodies, Inc.* Apparently they knew the full score. Lionel Overman—in Horner's body—seemed quite sure of himself.

"Good God!" Horner blurted. "You're me! You have my body—Horner's that is!"

"Quiet, you fool," the other Hugh Horner told him. "The old lady'll hear you. I'll give you this much of a break: get lost and I won't call the cops. But beat it—fast!"

"Now listen—" Horner began. His voice trailed off. He had nothing to say. He understood, but he was stunned. Intellectual understanding and emotional acceptance of a situation, he knew, having learned the hard way, were two different things. But he studied Lionel Overman in Hugh Horner's body, and was more determined than ever that he would not go back, if going back were possible.

The Hugh Horner he looked at was an ageing man. Forty-seven? He looked easily that old. He was a dumpy man with a sagging-jowled face, small, rather close-set eyes and a receding hair line. The eyes looked crafty, too: Horner had never known his eyes to look crafty before. Probably, that was Overman's personality coming through.

"You listen to me," Overman said, "and listen good. Get lost. I mean that brother. We both know the score, so don't try to pull any of this bewilderment crap on me. I heard over the radio how you escaped, but hell, man, they got a seven state alarm out for you. I got enough trouble with that bag of an old lady inside—"

"What," said Horner in a shocked voice, "did you say?"

"I got enough trouble with your bag of a wife, I said," Overman told him. "Hell, man, maybe my body's older now, but my memory ain't. She's a bag. A real bag. But what do you care, huh? You ain't saddled with her any more."

"Saddled with her?" Horner mumbled. "Saddled? I—I love my wife. How dare you call her a—a—" Horner went livid with rage, grabbed Overman's arm.

* * *

The small dumpy man lurched toward him. "Hey, leggo—" Overman struck out awkwardly, unathletically, in the Hugh Horner body. Horner warded off the weak blows easily, and hit Overman once, expertly, on the point of the jaw just as Jane Horner called from within the apartment:

"Who is it, dear? What's taking so long?"

Horner let the unconscious Overman fall. He was about to flee back to the elevator because he couldn't face his wife now, not—apparently—as the man who had just knocked Hugh Horner unconscious. But an apartment door between theirs and the elevator opened and Horner had no choice but to duck into his own apartment.

Jane appeared from the direction of the kitchen. She was wearing an apron and she was dumpier than Horner remembered. Probably, Horner told himself, my own dumpiness prevented me

from seeing her that way. She wore her hair in a bun and was forty-five and looked it. She was holding a heavy green-glass pitcher in her hand and looked down at what was apparently her unconscious husband on the floor and let out a scream—or began to, for Horner ran to her and clasped a hand over her mouth.

"I can explain everything," he said, wondering if, indeed, he could. "If you promise not to shout or scream, I'll let go of you."

The trapped face nodded. Horner let go and his wife said, "I know you. I know you now. I recognize you from the television. You're that Lionel Overstreet—"

"Overman—but I'm not."

"Who escaped from the prison up state. What—what did you do to my husband?"

"I," said Horner, "am your husband."

She looked at him. She looked at the Hugh Horner body, unconscious, on the floor. She sobbed hysterically and Horner said:

"You're both coming with me, in your car."

"A murderer! You'll kill us."

"Janey, listen to me. That time in Jones Beach before we were married and the top of your bathing suit came off while we were swimming—"

It was something only she and the real Horner would know, but he had waited too long. He had been staring down at the unconscious Lionel Overman while he spoke, and when he looked up it was too late to ward off the green-glass pitcher which Jane was bringing down over his head. It exploded there.

So did the world—for Horner.

There was a buzzing. There was a roaring.

Horner opened his eyes. He was seated on the floor and his arms were bound. So were his legs. He looked across the foyer. Overman-in-Horner was similarly seated, similarly bound.

* * *

"You're both driving me crazy," Jane Horner said.

"You call the cops," Overman-in-Horner a asked.

"Not yet. I'll give you both a chance. You," she gestured at Overman, "weren't acting yourself since you came home last night. You acted—well—cruel. That's the only way I can describe it."

"Of course he wasn't acting himself," Horner-in-Overman said. "Because he isn't—me."

"That makes sense, don't it?" Overman sneered.

"And you wouldn't say 'don't it,'" Jane told him. "And you," she said to Horner, "when you let go of me I knew I was going to hit you with the pitcher and I couldn't stop it, even when I wanted to when you said that about Jones Beach. We—we were alone, my husband and me. But how could you be my husband? You don't look like him. You—you're young enough to be my—my son."

"Ask him," Horner said, pointing at the bound Overman, "ask him about Jones Beach." Horner smiled grimly, waiting. His own memory of Overman's life was only fair, and spotty, and certainly not very good on particular details. Overman's of his would be the same.

"What happened at Jones Beach before we were married?" Jane asked Overman.

"Twenty years ago? How the hell should I remember?"

"*He* remembered," said Jane in a bewildered voice, pointing at Horner.

"Ask him about our honeymoon," Horner suggested.

"Where did we go on our honeymoon?"

"Er, Atlantic City," Overman-in-Horner said triumphantly.

"How long did we stay?"

"Two weeks."

"Who," Jane asked, "was in the hotel room next door?"

"Who remembers a thing like that?" Overman said after a while.

Horner grinned. "I do," he said, and named some old friends of theirs.

Jane made no comment, but asked other questions. They became increasingly intimate, and Overman could not answer most of them. But Horner, of course, answered them all.

Finally, Jane said, "I—I don't know how it can be." Her eyes were filling with tears as she looked down at Overman. "You—you're my

husband. You should be. But you don't know the things he would know. It's impossible, but you're not—not—"

Her voice trailed off. She turned to Horner. "While you—you're just a boy. You don't look anything like my husband, but you know all the things he knows."

* * *

Quickly, Horner told her. Overman tried to confound the incredible story with acid comments on its impossibility, but Jane heard Horner's words and, when he had finished, she went to him slowly and untied him. She looked at him and said, also slowly, "You—you're my husband. I know you are. I know it now. But you're young. I can't keep you, saddled—"

"That's just what he said," Horner said.

"But you'll want your freedom, won't you?"

"Hell," said Horner, "no. I have a better idea. Bring the car around, Janey. We have a lot to do."

"But this man who looks like—"

"He comes with us," Horner said. He chafed his wrists and ankles and went inside quickly and soon returned with a Luger pistol, a memento of his Army days in Germany during the Second World War. "Get up," he told Overman, then realized he could not. "Untie him," he told Jane.

She did so. Overman got slowly to his feet. "Try anything and you'll regret it," Horner said. "Don't go for the car, Janey. We'll all three go for it together, Overman in the middle."

Horner rammed the Luger into his jacket pocket and took hold of Overman's arm, steering him for the door. They went into the hall together, and into the elevator. Jane flanked Overman nervously on the other side. The elevator was not empty. A couple named Shapiro from the sixth floor was in it and Jane smiled at them. Horner jabbed the Luger against Overman's ribs and Overman gave them a weak smile too. Horner nodded at them in a friendly fashion.

Then they were all outside, and the Shapiros went their way. "The car?" Horner asked his wife. "Where is it?"

"Down the block," she said, and they began walking. Horner's grip on Overman's arm was like iron. He was much stronger than the little middle-aged man, and both of them knew it. But Overman was desperate, and they both knew that too.

They got into the car. "You drive," Horner told his wife. Overman sat between them and Horner told Jane to head out to Long Island. It would be a long drive and Horner knew he would have to watch Overman every mile of the way.

* * *

An hour later Horner said, "Turn there." He was surprised that he remembered the way. It had all seemed dream-like in the taxi.

"What are you gonna do?" Overman asked. "Try and change back, that it?"

Horner shrugged. Actually, he did not know. He was playing the rest of it by ear, but if there was an answer anywhere, it would be at *Bodies, Inc.* He did not answer Overman, but told Jane to ignore the no vehicles sign and drive up the lane alongside the high hemlock hedge.

They all got out of the car together. Horner took the Luger from his pocket now. There was no need to hide it, no reason to take chances. He lifted the door-knocker and let it fall and in a moment the beautiful auburn-haired girl opened the door.

"Yes?" she said, then snapped, "You! You had no business coming back here!"

"It wasn't my idea," Overman said with a bleak grin.

"It was mine," Horner told her. "You didn't say I'd be switching places with a convict. How many other poor suckers fell for it?"

"That's no business of yours. We didn't do a thing that wasn't legal."

"There are no statutes in the books to cover what you did, you mean," Horner accused.

"It's the same thing. Now go away, will you? There's nothing we can do for you here."

"I guess there is," Horner said wearily. "I'll tell you. I guess I'll have to ask you to change us back."

He didn't like the idea. He wanted to be young. He thought after what had happened, and since Overman apparently knew the score, he had earned his right to keep the strong young body as his own. But there seemed no other way out and, besides, he knew now that he loved Jane deeply and could not show her the kind of love he wanted to, young enough to be her son. He would change back with regrets, but change he would. The dream of youth had ended for him....

The pretty auburn-haired girl was laughing. "But I thought you knew," she said with finality. "We can't possibly reverse the procedure. Once made, the change is irrevocable because the electromagnetic impulses which make up a human mind are delicate and could never stand the shock twice. It looks like you're trapped, Mr. Horner. Or, should I say, Mr. Overman?"

Momentarily, he was stunned. He looked at Jane. Jane's face was crumpling. She was going to cry. A dumpy, middle-aged woman on the brink of tears.

* * *

He whirled—too late! Overman was in the soft and dumpy Horner body, but Overman's reflexes had apparently crossed over with him. He lunged for the Luger just as Horner brought himself out of the momentary funk which possessed him. The Luger was wrenched from Horner's hand. It seemed to leap into Overman's with a life of its own, then Overman swung it up and down and Horner felt the searing pain of it against his temple. He staggered and would have fallen, but Jane came to him, supported his weight until, slowly, strength flowed back.

"Go inside and call the cops," Overman snapped at the girl. "This guy can't prove nothin'. Let the dame rant if she wants, they'll think she's nuts and I'll wind up with a separation. Snap to it, baby!"

"Don't worry," auburn-hair said, "I will." And she disappeared inside.

"Hugh, oh, Hugh," Jane said. "What will we do?"

"You'll just wait for the cops," Overman told them. He held the Luger on them steadily, watching them very closely.

Horner said, "I'm sorry, Overman. It isn't loaded."

Overman grinned at him, a wolfish grin. "Sure," he said, "that's why you held it on me all the way out here."

"But I knew, and you didn't. That makes a difference, doesn't it? Don't you see, it wouldn't be loaded. It's only a war souvenir. You're not supposed to keep war souvenirs loaded. Well, are you?"

Overman looked uncertainly at the weapon, then at Horner. He got a fingernail under the edge of the ammo clip in the butt and was about to spring it when he said, "You're bigger'n me. If it ain't loaded, why don't you—"

Horner cried, "I'm going to!" and leaped at Overman. The gun bucked between them, went off. Horner felt the heat of the slug's passage in the air, then was grappling with Overman. The smaller man brought his knee up and a wave of nausea engulfed Horner. He clung to Overman, waiting for it to pass, keeping the Luger out of reach by holding Overman's wrist up over his head.

Overman's knee blurred up again, but this time Horner pivoted and caught it on his thigh. He lashed out with his free hand, striking Overman with all his might across the face, open-handed. Overman staggered back, stunned. Horner followed through with a short left hook, and the fight was over.

* * *

"I just phoned the police," auburn-hair said, coming out. "I—wha—"

"Stand still," said Horner. "Better yet, let's go inside." He turned to his wife. "Listen, Jane. The cops. I'll have to run. There's no way of proving—well, you know. But I want you to come with me. I love you."

"I couldn't go with you. Like this. Twice your age. I—"

"I don't want you to. You like this girl's looks? She's very pretty—"

"Now wait a minute!" shrieked auburn-hair.

"You wait. I don't know how many suckers you trapped in convict's bodies. You deserve whatever you get—like, for example, losing twenty years."

Jane said, "But—but what is wrong with growing older the way we're growing older?"

"Nothing," Horner told her quietly, "if we'd allowed ourselves to live. But we didn't. We just existed, always promising to do the things tomorrow—the things we always wanted to do—which somehow we never got around to. If you live, there's nothing wrong with growing old. But we haven't lived. And now, now Jane darling, we have a second chance. Jane—will you?"

She looked at him. There were tears in her eyes. "Yes," she said finally. "Oh, yes, Hugh!"

Horner gave Jane the Luger. "Take her inside," he said. "I'd better get Overman."

The girl said, "You'll never get away with it," as Horner lifted the unconscious Overman to his shoulder and entered the house. "I've already called the police. They're on their way."

"Then we have nothing to lose," Horner said. "If you don't work fast, I'll kill you. You understand?"

She looked at his face, studying him. She began to tremble. "But I don't want to be old!" she wailed.

"And I didn't want to be a convict—and neither did all those other men, whatever prisons they're in now. Get a move on."

* * *

There was a room. Two tables and machinery. Jane got on one of the tables, auburn-hair on the other. Auburn-hair was crying softly, bitterly. It was, Horner knew, just retribution. Probably, it was the only retribution ever meted out to her.

"We'll have to run for it, maybe the rest of our lives," Horner told Jane. "You want to?"

"With you? Yes, yes!"

Crying, auburn-hair told him what to do. Distantly, sirens were wailing. Horner activated the switches....

He looked at auburn-hair. "Jane?" he said. "Are you Jane?"

She smiled at him radiantly. She was beautiful. "Yes," she said. "Yes, darling."

"At Jones Beach—" he began.

"You got the bra of my bathing suit but wouldn't give it back to me," she said, and flushed.

"O.K., now let's hurry. Outside. The cops are almost here."

"Wait a minute," Jane said. "I have a vague memory. She—she wouldn't tell you...."

Jane's body—auburn-hair-in-Jane—was crying bitterly. It sounded as if she would go on crying forever. Overman was still unconscious.

"It's like fingerprints or retinal prints," the new Jane said.

"What is? Hurry up!"

"An electroencephalogram. An E.E.G. Each person's is different. There aren't any mistakes, ever."

"I once had one—in the Army!" Horner cried. "I can prove all of this, as fantastic as it sounds. And there's this machinery."

"We won't have to be fugitives, Hugh!"

"Yes, but," he smiled, "I wanted to see the world. I didn't mind."

"We'll see the world," Jane said, and kissed him. "After you clear yourself."

"And after a few new law books to cover this are written," twenty-five-year-old Hugh Horner said to his beautiful, twenty-year-old wife. They would have a long session with the police, he knew. At first, the police wouldn't believe them. But ultimately, they would have to. He remembered reading about a case in another state, in Wisconsin. Identical twins, never had their fingerprints taken, no identifying marks. One a criminal, the other not. And an E.E.G. proving their identity and accepted in court.

So, eventually, the police would believe them.

And give them a second chance to live their youth the way it should have been lived in the first place.

■ ■ ■

GASLIGHT

Free to read and print. More stories at

gaslight.neocities.org

HOUDINI Magazine
houdinimagazine.com

HOUDINI.TV
houdini-tv.neocities.org

Support Gaslight:
ko-fi.com/A0A81D040N

Rest in Peace Chris // Grim Dark (Half Off) - This Page Dedicated to Your Contributions to the Culture