When the broker's message came that a child was available the Raths went home and put their suits on and made love in a solemn methodical way, as though mimicking conception. Afterwards they peeled their clothes off and lay exhausted, in the bubble of the balcony Arvin and Hella themselves had designed, eagerly speculating about the broker's child. He called himself a broker. But he was probably just an opportunist who knew someone as desperate to sell a child as they were desperate to buy one.

Their bare skin was an alarming color – nothing to do with having just taken off the body suits. It was the light from the lurid sunset over the western suburbs – that distant mountain range was a mirage made of a low cloud of risen, suspended dust that turned the slipping sun into a misshapen solitaire the color of dried blood. It lighted their naked bodies with garish blooms of good health and mocked their sterility. Yet most of their friends were infected, and – though it was never simple – those people had found children for themselves. One consequence of having tested positive was that it made the Raths single-minded in their urgent search for a child.

Eight times they had been notified and so the love-making had become a ritual, but each time something had gone wrong. They were more hopeful, even though now the risk was great: it meant a trip across the river over that awful bridge to a neighborhood on the East Bank.

Scowling at the damp body suit that lay crumpled on the bed beside her like the pelt of a gutted animal, Hella brushed it to the floor. In a pious tone that made her nakedness pathetic, she said, 'God, I hope it works out,' adding, like an imploring one-word prayer, 'Please.'

Arvin said, 'We'll be fine.'

Hella knew what he would say next, since he had said it so many times before.

'I can test for anything,' Arvin said.

That was the challenge – one of the challenges. Children were available, but were they healthy? Some had parasites, others had drugs in their system; some were diseased or brain-damaged, some were unbalanced. Many had no papers – twice the Raths had been caught that way, offered smuggled infants by brokers. You could not trust anyone, which was why Arvin had discreetly advertised for his own broker and ignored all the ones who had come to him through the network, having heard that the Raths

were desperate.

When Hella told him that it was across the bridge, he did not wince as their friends had at the thought of the East Bank.

Hella said, ‘It’s one of those neighborhoods.’

Arvin had not said anything, so she knew he had a plan. You needed a plan. The East Bank police were private, but that was only part of the problem. Many of the neighborhoods were sealed, like fortress villages, and were dangerous to outsiders. These days only humans had money value and so some were valuable and some were cheap, and a child might cost anything.

The prospect of getting a child gave the Raths the courage to risk the bridge. They knew that what they were doing was illegal; that what they were planning was an abduction. Yet a child meant everything to them, not only because they were sterile: a child was the future.

They had not told anyone of the broker. Which of their friends knew anything about the East Bank anyway? The previous eight disappointments had been shared and piteously clucked over. Even the persistent party talk – ‘We got one in Poland,’ ‘The Goldstones found one in Mexico,’ all that – did not draw them out. You might have thought they were talking about puppies. The Raths, who had had many, were sick of pets and were no longer comforted by warm dogs.

Nor were they dismayed by the adoption stories which had turned out badly – the Bence’s Romanian infant girl who had been diagnosed as a vector after a year, and had to be destroyed; the Feericks’ boy Ivor, from Russia, who had shot himself in a motel on his twelfth birthday; all the tales of runaways, adoptees who had fled to places like the East Bank and lived like the drifters they called Skells, or the squatters known as Trolls.

‘I can test for epilepsy, I can find viruses, I can look into heredity, I can diagnose depression and potential malfunction, I can do brain scans, I can isolate a vector,’ Arvin said. ‘I can find anything.’

He had confidence in his tests, but where was the child who could pass them? His sophisticated instruments meant frequent disappointment. Five times he had examined infants in brokers’ offices and found dysfunction or systemic problems. And there were the two without papers.

Arvin was a lighting engineer, Hella an architect. Their apartment, an entire floor of a Kingsbury tower, was vast and beautiful, it lacked a child, but that was all. They had the virus but that was no disgrace – it wasn’t fatal. Half the people they knew had it.

You were inconvenienced by it, you were sterile; you lost your teeth, but the new implants were less trouble.

‘What was that?’ Arvin asked, hurriedly putting on his robe, an instinctive defense at hearing a noise when he was naked.

Someone was calling, a piercing peep-peep filled the room.

‘It’s my phone,’ Hella said and slipped it over her left hand and activated it. ‘Hello?’

‘Calling the Raths,’ the voice said. ‘This is Doc.’

The broker, Hella mouthed to Arvin, and then increased the speaker volume and said, ‘Is it still on?’

‘Sooner than I thought. Can you come first thing tomorrow? Say six?’

That threw them, and Arvin considered this, becoming so engrossed that his face seemed sculpted and pale and doubtful.

‘Why so early?’ Hella said, prompted by Arvin’s suspicious stare.

‘The bridge will be clear and it’ll be easier for you to find us.’

‘We’re not finding you,’ Arvin said suddenly, facing the tiny phone. ‘You find us – in Elmo. The station parking lot. I’ve got a red van.’

The puzzled voice at the other end said, ‘A van?’

‘For my instruments. I’m running some tests.’

‘You’re better off on the surface streets.’

‘Elmo,’ Arvin said, insisting.

What followed was not so much silence as scarcely audible consternation, like someone mumbling to himself or to another person close by – a lengthy murmuring pause.

‘Okay,’ the man said at last.

‘How do you know Elmo?’ Hella asked afterwards.

‘I was there about twenty years ago. We had a cleaner who lived in Elmo. It was

marginal then. But can it have changed that much?'

Watching as they drove across the bridge the East Bank seemed greener, denser, less settled to him than it had all those years ago, and they were hopeful again. On the horizon ahead, the sun at dawn was the same dusty solitaire they had seen last evening from the balcony, but inverted, a great lozenge of lighted dust rising in the cloud deck that looked tainted and fatigued. But there were trees here, there was long grass, and the old style of houses, and the fences were low and unthreatening; there were empty streets where they had expected savages and Skells.

'I feel right at home,' Arvin said.

It made her nervous when he tried to be funny, because it meant he wasn't paying attention.

As he spoke they cleared the end of the ramp and the whirring from the echoes of the roadside trees suddenly ceased to drum against the sides of the van, and a different muffled sound began – of the sealed windowless buildings that looked like fortress walls. Then, in a place they least expected it, near an embankment wall, and a sign directing them to Elmo, where the surface streets began, there was a checkpoint, and a policeman. Arvin slowed the car to a crawl as he approached the barrier.

'Howdy,' the policeman said in a friendly way, but still he did not raise the steel barrier. It was mesh. Such barriers had been designed to snare tanks and armored vehicles and rogue trucks.

The policeman smiled and took a step back to see the van's plates. His name-tag was printed Seely. He was casual in the way of contract police. His boots weren't shined, his badge was slightly crooked. They were all overworked, nor were they paid as well as the state troopers. But Arvin was reassured by the policeman, particularly when he halted the van and saw the child.

The child, just inside the checkpoint booth, was sitting on a stool, a low one, but even so his feet didn't touch the ground – he was kicking them, driving his heels against the stool's hard legs with a sort of frenzied East Bank vitality as he stabbed at the wall writing RONG DOGZ.

'Where you headed?'

Arvin hesitated, hating the question, but he was still smiling at the scribbling child.

The policeman said, 'I'm asking you for your own good.'

'Elmo. Is there a travel advisory?'

‘Not today. But you want to be real careful.’ Gesturing with his weapon, he pointed to the back of the van. ‘You got a load?’

‘We’re empty,’ Arvin said. ‘See you got a little helper.’

Hearing this, the small boy’s fleshy lips parted and his face drew tight as he made his teeth protrude. They were new teeth, just grown, and bulked in his mouth looking large and unused.

‘Sure do,’ the policeman said, and waved them on.

Soon on the surface streets they had their first sight of local people – children, probably kids of Skells and Trolls. But they were not scavenging, as people said. They looked just like the privileged children across the river who played outside, except that these were much younger. There were terrible stories of brokers who had snatched such children, saying, It’s not kidnaping – it’s a form of rescue, and found themselves with vicious, diseased or uncontrollable children who had no papers and had to be impounded.

‘Let’s make this quick,’ Arvin said, when he pulled into the Elmo parking lot and saw the cluster of hurrying people.

A man wearing a khaki shirt and khaki trousers, perhaps an old army uniform, was surrounded by about ten children, mostly boys, none of them more than twelve or thirteen. Several of the children watched Arvin and Hella intently as they drew in and parked the van. The other children were playing. One boy was operating a hand-held instrument and earphones, a game perhaps. The others were shouting much too loudly, and that was how Hella had been able to tell their ages – their voices hadn’t broken. And their teeth too were large and ill-fitting and crooked. Nothing about these children was more upsetting to Hella than these adult-sized teeth in their small ten-year-old jaws.

Arvin loathed the sight of the man with these children, the exploiter and the urchins; yet Hella became hopeful seeing the children so closely attentive or else frisking in the way all their small dogs had done.

‘I’m Doc,’ said the man in khaki, shuffling forward through the crowd of children. ‘Can I see your IDs?’

He was older than they had imagined him – too old perhaps to be the father of any of these children; but you never knew.

As Arvin showed his ID, a boy with long, stringy, green-tinted hair crept close to him

and looked at the phone on his wrist. His teeth did not fit his mouth; they bulged as he stared at Arvin, who made a point of indicating his phone.

He said, ‘I’m on an open channel,’ so as to caution them all. And then, ‘Can we see the child? I want to run some tests.’

Doc sat down on a bench and tapped his own phone. He was watched intently by several other boys; the one with long hair, perhaps the eldest – thirteen at most – wore big borrowed-looking shoes, probably expensive, though they did not fit, and a shirt that hung to his knees like a dress. A girl walked behind him and, without meeting her eye, the boy reached out and pinched her arm. He turned then and stared as though defying her to scream. But she did not cry out. She pressed her lips together and squinted in dumb suffering.

Surely Doc had seen the boy do this? But the man said nothing.

The children looked bored and impatient and captive – they did not want to be here, Hella could tell. They looked warm and thirsty. She now remembered the child at the checkpoint scribbling RONG DOGZ on the wall of the policeman’s booth.

Hella said, ‘Are they for sale too?’

She had spoken softly, so that only the man would hear, yet the boy had heard and he gave her a sudden look of scowling malevolence, and he hissed through his clamped-together teeth. Hella was so startled that she could not get her breath.

‘Here he is,’ Doc said.

Hella was searching among the big-toothed children when she felt her leg being clutched and she turned to see a small bright-eyed child trying to hug her. He was bigger than she expected but still so much younger than any of these other children that he seemed charming and infantile.

‘In perfect shape,’ Doc was saying. ‘Mixed race. Parents couldn’t keep him. They need the money. Three isn’t old.’

Again she thought: Who are we taking him from? and she thought of the nursery, already furnished with a crib, a high chair, a scale, a cupboard of toys, sheets and pillows and stuffed animals, the rocking horse, all the accumulated paraphernalia of their many attempts to find a child. Hella knew she was being sentimental, for part of her yearning to have a child was also her fantasy of cuddling an infant, feeding it, changing it, teaching it to speak and walk. Yet there was a logic in his being three – it was as though this was the child they had begun to search for three years ago, when they discarded their last pets.

‘He’s very bright. You can give him any test you like,’ the man said. ‘It’ll be easier, you know. Being older he’ll be more cooperative.’

Arvin was nodding: he accepted this as reasonable.

‘He’s got papers,’ the man said. ‘And if the tests don’t work out you can call the whole thing off.’

Arvin made a familiar gesture that meant to Hella: What have we got to lose?

The child was clean, he seemed affectionate; he was lightly dressed this warm morning, in a clean shirt and shorts. But he had the teeth too. Arvin stepped forward when the child kissed Hella, as though to protect her, but Hella let him kiss her, and she hugged him. She sorrowed for the child yet she refused to allow herself to feel possessive. If Arvin cleared him, then she would claim him and embrace him.

‘What’s his name?’ Arvin asked.

Before Doc could answer, the child said, ‘My name is Corbin’ – he had heard, he understood, he was so alert. His mouth was still open, the big teeth gleaming. ‘I want to go home with you. I want you to be my mummy.’

Hella plucked his hand away and led him to Arvin. She knew he wanted to begin the tests.

Arvin said, ‘He’s three? He looks older – six at least.’

‘Big for his age,’ Doc said. And then, ‘I’m going to have to take your phones.’

‘Wait a minute,’ Arvin said and put his hand over his wrist in a protective reflex.

‘Or else how about moving some money into my account?’

‘What is this?’ Arvin said, and fear strengthened him: something was wrong.

As a small boy gripped his wrist and snagged the phone with his fingers, Arvin turned and saw that Hella was surrounded too, and that Doc was doing nothing except smiling, like a man whose snarling dogs are menacing a stranger.

Hella called out, ‘No!’ – she was frantic, seeing those mouths and eyes.

Her scream seemed to work: the small, toothy children and their keeper jostled and scattered as a police car skidded towards them on the parking lot.

A voice exploded from a loudspeaker, ‘Stand back!’

It was the policeman, Seely, throwing open the doors of his armored car, and Arvin and Hella scrambled in. Now the policeman seemed scruffier than before, with shiny trouser knees and chipped insignia on the brim of his helmet.

‘Didn’t I tell you to be careful?’

Arvin said gratefully, ‘How did you find us?’

‘You think it was hard?’

They were still thanking him as they noticed the small head of a small boy in the front seat, and as though the child knew he was being scrutinized he turned to face Arvin. He was sure when he showed his teeth that he was the boy who had been kicking the stool in the checkpoint booth.

Arvin said, ‘Wait. The van’s back there.’

But the policeman said nothing. He was driving fast down an alley between two tall buildings.

‘Where are you taking us?’

Arvin was still talking as the policeman started to say, ‘Listen.’

The small boy beside him interrupted furiously and said, ‘Shut up!’

Arvin realized that he was speaking to the policeman, not to him, and he spoke with such anger that the policeman flinched and gripped the steering wheel.

‘Sorry,’ the policeman said. ‘He’s the boss.’

He kept driving. The place was blighted. It was not just the decayed buildings and broken streets; there was not a tree, not a single green thing. The trees had been cut but in a random and wasteful way, not for fuel – the limbs were strewn about. The grass had been trampled or poisoned or built over or burned; the place had been mindlessly vandalized, as though by children.

It had the look of violence: broken signs, uprooted poles, smashed windows, the scribbled and misspelled obscenities and big bewildering scrawls: RAT ROOLZ and RONG DOGZ and YUNGSTAZ and DANJAH FREEX and NO MERSI and WORRYERZ.

When Arvin muttered them disgustedly, Hella wanted him to stop.

Ahead was a warehouse, with broken windows, and there seemed to be at least one face at each window, some had more, crowding to see out.

The wide warehouse door swung open to admit the car and inside Arvin could see the broker, Doc. He was seated on a small ridiculous chair, among the children. Doc looked the other way when the policeman entered. The car doors were snatched open and the children crowded forward with steel spears made of sharpened rods and poked at Arvin and Hella. They got out of the car protesting and pleading.

The child with stringy hair and the long dress-like shirt held a weapon and said in a quacking voice to the policeman, ‘Why didn’t you blindfold them?’

The policeman crouched slightly and, in a tone of respectful explanation, said, ‘Because blindfolds spook them.’

‘Blindfold them now!’ the child said. ‘Wrong dogs!’

Doc said softly, as though to calm the children, ‘You want me to put out the ransom call?’

‘Go away,’ the first boy said, and turned to Hella, and as the stinking blindfold went over her eyes she had a last look at the big malevolent teeth that had frightened her back at the parking lot when she had asked Are they for sale too?

Another child began to screech, ‘Get out! Get out! Leave us alone! No mercy!’

In their darkness, afraid and unable to move, Arvin and Hella heard the two men leaving, muttering as they went out the door, and the large door shutting, an eclipse of light and sound that she could sense through her blindfold. The children came closer. Hella could sense their damp faces and heard them breathing eagerly through their mouths, like warm dogs.

Hella heard a child’s voice say, ‘This one is mine,’ and she cried out as the small fingers touched her.